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Journal of Mathematics Instruction, Social Research and Opinion
Vol. 5, No. 4, December 2026, pp. 2621 – 2631, https://doi.org/10.58421/misro.v5i4.1290
ISSN 2962-7842

Relevance of an Integrated Pesantren Curriculum to Societal and Professional Needs: Evidence from Graduate Competencies

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Article Info

Article history:

Received 2026-03-12
Revised 2026-04-24
Accepted 2026-10-08

Keywords:

Employability
Faith-based education
Graduate competence
Integrated curriculum
Pesantren education

ABSTRACT

Religious education institutions face increasing expectations to produce graduates capable of both ethical leadership and professional participation in contemporary society. This study examines the relevance of an integrated pesantren curriculum through a case-study approach at a single Islamic boarding school. Employing a mixed-method design, quantitative data were collected from alumni (n = 100) and graduate users/employers (n = 50), complemented by qualitative interviews, observations, and focus group discussions involving institutional leaders, teachers, alumni, and community stakeholders. The findings indicate that the curriculum effectively integrates moral formation, communication ability, and leadership experience through structured experiential learning activities. Graduates demonstrate strong ethical reasoning, interpersonal communication, and social responsibility, which are positively perceived by stakeholders. However, analytical and problem-solving competencies appear comparatively moderate, indicating the need for broader exposure to complex professional contexts. While the results suggest that integrated religious education remains socially relevant, these findings primarily reflect perceived relevance rather than comprehensive institutional effectiveness. A key limitation of this study lies in its single-case design, which may restrict generalizability across different pesantren contexts. The study contributes a dual-dimension relevance model connecting spiritual competence with socio-professional readiness, offering implications for curriculum development and policy in faith-based education.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Religious education institutions, particularly Islamic boarding schools (pesantren), have historically played a central role in shaping moral character, religious understanding, and community leadership. This role is operationalized through structured learning

management systems that govern how spiritual values are transmitted and internalized among students [1]. In contemporary contexts, however, these institutions are increasingly expected to contribute not only to spiritual development but also to graduates' readiness to participate in complex social and professional environments. The growing demands of globalization, technological advancement, and labor-market competition have shifted expectations toward education systems that produce individuals who are both ethically grounded and professionally competent [2], [3]. As a result, the relevance of pesantren education is now evaluated not only in terms of religious outcomes but also in relation to employability and societal engagement [4].

This shift has generated a critical challenge for traditional religious education. While pesantren are widely recognized for their strength in moral formation, discipline, and community orientation, questions remain regarding their capacity to equip graduates with competencies required in modern professional contexts. In particular, the gap between spiritual competence and professional competence has become a recurring concern. Graduates may demonstrate strong ethical reasoning and interpersonal values, yet encounter difficulties in analytical thinking, problem solving, and adaptation to diverse workplace demands [5]. This imbalance suggests that conventional instructional approaches may not fully address the multidimensional competence required in contemporary society.

In response, curriculum reform within pesantren has increasingly focused on integrating religious education with practical skills and experiential learning. Integrated curriculum models aim to connect theological knowledge with real-life application, while experiential learning emphasizes active engagement through community service, leadership practice, and collaborative activities [6], [7]. These approaches are expected to bridge the gap between normative values and practical competence, enabling students to internalize ethical principles while developing relevant social and professional skills. Consequently, the effectiveness of pesantren education is closely linked to how successfully such integration is implemented within curriculum and learning processes.

Previous studies have explored aspects of this transformation, including curriculum integration, experiential learning, and graduate employability in faith-based education. Research shows that integrated curricula can enhance character formation and interpersonal competence [8], while experiential learning contributes to adaptability and social engagement [9]. Other studies highlight the importance of aligning educational outcomes with labor-market expectations through competency-based approaches and stakeholder collaboration [10], [11]. These findings suggest that religious education can remain relevant when supported by appropriate pedagogical strategies and institutional adaptation.

