

PERSPECTIVE OF ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS EDUCATION STUDY PROGRAM STUDENTS ON THE ISLAMIC EDUCATION CURRICULUM IN INDONESIA

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Abstract

This study investigates the perceptions of final-year students in the Islamic Religious Education (PAI) Study Program at IAIN Kerinci regarding the evolution, structure, and implementation of the Islamic education curriculum in Indonesia. Employing a qualitative research approach with a case study design, the research seeks to provide an in-depth and contextually grounded understanding of student experiences within a specific institutional setting. Data were collected using triangulated methods, including in-depth semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. A total of ten final-year students—purposely selected based on academic performance and active participation in academic and co-curricular activities—were interviewed to gain reflective insights into how the curriculum aligns with professional teaching demands. The findings reveal that while students acknowledge the curriculum's foundational role in shaping moral character and professional competencies, they also identify significant disjunctions between policy intentions and classroom realities. Key issues include outdated content, limited digital literacy integration, lack of interdisciplinary approaches, and inadequate preparation for real-world teaching challenges. Students perceived that current curricula overemphasize theoretical knowledge while underpreparing them for professional demands such as inclusive education, contextual pedagogy, and technological adaptation. Despite progressive reforms like the Merdeka Curriculum, institutional readiness and lecturer capacity remain major barriers to effective implementation. This study contributes to curriculum discourse by centering student voices and emphasizing the need for learner-inclusive reform in Islamic higher education. The findings suggest that involving students as active stakeholders in curriculum design is essential for achieving contextual, adaptive, and competency-based Islamic education.

Keywords

Curriculum Development, Islamic Education Curriculum, Student Perception.



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INTRODUCTION

The curriculum holds a strategic position in the educational landscape, functioning as a fundamental framework that defines the direction, content, and learning outcomes of students (Republic of Indonesia, Law No. 20/2003). In the Indonesian context, the curriculum is designed not only to develop cognitive competencies but also to foster students' character in line with national educational goals—namely, to cultivate individuals who are faithful, pious, knowledgeable, creative, and independent (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2017). Within Islamic education, the curriculum aims to shape the holistic human being (*insān kāmil*), balancing intellectual, spiritual, and social dimensions (Azra 1999). In Islamic Religious Education (PAI) programs at the university level, the curriculum seeks to integrate Islamic values with scientific knowledge while remaining adaptive to global challenges.

The rapid changes of the contemporary era, particularly within the context of the Fourth Industrial Revolution and Society 5.0, demand a more flexible and relevant curriculum. This is reflected in the “Merdeka Curriculum” policy developed by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (2022), which promotes learning autonomy, character education aligned with the Pancasila student profile, and the empowerment of local and global student potential. These transformations also influence curriculum development at State Islamic Higher Education Institutions (PTKIN), including in Islamic Religious Education study programs.

Students, as primary actors in higher education, directly experience the impact of curriculum change. Their perceptions serve as vital indicators for evaluating the effectiveness, relevance, and meaningfulness of the curriculum in shaping graduate competencies (Biggs, Tang, and Kennedy 2022). Fatmawati (Fatmawati 2019) found that students’ perceptions significantly influence their motivation and academic achievement. However, Ganesh (Ghuge 2015) reports that many students feel excluded from curriculum evaluation and development processes, resulting in dissatisfaction with the learning content. This limited participation contradicts the principles of a learner-centered curriculum, which emphasizes the importance of student voice in curriculum design (Ornstein and Hunkins 2018).

At IAIN Kerinci, students in the Islamic Religious Education program demonstrate varied perceptions of the curriculum, particularly in relation to the challenges of contemporary education. Current curricula are often seen as overly focused on traditional Islamic disciplines—such as *fiqh*, *tafsir*, and Islamic history—which, although essential, fail to sufficiently address modern issues such

as digital literacy, inclusive education, educational technology, and religious pluralism. As Arif asserts, Islamic education stands at a crossroads between tradition and modernity, necessitating curricular adaptation to technological and global developments. A curriculum that remains overly normative and lacks contextual relevance may widen the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical realities, especially when students face real-world educational settings. Consequently, such curricular misalignment may hinder the development of graduates who are adaptive, innovative, and globally competent (Zahraini et al. 2025).

