

## **Bridging Gaps: Strategies for Competitiveness and Survival of IAIN Langsa Islamic Education Graduates in the Eastern Coast of Aceh**

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### **Abstract**

This study examined the competitiveness and survival strategies of Islamic Education (PAI) graduates from IAIN Langsa in the Aceh Timur region, including East Aceh Regency, Kota Langsa, and Aceh Tamiang. Higher education institutions, particularly Islamic Studies programs, are responsible for preparing graduates to meet the demands of an increasingly dynamic and globalized job market. This research aimed to explore the challenges faced by PAI alumni in adapting to globalization, digitalization, and evolving market expectations. Using a mixed-methods explanatory sequential design, quantitative data were collected via online surveys from 165 alumni graduating in 2021, 2022, and 2023. The survey measured indicators such as job waiting periods, relevance of employment to academic background, income levels, and workplace challenges. Qualitative data were subsequently obtained through in-depth interviews with 10 purposively selected alumni. Quantitative findings were analyzed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative data underwent thematic analysis, supported by method triangulation and a focus group discussion (FGD) with experts and alumni. Results indicated significant gaps in technical skills, including IT proficiency, foreign language competency, and public speaking. While most alumni pursued careers in education, others entered diverse fields, employing adaptive survival strategies influenced by socio-cultural expectations in Aceh. These findings contribute to curriculum refinement and institutional strategies to enhance graduate competitiveness and employability.

### **Abstrak**

Penelitian ini mengkaji daya saing dan strategi bertahan lulusan Pendidikan Agama Islam (PAI) IAIN Langsa di wilayah Aceh Timur, yang meliputi Kabupaten Aceh Timur, Kota Langsa, dan Aceh Tamiang. Perguruan tinggi, khususnya program studi keislaman, memiliki tanggung jawab untuk mempersiapkan lulusan agar mampu memenuhi tuntutan pasar kerja yang semakin dinamis dan global. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi tantangan yang dihadapi oleh alumni PAI dalam beradaptasi dengan globalisasi, digitalisasi, dan perkembangan kebutuhan pasar. Menggunakan desain metode campuran eksplanatori berurutan, data kuantitatif dikumpulkan melalui survei daring dari 165 alumni lulusan tahun 2021, 2022, dan 2023. Survei mengukur indikator seperti waktu tunggu kerja, relevansi pekerjaan dengan latar belakang akademik, tingkat pendapatan, dan tantangan di tempat kerja. Data kualitatif kemudian diperoleh melalui wawancara mendalam dengan 10 alumni yang dipilih secara purposif. Temuan kuantitatif dianalisis menggunakan statistik deskriptif, sedangkan data kualitatif dianalisis secara tematik, didukung dengan triangulasi metode dan diskusi kelompok terfokus (FGD) bersama para ahli dan alumni. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan adanya kesenjangan signifikan dalam keterampilan teknis, termasuk kecakapan teknologi informasi, kemampuan berbahasa asing, dan keterampilan berbicara di depan umum. Meskipun sebagian besar alumni bekerja di bidang pendidikan, beberapa di antaranya memasuki sektor lain dengan menerapkan strategi bertahan yang adaptif, dipengaruhi oleh ekspektasi sosial-budaya di Aceh. Temuan ini memberikan kontribusi terhadap pengembangan kurikulum dan strategi institusi untuk meningkatkan daya saing dan employability lulusan

### **Keywords**

Competitiveness, survival strategies, Islamic education graduates; IAIN Langsa

### **Introduction**

The training of qualified Islamic religious teachers is a cornerstone of Islamic education policy and societal development in Indonesia. However, the changing needs of the 21st-century workforce (Amery, 2020; Lopez-Claros et al., 2020), driven by globalization and digitalization (Bradford, 2023), demand that Islamic Education (PAI) graduates possess not only strong religious knowledge but also adaptable skills to thrive in diverse professional settings. This research explores the issues and trends impacting the employability of PAI graduates from IAIN Langsa in Aceh Timur, focusing on their competitiveness and the survival strategies they employ to navigate the complexities of the contemporary job market and meet the socio-cultural expectations of their communities.

Existing scholarship has explored various facets of Islamic education, teacher training, and graduate employability. Studies on Islamic education policy in Indonesia (Mulyadi & Herdianto, 2022; Suhardin, 2018), have examined the evolving curriculum frameworks and their impact on teacher preparation. Research on Islamic religious teacher training has highlighted the importance of pedagogical skills, subject matter knowledge, and character development in producing effective