However, existing literature tends to examine these components curriculum integration, experiential learning, and employability separately rather than as interconnected processes within a single institutional context. As a result, there is limited empirical understanding of how these elements operate simultaneously in practice and how they collectively influence graduate competence and societal relevance. In particular, few studies provide comprehensive analysis linking curriculum content, implementation mechanisms, and measurable outcomes within one pesantren setting. This gap limits the ability to evaluate

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educational relevance holistically and to identify how theoretical models are translated into operational practice.

Therefore, this study addresses the following research question: how does an integrated pesantren curriculum contribute to graduate competence and societal relevance? Specifically, the study examines the relationship between curriculum structure, learning processes, and graduate outcomes within a single institutional case. By analyzing both quantitative indicators and qualitative insights from stakeholders, the research seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of how educational practices shape graduate readiness.

The novelty of this study lies in its integrated analytical approach, which simultaneously examines character formation, social competence, and employability within one coherent framework. Rather than treating spiritual and professional competencies as separate domains, this research conceptualizes them as interdependent dimensions of educational relevance. Through a case-study design, the study offers empirical evidence on how an integrated curriculum functions in practice and how it responds to contemporary societal expectations. This contribution is expected to inform curriculum development and policy in faith-based education.

2. METHOD

a. Research Design

This study employs a mixed-method design using a concurrent triangulation model to examine curriculum relevance and graduate competence within a pesantren context. Mixed-method approaches enable the integration of quantitative and qualitative data to provide a more comprehensive understanding of educational outcomes by combining measurable indicators with in-depth contextual explanations [12], [13]. In this design, quantitative and qualitative strands are given equal priority, allowing the study to capture both the extent of competence development and the processes through which such competencies are formed. In this study, quantitative and qualitative data were collected simultaneously, analyzed separately using appropriate analytical techniques, and then integrated to ensure convergence, complementarity, and robustness of findings [14], [15]. The use of concurrent triangulation also strengthens internal validity by enabling cross-verification between numerical trends and participant narratives, thereby reducing potential bias and enhancing the credibility of the overall interpretation.

b. Participants and Sampling

The study involved four stakeholder groups: administrators, teachers, alumni, and graduate users (employers/community leaders). A purposive sampling technique was used to ensure that participants had direct experience with the curriculum and its outcomes. This approach is commonly used in educational research to obtain information-rich cases [16], [17]. Selection criteria included: (1) administrators involved in curriculum management, (2) teachers actively engaged in instruction, (3) alumni who graduated within the last 1–5 years, and (4) employers or community members who had direct interaction with graduates.

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Table 1. Participant Distribution

Group	Quantitative (n)	Qualitative (n)	Criteria
Administrators	–	4	Curriculum decision-makers
Teachers	–	6	Active teaching staff
Alumni	100	7	Recent graduates
Employers/Users	50	4	Graduate users
Total	150	21	–

c. Quantitative Instrument (Survey)

A structured questionnaire was used to measure graduate competence and curriculum relevance, as such instruments are widely applied to assess competencies and stakeholder perceptions in education research [18]. The instrument consisted of 24 items measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The items were organized into four dimensions, namely religious/ethical competence, communication skills, leadership and social responsibility, and analytical and problem-solving skills, with each dimension represented by six items. The questionnaire was self-developed and adapted from established frameworks of employability and religious competence to ensure contextual relevance [19], [20].

Content validity was established through expert judgment involving two education scholars and one curriculum practitioner who evaluated the clarity, relevance, and representativeness of the items. Prior to full deployment, a pilot test was conducted with 30 respondents, resulting in a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.87, which indicates strong internal consistency and meets acceptable reliability standards [20].

d. Qualitative Procedures

Qualitative data were collected through interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and observations to obtain in-depth insights into learning processes and competence development. A total of 12 semi-structured interviews were conducted with administrators, teachers, alumni, and employers, each lasting between 30 and 60 minutes. These interviews explored participants' experiences regarding curriculum implementation, competence development, and the relevance of learning outcomes in real-world contexts.