An internal survey conducted by the Faculty of Tarbiyah and Teacher Training at IAIN Kerinci in 2024, involving 120 final-year students, revealed that 58% of respondents perceived the curriculum content as inadequately aligned with fieldwork realities. Many students reported insufficient preparation in practical skills such as utilizing educational digital platforms, designing collaborative learning experiences, and employing contextual pedagogical approaches. These findings are consistent with Kosim's study, which highlights the importance of digital literacy and religious moderation in shaping adaptive and visionary graduates in the digital era (Nandang Kosim, Aat Royhatun 2024). A curriculum insensitive to current shifts may undermine the cultivation of 21st-century competencies—critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity—essential for professional teaching careers.

These challenges reinforce the urgency to reformulate the PAI curriculum at IAIN Kerinci. Ideally, an Islamic education curriculum should not only convey spiritual and intellectual content but also foster social and professional competencies. Azra's concept of the holistic individual (*insān kāmil*) should extend beyond spirituality and intellect to include readiness to engage with global sociocultural realities. Active student involvement in curriculum evaluation and development is crucial so that students become co-creators of knowledge rather than passive recipients (Azra 1999). Without this engagement, the curriculum will continue to lag in addressing contemporary needs and fail to produce resilient, socially engaged graduates.

The same internal survey revealed a mismatch between the academic content delivered and the practical demands encountered during field internships or teaching practicum (PPL). A majority of students felt that the curriculum leaned heavily on theory without adequate training in practical teaching tools such as digital lesson planning, managing inclusive classrooms, and integrating technology into instruction. This disconnect indicates that the PAI curriculum has not been fully designed around student needs and the realities of their future professional environments. As

Rahmawati (Rahmawati 2021) argues, a curriculum that lacks practical orientation loses its utility in forming competent graduates ready to navigate evolving educational ecosystems.

Moreover, the current PAI curriculum tends to be fragmented and lacks an interdisciplinary approach. It primarily focuses on normative-theological aspects and does not integrate perspectives from educational sociology, information technology, or holistic character development. In the context of the Fourth Industrial Revolution and Society 5.0, Islamic educators must not only deliver textual teachings but also facilitate transformative and innovative learning. Curriculum design must incorporate constructive alignment between learning objectives, teaching activities, and assessments, while responding to students' social contexts. Adriansyah (Ardiansyah, Putra, and Nikitina 2024) emphasizes that an interdisciplinary curriculum is fundamental to cultivating critical, collaborative, and creative thinking, which are key to educational success in the modern era.

The direct consequence of this curricular rigidity is the low confidence of students when transitioning into the workforce. Many report difficulties in developing contextual teaching materials, managing classroom diversity, and effectively utilizing educational technologies. Ningsih (Ningsih, Narahara, and Mulyono 2018) notes that this lack of preparedness stems from a curriculum that is misaligned with the 21st-century teacher profile, which demands digital literacy, reflective thinking, and social sensitivity. Regular curriculum revision, involving key stakeholders including industry partners, is essential to ensure that curriculum design goes beyond normative content and emphasizes professional readiness. Yuliana and Fadhilah (Fadhilah, Efendi, and Pramono 2024) advocate for project-based learning, enhanced practicum experiences, and technology integration as strategies to align education with real-world challenges.

The evident gap between curriculum content and labor market expectations signals the need for comprehensive reform of Islamic Religious Education curricula at PTKINs, including IAIN Kerinci. The PAI curriculum must transcend traditional boundaries to encompass spiritual, intellectual, and social domains, while responding to the actual demands of society and 21st-century global dynamics (Azra 1999). Involving students in curriculum development and evaluation ensures that they serve not only as learners but as active contributors to educational innovation. Neglecting this role will perpetuate a disconnect between institutional graduate profiles and real-world competencies.

