

WOMEN, EDUCATION, AND EMPLOYMENT: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN ISLAMIC HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

The findings indicate that many alumni are employed in fields not directly related to their academic specialization. Contributing factors to this trend include limited job market opportunities that align with the program's focus and inadequate integration of practical training throughout their studies. Stakeholders recognize strengths among alumni, such as adaptability and commitment, but they also emphasize the necessity for curriculum enhancements aimed at improving job readiness. This research investigates the alumni tracking of the Muamalah Study Program within the Faculty of Sharia and Law at Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara. The primary objective is to analyze employment patterns among alumni and their correspondence with the academic outcomes of the program. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and content analysis of stakeholders' perceptions and alumni experiences. The results reveal a significant number of alumni securing employment outside their academic fields. Factors contributing to this situation include a scarcity of job market opportunities that align with the program's focus and insufficient practical training during their academic tenure. Stakeholders highlighted alumni strengths, including adaptability and commitment, while stressing the need for curriculum improvements to enhance job readiness. This study underscores the importance of strengthening the alumni network and establishing institutional partnerships to bridge the gap between academic training and employment opportunities. Based on our findings, we offer recommendations aimed at improving alumni outcomes and better aligning them with the objectives of the Muamalah Study Program.

Keywords : *Academic Outcomes; Curriculum Enhancements; Employment Patterns; Institutional Partnerships*

Introduction

Indonesia, with its largest Muslim population, has a significant female population. The Indonesian Constitution ensures equal educational opportunities for both genders. However, achieving this potential requires developing human capacities, including rational, intellectual, moral, and spiritual aspects. Liberating women from violence and empowering them to perform social, political, and cultural roles is crucial. Both genders must collaborate in nation-building.

(Machali 2013).

Islam views men and women equally, with equal rights to serve Allah. Both can enter paradise through good deeds and receive punishment for evil. Women, with their gentle, loving, and nurturing nature, often face injustice in various fields and cruel treatment. Injustice in accessing and utilizing resources remains a problem in women's society, highlighting the need for gender equality in human rights (Ainiyah 2017); (Supriyadi 2019). Studying Canadian educational institutions and patriarchal social control, feminist and ethnographic approaches explore how these

spaces teach self and community, fostering resistance and articulating new political and citizenship conceptions (Eidoo 2018).

Islam has established gender equality between women and men. Western historian Will Durant acknowledges Muhammad's contribution to improving women's rights and highly recognizes the position of women in Islam (As-Suyuthi. 2015) (Rahmat, 1999, p. 125). The Islamic faith, as conveyed by the Prophet Muhammad PBUH, was a mission of religious liberation. It aimed to end discriminatory practices against women, thus seeking to liberate them from various forms of oppression, rights inequality, and male arbitrariness stemming from national or societal cultural norms.

The insufficient comprehension and interpretation of Islamic teaching sources contribute to gender inequality. People often perceive women as incapable of taking on leadership roles. However, the Qur'an and hadiths substantiate that leadership is not exclusively the domain of men. Instead, Islam recognizes the equality of male and female dignity, as both genders possess equal rights and obligations across various domains. Al-Ahzab: 33 and 73, Ali Imran: 195, and al-Baqarah: 187 normatively confirm the concept of parallels that reflect justice. To put it another way, the recognition of women's leadership capabilities can lead to the

establishment of an egalitarian social order and the abolition of unjust social structures.

Women are the origin and focal point of human civilization, with the future of nations and humanity heavily dependent on their influence. A well-known Arabic proverb states: "Al-Mar'ah 'Imad al-Bilad. Idza Shaluhat Shaluha al-Bilad, wa Idza Fasadat Fasada al-Bilad." Woman are the state's pillars; if they're good, the state is good; if not, corrupt.

"Shaluha" or "shalih" signifies goodness, health, propriety, solidity, benefit, peace, and suitability. In English, "shalih" encompasses meanings including good, right, proper, sound, solid, virtuous, practical, suitable, and appropriate. Therefore, the connotation of "shaluha" extends beyond individual moral integrity to encompass social moral integrity, physical and mental well-being, rational intelligence, and the capacity for self-actualization across various private, domestic, or public domains (Muhammad 2014).