In addition, two focus group discussions were organized to capture shared perspectives and facilitate interaction among participants. The first group consisted of five alumni, while the second involved a mixed group of six participants comprising alumni and employers. Each session lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and focused on discussing expectations, experiences, and perceived gaps between educational preparation and workplace demands [21].

Observations were conducted during classroom instruction and community-based activities to document real-time competence demonstration. A structured observation rubric was applied, covering key indicators such as communication clarity, ethical behavior, leadership participation, and collaboration. Each indicator was rated on a four-level scale ranging from low to very high, and the ratings were complemented by detailed field notes to

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capture contextual nuances. Observation checklists are recognized as effective tools for assessing observable competencies in authentic settings [18].

e. Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including means and percentages, to summarize competence levels and stakeholder perceptions. This approach is appropriate for evaluating educational outcomes and identifying patterns in perception-based data [22]. Comparative interpretation was also conducted to examine alignment between alumni and employer responses. Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis procedures involving three stages: open coding to identify initial categories, axial coding to establish relationships between themes, and selective coding to integrate the findings into a coherent narrative [23]. To enhance the reliability of qualitative interpretation, inter-coder checking was performed with an additional researcher, and any discrepancies were resolved through discussion.

f. Triangulation

Data triangulation was applied by systematically integrating findings from surveys, interviews, FGDs, and observations in order to corroborate evidence across multiple sources and methods. This process involved comparing quantitative trends with qualitative themes and examining areas of convergence as well as divergence to generate more nuanced interpretations. Triangulation strengthens the credibility and validity of mixed-method research by reducing method bias and enhancing the robustness of conclusions [6], [14]. In this study, triangulation also enabled cross-validation between stakeholder perceptions and observed practices, thereby ensuring that reported competencies were supported by both numerical indicators and real-world behavioral evidence.

g. Alignment of Methods and Findings

Only instruments whose results are explicitly reported (survey, interviews, FGDs, and observations) were included in the final analysis to maintain methodological consistency. This alignment ensures that all claims presented in the findings section are directly supported by corresponding data sources. Standardized tests and performance assessments initially considered during the research design phase were excluded from the final analysis due to incomplete or inconsistent data collection. This decision was made to avoid potential bias and to ensure that the methodological framework remains coherent and transparently linked to the reported evidence, thereby improving the internal validity of the study.

h. Ethical Considerations

All participants provided informed consent prior to their involvement in the study and were clearly informed about the purpose, procedures, and voluntary nature of their participation. Confidentiality was strictly maintained by anonymizing all data using participant codes and removing any identifying information from transcripts and reports. Participants were also given the right to withdraw at any stage without any consequences.

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The study adhered to established ethical standards in educational research, including respect for participants, data protection, and responsible reporting [24]. These measures were implemented to ensure that the research process upheld principles of integrity, transparency, and participant protection.

3. RESULTS

a. Curriculum Content Findings

Document analysis and classroom observations indicate that the curriculum integrates core religious sciences (Fiqh, Aqidah, Tafsir, Hadith, Arabic) with applied domains such as sharia economics and entrepreneurship. Instruction is intentionally coupled with practice modules (public speaking, leadership drills, community service). Interviews confirm that teachers sequence lessons from concept to application (e.g., preaching practice following doctrinal instruction). Student reflective journals consistently frame religious knowledge as guidance for real-life conduct, indicating alignment between intended and enacted curriculum.

b. Curriculum Implementation Findings

Implementation is characterized by experiential learning, systematic role rotation, and community engagement. Students rotate through roles (event coordinator, discussion leader, prayer leader), ensuring distributed leadership exposure. Observations show increasing autonomy across cohorts, with later-stage students initiating and managing activities with minimal supervision. Community programs (religious outreach, social service) require interaction with diverse publics, strengthening communication and adaptability. Interview data indicate that feedback loops (post-activity debriefs) are used to connect behavior with learning objectives.

c. Stakeholder Survey Findings

Quantitative data from alumni (n = 100) and employers (n = 50) summarize perceived competence across four dimensions.