Curricular reform must also focus on strengthening the integration of Islamic values in learning processes. A values-based curriculum not only enhances content relevance but also supports the formation of character and professional identity. Lestari (Lestari and Emilia 2023) found that embedding Islamic values into the curriculum fosters learning motivation, social awareness, and readiness to tackle global issues. Core values such as honesty, responsibility, tolerance, and social empathy should be embedded in learning objectives and assessment indicators.

Beyond values, pedagogical strategies are crucial for curricular innovation. 21st-century learning emphasizes critical thinking, collaboration, digital literacy, and complex problem solving. Hidayati (Hidayati 2024) argues that adopting active learning methods, such as project-based learning, flipped classrooms, and inquiry-based instruction, within religious education can increase student engagement and contextual relevance. A curriculum that supports these strategies will produce graduates who are not only knowledgeable but also adaptable and professionally competent in the digital era.

Dalimunthe (Dalimunthe 2023) found that student perceptions of religious moderation are shaped by academic environments, extracurricular activities, and media exposure. While students generally hold positive views of moderation, they are seldom involved in holistic curriculum evaluations. Other studies, such as those by Purnama (Purnama, Nasir, and Erihadiana 2024), Setiowati and Setiowati (Setiowati and Handayani 2025), and Jannah (Jannah et al. 2024)—have explored various dimensions of Islamic education, yet few have comprehensively addressed the PAI curriculum from the perspective of final-year students in PTKIN settings.

This literature review identifies several research gaps. First, few studies offer a comprehensive exploration of final-year students' perceptions regarding the structure, content, and implementation of the PAI curriculum. Second, existing research rarely centers on final-year students, despite their unique capacity to reflect on the entire educational experience. Third, there is a lack of focused research within PTKINs, particularly at IAIN Kerinci, evaluating how PAI curricula respond to digitalization, religious pluralism, and teacher professionalization.

Hence, the novelty of this research lies in its in-depth exploration of final-year students' reflective and empirical experiences within the PAI program at IAIN Kerinci. It examines not only their views on values and pedagogy but also the overall curriculum structure, its alignment with workforce demands, course effectiveness, and student involvement in curriculum development. This approach contributes to creating a more contextual, inclusive, and adaptive PAI curriculum

and promotes greater student participation in its design and evaluation.

The purpose of this research is to analyze in depth the perceptions of final-year students in the Islamic Religious Education program at IAIN Kerinci regarding the structure, substance, and implementation of their curriculum. It aims to explore their empirical and reflective experiences in assessing curriculum relevance to the workforce, its compatibility with contemporary Islamic education challenges, and the extent of their involvement in curriculum development and evaluation. The study seeks to offer concrete recommendations for improving the curriculum so that it becomes more adaptive, contextual, and responsive to both global and local developments.

Theoretically, this study contributes to Islamic education literature by advancing student-centered perspectives in curriculum development at PTKINs—an area often dominated by administrative or faculty viewpoints. It also offers a new lens for curriculum evaluation based on the reflective insights of final-year students. Practically, the findings provide evidence-based recommendations for curriculum reform at the program, faculty, and institutional levels (particularly at IAIN Kerinci). These insights can inform policy, guide lecturers in designing more relevant instructional strategies, and empower students to actively participate in shaping their educational journey.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach using a case study design conducted at IAIN Kerinci. The main objective was to explore in depth the perceptions of students from the Islamic Religious Education (PAI) Study Program regarding the Islamic education curriculum implemented in Indonesian higher education. A case study design was chosen to allow for a contextualized, comprehensive examination of student perceptions within a specific institutional setting (Yin, 2018).