The Muamalah Study Program at Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara focuses on integrating religious studies, science, and technology to prepare students for the globalized world, industrial societies, and societal welfare. The program's distinctive feature is its balanced approach to theory and practice, aiming to shape professional graduates who can

address both material and spiritual needs, preparing them for success in the globalized world.

The Muamalah Study Program at Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara combines Islamic principles with contemporary disciplines to equip graduates with the skills they need to navigate global challenges. The program combines Islamic teachings with practical expertise in law, economics, and technology, aiming to cultivate graduates who can balance ethical values with professional skills. This is particularly relevant in Indonesia, where there is a need for professionals who understand both modern and Islamic societal frameworks. However, recent evaluations have highlighted a discrepancy between the program's educational objectives and alumni's career paths. Muamalah bridges Islamic law with practical applications of economic transactions, property rights, and contractual obligations within Sharia.

The Muamalah Study Program aims to develop students as agents of change and effective communicators, equipping them with technical proficiencies and interpersonal skills for leadership and community engagement. However, many alumni find employment in fields unrelated to their field of study, raising questions about the program's relevance to the labor market and its ability to equip students with

transferable skills. The program's lack of a robust alumni network and limited engagement with industry stakeholders further hinders graduates' career prospects. The primary challenge facing the Muamalah Study Program is the apparent disconnect between its curriculum and the employment outcomes of its graduates.

Method

In the effort to gather data for a study on the evolving understanding of user perceptions towards the Muamalah Study Program at the Faculty of Sharia and Law, Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara, the researcher will directly collect data from users in government agencies and the community who are directly involved with the Muamalah Study Program. We collect data from user leaders in two ways: first, through the informal interview method, which relies entirely on the spontaneous development of questions during a natural interaction. During this informal interview, the participants may remain unaware of the systematic nature of the process.

The user implements the data collection strategy through in-depth interviews and observations of the community directly involved in the program. We carry out this strategy to understand the alumni's responses and perceptions of the Muamalah Study Program at the Faculty of Sharia and Law,

Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara, and to develop and refine theories.

I employed observation methods throughout the data collection process to enhance my understanding of the problem context. As noted by Poerwandari (2005), Patton emphasizes the importance of observation in qualitative research, as it helps obtain valuable and accurate data that reflects the subjects' thoughts about their experiences and reveals aspects that may not have been addressed during interviews. Once I have gathered data through literature studies, interviews, and observations, I will use content analysis to analyze the stakeholders' perceptions critically. This method involves collecting and analyzing the text's content, which encompasses words, meanings, images, symbols, ideas, or themes communicated within the text.

Before conducting the analysis, I will transcribe the interview results verbatim and classify them by assigning specific names and codes. I will also organize and annotate the field notes I prepare with critical insights. After categorizing all the data into distinct codes, I will identify the themes and proceed with the analysis. Ultimately, I will compile a report detailing the research findings.

The data analysis process is cyclical, involving the organization of data, categorization into patterns, and continuous application throughout the research.

According to Patton (1980:268), data analysis entails sorting and organizing data into categories and basic descriptions, allowing for the identification of themes and the formulation of working hypotheses based on the data.

The data analysis process begins with reviewing all available data from various sources, namely in-depth interviews, direct observations, and written documentation. After being read and studied, the existing data is then reduced by abstracting it. Next, we organize the units for the upcoming coding step. The final stage of data analysis is the verification of data validity. The next step is the interpretation stage, which involves managing the results and temporarily applying substantive theory using specific methods.

Result

Before discussing the lecturers' views on the quality of students and their attitudes in the Muamalah Study Program at the Faculty of Sharia, Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara, it is important to first explain the reasons for students' choices regarding this program. We conducted a focus group discussion to explore the factors influencing students' decisions when selecting the Muamalah Study Program. Four of the twelve students we spoke with chose the Muamalah

program as their first choice, while the others selected it as their second or third option.

Interestingly, despite their genuine interest in the Muamalah program, some students opted for alternative programs due to peer influence. As a result, they listed Muamalah as their second choice and were ultimately successful in gaining admission. Despite not choosing the Muamalah Program as their first choice, students have adjusted and felt satisfied there, suggesting they have accepted their enrollment.