Table 2. Graduate Competence Evaluation

Competency	Alumni Mean	Employer Mean
Religious/Ethical Competence	4.3	4.2
Communication Skills	4.2	4.0
Leadership & Social Responsibility	4.1	4.0
Analytical & Problem-Solving	3.6	3.6

Both groups rate religious/ethical competence highest (≥4.2), followed by communication and leadership (≈4.0–4.2). Analytical/problem-solving is consistently lower (3.6). Employers rate communication and leadership slightly below alumni, suggesting stricter workplace benchmarks. The magnitude of the gap (≈0.4–0.7 points vs. top dimensions) indicates a relative weakness rather than an absolute deficit.

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d. Observed Behavioral Outcomes

Observation checklists show a consistent and stable demonstration of ethical behavior, particularly in terms of discipline, responsibility, and respect during both classroom and community-based activities. Students also exhibit effective communication skills in structured settings such as presentations and moderated discussions, where they are generally able to articulate ideas clearly, respond to feedback, and maintain audience engagement. Leadership is evident in coordination and task allocation within groups, with students demonstrating the ability to organize activities, delegate responsibilities, and maintain group cohesion. However, field notes indicate that problem-solving remains largely procedural in nature. While students are able to manage routine and familiar tasks effectively, they tend to hesitate when confronted with novel, complex, or ill-structured problems. In such situations, there is limited evidence of advanced analytical strategies, such as hypothesis testing, multi-step reasoning, or critical evaluation of alternative solutions, suggesting that higher-order cognitive skills are less consistently developed.

e. Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

Triangulation reveals convergence across data sources. High survey ratings for ethical and communication competencies are supported by observed behavior and interview accounts. Lower scores in analytical/problem-solving align with observational evidence of limited performance in complex scenarios and employer feedback emphasizing challenges in unstructured tasks. The integrated pattern indicates strong socio-moral and interpersonal competence with comparatively weaker higher-order cognitive performance.

f. Summary of Results

The curriculum effectively develops ethical reasoning, communication, and leadership through the integration of structured content and experiential implementation, as evidenced by consistent patterns across multiple data sources. These competencies are not only reflected in high survey ratings but are also supported by observational findings and stakeholder perceptions, indicating that graduates are well-prepared for socially oriented roles. However, analytical and problem-solving competence remains comparatively weaker, as indicated by consistent survey scores (3.6) and reinforced by qualitative data showing limited engagement with complex or unfamiliar problem contexts. This suggests that while foundational and interpersonal competencies are well established, higher-order cognitive skills require further development. Differences between alumni and employer ratings further reveal that workplace expectations tend to exceed educational perceptions in certain domains, particularly in areas requiring adaptability and advanced reasoning. This discrepancy highlights the need for closer alignment between curriculum design and the evolving demands of professional environments.

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4. DISCUSSION

a. Interpretation of Findings

The results indicate that the curriculum's integration of values and practice produces robust socio-moral and interpersonal competencies, as reflected in consistent evidence across survey ratings, observations, and stakeholder accounts, while higher-order cognitive skills develop less strongly and with greater variability across contexts [25], [26]. This pattern supports models that position spiritual competence as a foundational basis for ethical conduct and effective social interaction, providing learners with stable norms for behavior, responsibility, and communication [27], [28]. At the same time, the findings highlight that such foundations do not automatically translate into advanced analytical performance without targeted cognitive scaffolding, such as structured problem-based learning, explicit reasoning instruction, and exposure to complex, ill-structured tasks [29], [30]. In other words, while value integration successfully shapes dispositions and interpersonal effectiveness, the transition from normative understanding to analytical expertise appears to require additional pedagogical mechanisms that specifically cultivate critical thinking, multi-step reasoning, and adaptive problem-solving capacities [11], [31].