The target population of this study comprised all final-year students enrolled in the Islamic Religious Education (PAI) Study Program at IAIN Kerinci, which consisted of five classes with approximately 25 students each, totaling 125 individuals. This population was selected on the basis that final-year students are presumed to have completed the majority of the courses within the curriculum, thus providing them with sufficient exposure and experience to assess the structure, implementation, and relevance of the curriculum in practice. From this population, ten students were purposively selected to serve as key informants. The sampling technique employed was purposive sampling, a non-probability method that involves selecting participants based on

predefined criteria established by the researcher. The criteria included: (1) being in the final semester, (2) having completed most core courses, (3) having actively participated in academic engagements such as lectures, seminars, or field teaching practice, and (4) being willing to participate in in-depth interviews. This approach was deemed appropriate due to the study's qualitative case study design, which prioritizes the depth and richness of data over generalizability, thereby necessitating the inclusion of informants capable of providing nuanced, reflective, and contextually grounded insights (Creswell and Poth 2016; Patton 2014). Data collection was carried out through three techniques: observation, interviews, and document analysis. Observations were conducted over a two-month period, from January to February 2024, focusing on lectures, seminars, and academic discussions to capture how students experienced and interpreted curriculum implementation in practice.

In-depth interviews were conducted with ten final-year students of the PAI program who had completed the full curriculum sequence. Respondents were selected purposively based on their academic performance and engagement in both curricular and co-curricular activities. The interviews aimed to capture students' reflective insights on the alignment between curriculum content and the demands of the education profession. Document analysis involved the collection and examination of various academic records, including Semester Learning Plans (RPS), the PAI curriculum handbook, academic guidelines, and curriculum evaluation reports by faculty and institutional bodies.

Data were analyzed using the interactive model by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (Matthew B. Miles, A. Michael Huberman 2014), which consists of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. In the data reduction phase, the researcher filtered relevant information from observation notes, interview transcripts, and institutional documents, particularly data related to the integration of character education values and the responsiveness of curriculum content to contemporary challenges. The reduced data were then organized and presented in the form of narrative descriptions, tables, and charts to illustrate the students' perspectives on the structure, substance, and implementation of the Islamic education curriculum.

Further analysis was conducted through critical interpretation of the data, which was then compared with prior studies, such as those by Fatmawati (Fatmawati 2019), Kosim et al. (Nandang Kosim, Aat Royhatun 2024), and Jannah (Jannah et al. 2024), to identify emerging patterns and significant divergences. The findings revealed the necessity of student involvement in curriculum

evaluation and reform to ensure contextual relevance and responsiveness to current and future educational demands. Nevertheless, an opposing concern raised by the study is the persistence of top-down bureaucratic practices in curriculum development, which may hinder timely innovation and the adoption of learner-centered approaches. In conclusion, the analysis not only offers empirical insights into students lived experiences but also contributes to a critical dialogue between educational theory and practice, particularly in addressing curriculum challenges faced by Islamic higher education institutions.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

The findings of this study were derived using three principal qualitative data collection techniques: participant observation of academic activities, in-depth interviews with purposively selected informants, and document analysis of official curriculum-related materials concerning Islamic Religious Education (PAI) in Indonesia. These strategies align with Creswell's (Creswell and Poth 2016) qualitative research framework, which emphasizes the importance of collecting data from multiple sources to ensure a rich, contextualized understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. Such triangulation enabled the researcher to gain comprehensive insights into final-year students' perceptions regarding the philosophical foundations, policy substance, and practical implementation of the Islamic education curriculum. Table 1 presents a synthesized summary of student perspectives on six key phases in the development of the PAI curriculum—from the Ministerial Decree No. 1 of 1951 to the current Merdeka Curriculum—reconstructed from empirical evidence gathered during the fieldwork.