educators (Mursyidin Ar-Rahmany, 2022; Pohan & Wisda, 2024). However, there is a growing recognition that contemporary challenges, such as globalization, digitalization, and rapidly changing labor market demands, require Islamic education graduates to possess a broader range of competencies beyond traditional religious knowledge and pedagogical skills (Riadi, 2019). Studies have pointed to critical skill gaps among graduates, including IT proficiency, foreign language skills, and public speaking (Mulyadi & Herdianto, 2022; Mursyidin Ar-Rahmany, 2022; Yudhanegara & Lestari, 2019). These gaps hinder their competitiveness in the job market and necessitate the development of adaptive survival strategies. Furthermore, research exploring the socio-cultural context of graduate employment has emphasized the importance of understanding local norms and expectations in shaping career trajectories. Thus, tracer studies are essential tools for evaluating the relevance of higher education curricula to labor market needs, allowing institutions to map alumni competitiveness, employment relevance, and encountered challenges. Furthermore, research on graduate employability has often been conducted qualitatively, limiting the generalizability of findings. Thus, the study addresses these gaps by employing a mixed-methods tracer study to investigate the competitiveness and survival strategies of IAIN Langsa PAI alumni in Aceh Timur, specifically examining the alignment between academic competencies and market demands in both educational and non-educational career paths, while also considering the influence of local socio-cultural expectations.

While previous research has provided valuable insights into teacher preparation and graduate outcomes in Islamic education, a critical gap remains in understanding the specific alignment between academic competencies and market demands within distinct regional contexts. This study addresses this gap by focusing on the experiences of Islamic Education (PAI) alumni from IAIN Langsa in Aceh Timur. The PAI program at IAIN Langsa, a key provider of Islamic education in Aceh, has produced numerous graduates; however, increasing competition in the job market necessitates a broader skill set beyond traditional religious knowledge. This focus is motivated by three key phenomena: (1) a perceived gap between the competencies acquired in higher education and the skills demanded by employers, particularly in areas like IT proficiency, foreign language skills, and public speaking; (2) the diversification of career paths among PAI alumni, with many venturing into entrepreneurship or the informal sector, underscoring the need for adaptable survival strategies; and (3) the influence of socio-cultural expectations in Aceh, where PAI graduates are often expected to fulfill specific religious roles within their communities, adding another layer of complexity to their professional lives. This study contributes to the existing literature by providing empirical data on these issues, moving beyond primarily qualitative studies on the relevance of higher education to the job market.

Building upon the identified gap between academic competencies and market demands, this research sought to investigate the experiences of IAIN Langsa PAI alumni in navigating the contemporary job market. The study proposed three research questions: (1) What is the competitiveness and employment profiles of IAIN Langsa PAI alumni in the workforce within the three regencies/cities of Kabupaten Aceh Timur, Aceh Tamiang, and Kota Langsa? (2) How relevant is the PAI knowledge acquired during their studies to the jobs pursued by alumni? (3) What challenges do alumni face in the job market, and what survival strategies do they employ to navigate these challenges?

Therefore, the study investigated a perceived mismatch between the skills acquired during higher education, the competencies required by employers, particularly in areas such as IT proficiency, foreign language skills, and public speaking. This diversification of career paths among PAI graduates, with many pursuing employments outside traditional educational settings, necessitating the development of adaptive survival strategies, which also influenced by the socio-cultural expectations in eastern coast of Aceh province.

## Method

This tracer study employed a mixed-methods explanatory sequential design (Creswell & Clark, 2018; Weyant, 2022). This design involved collecting and analyzing quantitative data first, followed by the collection and analysis of qualitative data (Chu, PH. and Chang, 2017; Creswell & Clark, 2018). The qualitative data served to explain and elaborate on the initial quantitative findings. The study investigated the Graduate employability and adaptation are complex phenomena influenced by multiple factors, including individual skills, market demands, institutional practices, and socio-cultural contexts. A mixed-methods approach allows you to capture this complexity by combining the strengths of quantitative and qualitative data.

The explanatory sequential design provided a quantitative data to provide a broad overview of employment rates, job types, income levels, and other quantifiable indicators (Creswell & Clark, 2018; Feters et al., 2013). The design also perceived relevance on a larger scale of qualitative data, which projected the alumni individual experiences, challenges, and coping mechanisms (Fitriani et al., 2018; Zandvanian & Daryapoor, 2013). In addition, the qualitative data projected the trends and patterns identified in the quantitative data, which illustrated *why* this is happening, uncovering specific challenges they face and the specific expectations and challenges faced by PAI graduates within the Aceh context in the job market (Creswell & Clark, 2018; Feters et al., 2013). The result of Interview result provide *how* graduates are adapting their skills and knowledge to different work environments. Accordingly, the researchers triangulate quantitative and qualitative data, which is also enhance the validity and reliability of findings.

This research focused on Islamic Education (PAI) alumni of IAIN Langsa who were working in the eastern region of Aceh province, encompassing Kabupaten Aceh Timur, Kota Langsa, and Aceh Tamiang. The study population consisted of all PAI alumni from the graduating classes of 2021, 2022, and 2023. The quantitative phase involved an online survey distributed to all available alumni contact information. The study involved in-depth interviews with 49 alumni, were purposively selected based on the following criteria; (1) diversity in career paths (employed in education vs. employed outside education), (2) varying levels of job satisfaction reported in the survey, and (3) willingness to participate in an interview.