During the learning process, the lecturers emphasize the quality and attitudes of the students. Some lecturers generally observe that the students in the Muamalah Study Program have room for improvement. While they acknowledge that students attend lectures led by instructors qualified in their respective disciplines, there are a few issues that persist.

1. Overall, the cognitive quality of Muamalah Program students tends to be similar, with only a few high-achieving students standing out in each class. This is evident during classroom discussions, where higher-quality students offer creative responses when reviewing material, evaluating concepts, or asking questions.

2. The Grade Point Average (GPA) at the end of the semester, which reflects students' performance, shows generally encouraging and satisfactory results.

However, students with lower academic quality receive less favorable grades. In general, Muamalah students achieve average grades across all subjects. Notably, the disparity is more pronounced in instrumental courses like Arabic, with only a few students demonstrating strong proficiency. The students' educational backgrounds, which range from general high schools to vocational and Islamic high schools, could potentially explain this. This diversity significantly impacts their ability to learn Arabic effectively. Additionally, students from a pesantren background sometimes struggle with their English language skills.

Despite these challenges, students generally maintain a positive attitude about the courses. Lecturers clearly explain the course objectives and expected outcomes at the beginning of each class. However, students feel that some course content may be excessive, emphasizing that the courses closely related to the Muamalah program should take precedence. Before discussing the lecturers' views on the quality of students and attitudes in the Muamalah Study Program at the Faculty of Sharia, Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara, it is necessary first to explain their choices regarding the Muamalah Study Program. We conducted a focus group discussion to understand the differences among students when choosing the Muamalah Study

Program. Some students chose the Muamalah program not as their first choice but as their second or third choice. Four of the twelve students chose the Muamalah program as their first choice. The rest made Muamalah their second and third choice. It is intriguing that some students, despite their genuine liking and desire for the Muamalah program, opt for other programs due to peer influence. Therefore, they made Muamalah their second choice and eventually succeeded in getting it. Although not all students choose the Muamalah Program, they can adapt and feel fulfilled studying there. This indicates that they have already come to terms with being part of the Muamalah program.

In the learning process, the lecturers emphasize the quality and attitude of the students. Some lecturers generally state that the students in the Muamalah Study Program are still lacking. Although, in general, they state that students who attend lectures from lecturers with various course qualifications by the discipline they are pursuing, there are still some issues, including:

1. In essence, the quality of Muamalah Program students is generally similar in terms of cognition, with only a few students in one class having an advantage over others. The classroom process in the local setting demonstrates this. Students

who are of high quality will provide creative responses when reviewing, evaluating, or even asking questions.

2. The Grade Point Average at the end of the semester, which demonstrates encouraging and satisfactory results, also reveals the quality of Muamalah Study Program students. Conversely, students with lower quality tend to receive less favorable grades. However, Muamalah students generally receive average grades in all their courses. In courses that are instrumental, such as Arabic language for students, it has almost become a common issue, and in this course, only a few students have good quality. This is likely not unrelated to the students' backgrounds, having a general education from high school, vocational school, or at least an Islamic high school. This condition significantly impacts the student's ability to access Arabic effectively. The findings also reveal that students from a pesantren background occasionally struggle with their English skills.

Meanwhile, the student's attitude towards the courses provided is positive, with explanations from the lecturers at the

beginning of the lectures regarding the objectives and outcomes of the courses studied. However, they see that the courses offered sometimes seem excessive. However, the courses specifically designed for the program should take center stage.

In the future, the lecturers hope that the Muamalah Study Program will engage in constructive and innovative activities in line with market demands. Students anticipate that the Muamalah Study Program will broaden its practical training to the institutions they have already visited and other institutions, like intellectual property protection agencies and consumer protection agencies, among others. Furthermore, the lecturers hope the program will implement admission qualifications for students entering the Muamalah program. The ability to master the subjects they will be studying is a crucial factor. The lecturers also hope that to improve the quality of the faculty, the program must be able to provide suitable stimuli and forums for study and discussion to enhance the quality of students in their subjects. Moreover, the program should provide students with training and motivation to enhance their attitudes toward the future of the Muamalah program. Furthermore, the Muamalah Study Program must intensify its relationship with the Student Association of the Department (HMJ) to strengthen and improve the

quality and attitude of Muamalah Study Program students in the future.