Table 1. Student Perceptions on the Development of the Islamic Education Curriculum in Indonesia

No.	Curriculum Development	Philosophical Foundation	Substantive Changes	Student Perceptions
1.	Decree of the Minister of Religious Affairs No. 1/1951	Need for a formal curriculum for madrasahs post-independence	Recognition of Islamic education as part of the national education system	Largely unknown; regarded as a historical reference only
2.	Law No. 2/1989	Education is an integral part of national development	Integration of religious education into the national structure	Considered normative and disconnected from contemporary educational needs

3.	Law No. 20/2003	Education to develop individual potential and national character	Emphasis on lifelong learning and value-based education	Philosophically relevant but perceived as weak in practical implementation
4.	Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC), 2002	Learning outcomes and competency-oriented education	Focus on measurable learning outcomes and student competencies	Perceived as overly theoretical, lacking sufficient practical teaching training
5.	Indonesian National Qualification Framework (KKNI), 2014	Alignment between the education and employment sectors	Standardized learning outcomes aligned with occupational levels	Logically structured, but difficult to implement effectively due to a lack of facilities
6.	Merdeka Curriculum	Student-centered learning and character education via Pancasila Student Profile	Flexibility, personalized learning pathways, and integration of local-global values	Most familiar, yet not fully understood or consistently applied by lecturers and institutions

This study explored the perceptions of final-year students in the Islamic Religious Education (PAI) Study Program at IAIN Kerinci regarding the evolution of the Islamic education curriculum in Indonesia. The analysis was structured around six major curriculum milestones, from the issuance of the 1951 Ministerial Decree to the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. These milestones were examined based on their policy basis, substantive content, and how they were perceived by students, as summarized in Table 1.

The earliest documented stage in the development of the Islamic education curriculum received the least recognition from students. Many participants admitted unfamiliarity with this regulation and regarded it merely as a historical reference with minimal relevance to their academic formation. It was perceived as distant from contemporary curriculum discourse and had little to no influence on students' understanding of curricular structure and dynamics within the current educational framework.

At this stage, students viewed the curriculum derived from this law as largely normative in nature. While acknowledging its role in formalizing religious education as part of the national education system, students expressed that the content appeared too generalized and lacked contextual relevance. It did not seem to provide clear instructional direction or practical implications

for addressing modern educational challenges, especially those encountered in field-based teaching environments.

This law was more recognized among students for its aspirations toward character development and lifelong learning. However, students felt a disparity between the aspirational goals outlined in the regulation and their actual experience within the classroom. They noted that although the language of the law emphasizes integrated and value-based education, its translation into concrete curriculum components and teaching strategies at the university level remained inconsistent and superficial.

The implementation of the Competency-Based Curriculum was met with mixed responses. Students appreciated the idea of aligning education with learner competencies but were critical of its execution, particularly the overemphasis on theoretical frameworks. Many students indicated a lack of practical training and real-world preparation, noting that the curriculum did not sufficiently bridge the gap between academic learning and professional readiness as future educators.

Students recognized the structured and tiered logic of the KKNI-based curriculum and acknowledged its attempt to align academic outcomes with employment competencies. Nevertheless, they expressed concerns about its operational challenges. Limited institutional resources and insufficient support mechanisms were cited as key barriers that hindered the full realization of the KKNI curriculum's objectives. Consequently, although the conceptual design was viewed favorably, its practical implementation was seen as incomplete and uneven across departments.

Among all curriculum phases, the Merdeka Curriculum was the most widely known and referenced by students. They found its principles—such as differentiated instruction and learner autonomy—to be conceptually progressive. However, the students also highlighted that these concepts had not yet been fully adopted or consistently applied in teaching practices. Both lecturers and institutions were perceived as still adjusting to the new framework, leading to varied interpretations and limited integration of the curriculum's core values into daily instructional activities.

Across all six curriculum milestones, a recurring theme emerged: students demonstrated critical awareness of curricular transitions and were able to articulate differences in emphasis, structure, and educational intent. Despite this, there was also a noticeable gap between policy aspirations and classroom realities. Students consistently pointed out the challenges in translating

curriculum policies into meaningful learning experiences, especially in areas concerning digital competence, inclusive pedagogies, and contextual relevance.