b. Alignment with Prior Literature

The strong outcomes in ethics, communication, and leadership are consistent with studies showing that faith-based curricula excel in character formation and community-oriented skills, particularly in cultivating discipline, responsibility, and socially embedded forms of leadership [32], [33]. These results align with evidence that such institutions effectively translate moral instruction into interpersonal competence and community engagement. At the same time, the comparatively lower analytical scores echo critiques that traditional pedagogies may underemphasize complex problem solving, creativity, and adaptability required in contemporary professional environments [29], [30]. This suggests that while normative and affective domains are well developed, cognitive domains—especially those involving higher-order reasoning—may receive less systematic emphasis. The present findings extend prior work by demonstrating these patterns within a single institutional system where curriculum content, implementation mechanisms, and measured outcomes are examined together rather than in isolation, thereby providing a more integrated account of how strengths in socio-moral competence can coexist with gaps in analytical capacity within the same educational model [11], [34].

c. Implications for Curriculum and Practice

These recommendations align with adaptive management approaches already demonstrated in pesantren contexts, where continuous institutional evaluation informed by theological commitments has been shown to maintain educational quality even amid resource constraints [35]. First, curriculum design should incorporate structured opportunities for complex problem solving (e.g., case-based learning, project-based tasks with uncertainty, interdisciplinary modules). Second, experiential learning should be expanded beyond community service to include contexts that demand analytical reasoning

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(e.g., simulated decision environments, data-informed projects). Third, feedback systems should explicitly assess reasoning processes, not only outcomes, to build metacognitive awareness. Fourth, partnerships with external stakeholders can expose students to varied problem contexts and raise alignment with workplace expectations.

d. Contribution of the Study and Limitations

This study contributes a dual-dimension relevance perspective by empirically linking moral formation with socio-professional readiness while identifying a specific developmental gap in analytical competence. It also demonstrates how integrated curriculum design operates in practice through the alignment of content, implementation mechanisms, and outcomes within one case, supported by convergent mixed-method evidence.

The single-case design limits generalizability across pesantren with different resources and pedagogical traditions. The reliance on perception-based measures, while triangulated, may not fully capture objective performance in complex tasks. The study focuses on cross-sectional outcomes rather than longitudinal trajectories of graduate development.

e. Transition to Conclusion

Taken together, the findings indicate that integrated pesantren education remains socially relevant through strong ethical and interpersonal outcomes, as consistently reflected in both quantitative ratings and qualitative observations. These results demonstrate that the curriculum successfully fulfills its core mission of character formation and social engagement, enabling graduates to function effectively within community-oriented and relational contexts. At the same time, the findings signal a clear need to strengthen higher-order cognitive skills, particularly in areas related to analytical reasoning, complex problem solving, and adaptive decision-making in unfamiliar situations. This dual pattern suggests that while the existing model is effective in producing socially competent and ethically grounded individuals, it requires further refinement to ensure balanced competence development across both affective and cognitive domains. The following section synthesizes these insights more comprehensively and outlines the key concluding implications for curriculum development, educational practice, and future research directions.

5. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that an integrated pesantren curriculum is capable of producing graduates with strong ethical reasoning, communication skills, and leadership capacity, confirming its continued relevance in contemporary society. The findings show that the combination of structured religious instruction and experiential learning practices effectively supports character formation and social competence, enabling graduates to function productively within community-oriented and relational contexts. These outcomes indicate that pesantren education remains a significant contributor to socially embedded human resource development.

However, the study also identifies a consistent gap in analytical and problem-solving competence. While graduates perform well in routine and structured situations, they

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demonstrate limited capacity when confronted with complex or unfamiliar challenges. This suggests that the current curriculum, although effective in developing affective and interpersonal domains, requires further strengthening in higher-order cognitive skills to ensure balanced competence development.

The study contributes by providing an integrated empirical perspective that links curriculum content, implementation processes, and graduate outcomes within a single framework. This approach clarifies how spiritual and professional competencies can be developed simultaneously, while also highlighting areas requiring pedagogical refinement. Future efforts should focus on incorporating more cognitively demanding learning strategies, expanding experiential contexts beyond community settings, and strengthening alignment with evolving workplace expectations. Further research across multiple institutions and through longitudinal designs is recommended to enhance generalizability and capture long-term graduate development trajectories.

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