Gender is the non-biological differences and similarities between women and men. The term gender is often associated with equality between men and women. This equality primarily focuses on equalizing their rights as human beings. In other words, there are no differences between men and women regarding the economy, education, and other aspects of life. Women and men are the same in sectors of a country. In Islam, women and men are equal; the only difference is in their obedience to Allah SWT. Beyond that, women and men are equal in education, politics, economics, and other areas (Nurjannah 2020).

Islam has never prohibited women from doing business, studying, and even becoming leaders of a country. However, the belief that women should only manage their households stems from the tradition of Islamic society itself (Jafar 2016). The discourse about women in various countries knows no bounds. Women are an exciting discourse. Women's existence and position in our world often spark controversy (Ariwidodo 2016). From the classical era to the current millennial era, women's position and status have undergone significant changes historically, particularly within the state (Aswiyati 2016); (Prasekti 2019).

Due to their perceived emotional sensitivity, people often depict women as gentle, affectionate, and nurturing. This portrayal is prevalent in societal discourse, with anatomical and physiological differences contributing to behavioral variations and abilities (Sonbol 2020); (Susanti 2020); (Syahriza 2021). The term "women" is derived from the Sanskrit word "empu," meaning "master," and "perempuan," meaning "to be valued." The term "wanita" has Sanskrit origins, meaning desire, and is associated with objectification or sexual objectification. The symbolic transition from "wanita" to "perempuan" represents a transformation from object to subject. However, we render the English word "wan" as "want," Dutch as "men," and German as "wun" and "schen," suggesting that we may perceive a woman as someone who is either desired or needed. Feminist scholars argue that "women" is a social construct, with identity established through representation. The term "woman" serves as a designation for a group or category, distinguishing it from other categories (Abukari 2014); (Siregar 2020).

The article argues that the Qur'an's worldview emphasizes the importance of knowledge acquisition and application for Muslims to adhere to its principles (Barlas 2019); (Zaenudin 2015). However, interpretations of the Qur'an can contradict its fundamental worldview, as seen in the

recent assassination of a Pakistani girl for advocating female education. The article argues that understanding various types of knowledge is crucial for fulfilling divine requirements and all human endeavors (Abukari 2014).

The modern narrative depicts women's education and gender empowerment as a manifestation of their personal agency and autonomy, not as a challenge to the restrictive structures of family, community, and Islam (Emon 2016); (Umami 2020). It examines the lived experiences of educated Muslim women, challenging the traditional view that women's education and gender empowerment are a means to modernize Muslim societies (Khurshid 2015); (Azani 2019). The Islamic education curriculum urgently needs to incorporate gender mainstreaming because research shows it significantly alters educators' and students' perspectives (Umami 2020); (Zarkasyi 2021).

The National Education Policy (NEP) in Malaysia has significantly impacted Malays' access to higher education and professions, with a significant increase in ethnic Malays practicing as doctors, engineers, or accountants. Women's education and participation in the workforce have also improved, with over half of university students being women by the turn of the

20th century (Ainslie 2015). However, conservative interpretations of Islam have limited the ambitions of female managers and employees in "sharia-compliant" corporations, leading to ambivalence and a focus on husband and family obligations. Conversely, conservative values have stimulated women's professional employment and careers, such as in the medical sector, where concerns about close or improper interactions between men and women have increased the demand for female doctors (Peletz 2018).

Conclusions

The Muamalah Study Program at UIN Sumatera Utara has been criticized for its lack of alignment with labor market demands. The program's objectives are often misaligned with the professional outcomes of its graduates, with many finding themselves in careers unrelated to their field of study. This highlights challenges in curriculum relevance, stakeholder engagement, and institutional support systems. Key observations include a significant proportion of alumni employed outside their academic training, weak alumni networks hindering professional collaboration and career advancement, and employers recognizing the ethical grounding of graduates but a lack of practical skills. The study emphasizes the need to align educational

programs with market realities and strengthen the institution's engagement with alumni and industry stakeholders.

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