Overall, the data suggest that students have developed a reflective stance toward curriculum content and delivery, especially as they approach the end of their academic journey. Their perceptions reflect a nuanced understanding of both the strengths and limitations of curriculum design in Islamic higher education. Importantly, these findings underline the need for greater curricular responsiveness to actual educational contexts and learner experiences, emphasizing the necessity for ongoing curriculum reform driven by feedback from those directly affected by it.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that the Islamic Religious Education (PAI) curriculum at IAIN Kerinci is perceived by students as a key element in shaping their mindset, personal development, and professional orientation. The curriculum is seen not only as a means to equip students with Islamic knowledge but also to build a strong foundation of character, moral values, and social competencies necessary for societal life. This aligns with the theory proposed by Muhaimin (Muhaimin 2005), which states that the Islamic education curriculum functions as a medium for the holistic development of Muslim personalities, integrating cognitive, affective, and psychomotor aspects in learning.

The perceptions of students regarding *Ministerial Decree No. 1 of 1951* reflect a limited awareness of this foundational regulation in the development of Islamic education in Indonesia. Students tend to perceive the decree as a historical artifact with little relevance to the current curriculum landscape. This indicates a lack of historical contextualization within the Islamic Religious Education (PAI) curriculum, resulting in a disconnection between early policy initiatives and contemporary pedagogical practice. As Mahfud (Mahfud 2019) argues, curriculum reforms in Islamic education often proceed without a deep engagement with their historical foundations, thereby creating discontinuities between inherited policy legacies and present-day curriculum execution. This is corroborated by Ismail (Ismail 2016), who positions the 1951 Decree as a seminal step toward integrating religious instruction in public schools but notes its marginal presence in the discourse of higher education curricula. Similarly, Asyibli (Asyibli, Ibtihal, and Fauzan 2025) highlight the epistemological dissonance between traditional Islamic educational values and the frameworks of modern knowledge, which hampers their synthesis within today's curriculum design.

Students' evaluation of Law No. 2 of 1989 on the National Education System reveals perceptions of its normative and abstract nature. While the law formally recognizes religious education within the national system, its operationalization has been criticized as lacking contextual sensitivity and failing to address practical classroom realities. Mahfud (Mahfud 2019) identifies this legislation as overly general and limited in its capacity to guide religious instruction in diverse educational environments. Abdul Fattah (Abdul Fattah Nasution, Rabiatal Adawiyah, Salsabila Syfa Siregar, Fadila Hasibuan 2024) further critiques the centralized character of the law, arguing that it inadequately accommodates regional and socio-cultural particularities in Islamic education. This concern is echoed by Awwaliyah and Baharun (Baharun and Zamroni 2010), who contend that the law's top-down formulation restricts institutional autonomy and impedes contextual curriculum reform at the program level.

The 2003 National Education System Law (UU No. 20/2003) places a strong emphasis on character development and lifelong learning. However, students note a persistent gap between the aspirational goals of the law and the actual conditions within academic environments. Mahfud (Mahfud 2019) suggests that this gap stems from inconsistent implementation, which undermines the normative values embedded in the legislation. Empirical findings by Sama' (Sama' 2003) indicate that character education initiatives often lack integration with local cultural dynamics, resulting in fragmented practice. Moreover, Romanyuk (Romanyuk et al. 2022) documents ongoing moral degradation among students—evidenced by social deviance and behavioral issues—which underscores the difficulties in translating the law's character-building agenda into pedagogical effectiveness.

The Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC), introduced in 2002, is generally appreciated by students for its outcome-oriented framework. Nonetheless, they express concerns over the lack of practical support mechanisms, particularly in terms of teacher training and instructional infrastructure. Marbun (Marbun and Tohir 2022) highlights that many Islamic education instructors were inadequately prepared to implement CBC due to limited pedagogical training and resource constraints. This is corroborated by data from Puslitbang Kemenag (2005), which shows significant challenges in teacher readiness and technical understanding of competency-based instruction. Hasiguan (Hasugian et al. 2024) further stress that the absence of digital infrastructure and pedagogical scaffolding diminishes the curriculum's capacity to foster student autonomy and competency mastery.

Students recognize that the Indonesian National Qualifications Framework (KKNI)—adopted in 2014—offers a clear structural logic for aligning learning outcomes with labor market demands. However, they also point out various obstacles in its implementation, such as uneven institutional support and inadequate dissemination of curriculum standards. Tjalla and Sunubi (Tjalla et al. 2024) argue that the success of KKNI relies heavily on institutional readiness, particularly in developing course plans aligned with learning outcome descriptors. Complementary findings by Sinaga et al. (Dearli Sinaga, Maya Andriani 2018) show that many students are unaware of the framework's relevance due to insufficient socialization efforts. Nasution et al. (Abdul Fattah Nasution, Rabiatul Adawiyah, Salsabila Syfa Siregar, Fadila Hasibuan 2024) emphasize that although PAI students benefit from KKNI-based assignments, such as journal reviews, mini-research projects, and reflective writing, the inconsistent application of these activities by lecturers impairs the realization of KKNI's intended objectives.

The Merdeka Curriculum, as the most recent reform initiative, is widely acknowledged by students for its progressive principles of differentiated instruction and learner autonomy. Nevertheless, implementation challenges persist, primarily concerning teacher preparedness and institutional capacity. Damanik (Damanik et al. 2023) emphasizes that the successful adoption of this curriculum depends on educators' comprehension of its philosophical underpinnings and their ability to enact them in daily instruction. Sucipto (Sucipto et al. 2024), through a systematic review, identifies critical limitations in infrastructure, digital literacy, and resource distribution, especially across less-developed regions. Moreover, Warsihna (Warsihna et al. 2023) report that many educators remain in transitional phases of adaptation, requiring sustained professional development and pedagogical mentoring to fully operationalize Merdeka's ideals.

In sum, final-year students in the PAI study program at IAIN Kerinci demonstrate a high level of critical awareness concerning the historical trajectory and practical realities of curriculum reforms in Islamic education. They are able to articulate shifts in curricular structure, intent, and emphasis across different policy regimes. Nonetheless, a recurring concern remains: the disjunction between regulatory aspirations and on-the-ground implementation. This calls for a recalibration of curriculum design processes that are not only policy-driven but also empirically responsive to learner experiences. Active involvement of curriculum stakeholders—including students and lecturers—is essential to ensure that Islamic education curricula evolve as living systems rooted in relevance, coherence, and pedagogical integrity.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the reflective insights of final-year students in the Islamic Religious Education (PAI) program at IAIN Kerinci concerning the historical development and current implementation of Islamic education curricula in Indonesia. Students demonstrate a nuanced understanding of the curriculum's philosophical foundations and its practical limitations. Their responses underscore recurring misalignments between curriculum policy and actual teaching practices, particularly in areas such as digital literacy, inclusive education, and real-world teaching readiness. Although recent reforms such as the KKNI framework and the Merdeka Curriculum are acknowledged for their progressive intent, their impact remains constrained by institutional inertia, inadequate faculty development, and limited student engagement in the reform process. The study affirms the critical role of students as evaluative agents in curriculum development and calls for their active inclusion in decision-making structures. It also recommends strengthening interdisciplinary integration, enhancing practice-based learning experiences, and aligning curriculum content with global competencies. Moving forward, Islamic higher education institutions must adopt a more participatory and adaptive approach to curriculum design—one that reflects the complex realities of educational practice and prepares graduates to navigate both local and global challenges. Ultimately, a student-centered, context-responsive curriculum is not only essential for fostering academic excellence but also for ensuring the future relevance and resilience of Islamic education in a rapidly evolving world.

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