The quantitative phase used an online survey on google forms structured into four sections: (1) Demographics (age, gender, graduation year, location); (2) Employment Profile (employment status, job title, industry, job waiting time, income); (3) Relevance of PAI Knowledge (perceived applicability to current job, Likert scale); and (4) Competencies and Challenges (self-reported proficiency in IT, foreign languages, public speaking; job market

challenges, Likert scale). This design aimed to provide a robust dataset for analyzing graduate competitiveness and adaptability. The qualitative phase employed a semi-structured interview protocol with open-ended questions exploring five themes: (1) Job Search Experiences (challenges and opportunities); (2) Relevance of PAI Knowledge and Skills (alignment of academic preparation with professional requirements); (3) Workplace Challenges (competency-related and external obstacles); (4) Adaptation and Survival Strategies (methods used to navigate the job market); and (5) Socio-Cultural Influences (impact on career choices and professional life). This protocol aimed to complement the quantitative data with rich qualitative narratives of graduate experiences.

The study employed a sequential explanatory design, beginning with quantitative data collection. Ethical approval was obtained from IAIN Langsa Research Department to ensure compliance with research ethics standards. An online survey was pilot tested with a small group of PAI graduates to confirm its clarity and validity. The finalized survey was distributed via google form, social media groups, alumni networks, accompanied by a clear explanation of the study's purpose and a link to the survey. The participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality throughout the process. Data collection for the quantitative phase was conducted over 7 months, March to September in 2024. For the qualitative phase, participants were contacted through phone to schedule interviews. Prior to commencing, informed consent was obtained from all participants to ensure voluntary and ethical participation. Interviews were conducted using Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes, allowing for in-depth exploration of the key themes.

The Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (SPSS) to summarize key variables and identify trends. In addition, the qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2021). The procedures involved: (1) familiarization with transcripts; (2) systematic coding for key concepts; (3) development of initial themes; (4) review and refinement of themes; (5) clear definition and naming of themes; and (6) thematic presentation of findings in the report.

## **Results and Discussion**

The finding that many alumni lack proficiency in IT skills is consistent has identified similar skill gaps among graduates in Indonesia. However, our study also revealed that alumni are actively seeking to improve their IT skills through self-learning and online courses, which highlights their adaptability and resilience in the face of these challenges.

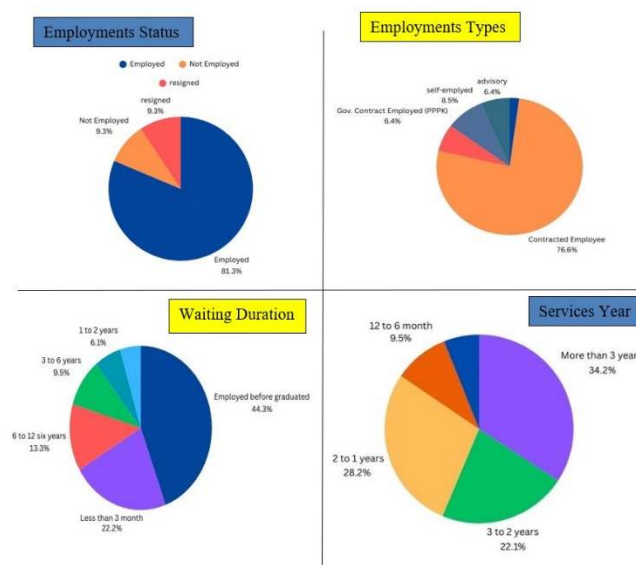
### *The Competitiveness and Employment Profiles of IAIN Langsa PAI Alumni*

To address the critical issue of graduate employability and competitiveness, this study first examined the employment profiles and career trajectories of IAIN Langsa PAI alumni. The research explored the extent to which graduates have successfully transitioned into the workforce, the sectors where they were employed, and the factors influencing their competitiveness. The findings shed light on both the opportunities and challenges faced by these graduates, offering valuable implications for enhancing their employability and aligning academic competencies with market demands.

The employment profiles of IAIN Langsa PAI alumni reveal a dual trend: strong ties to the education sector and increasing diversification into other fields. 75% of graduates found employment within six months of graduation, with the majority working as teachers in madrasas or instructors in other Islamic educational institutions. However, a notable 25% have entered non-traditional career paths, demonstrating adaptability and a willingness to explore opportunities in entrepreneurship, healthcare, and administrative roles. This diversification suggests a need for curricula that equip graduates with transferable skills applicable across various sectors. While employer feedback indicates satisfaction with alumni work ethic and dedication, alumni themselves identified critical skill gaps, particularly in IT and foreign language proficiency, hindering their competitiveness in the global job market. Analysis of employment indicators (status, type, waiting time, length of employment) within Aceh Timur suggests a baseline level of competitiveness, but the identified skills gaps represent a significant challenge to their long-term career prospects (see Figure 1).

The employment profile of IAIN Langsa PAI alumni is illustrated through four key dimensions: employment status, types of employment, waiting time for employment, and length of employment. These findings provide valuable insights into the career pathways and job market experiences of the alumni. The majority of alumni, 87.2%, are currently employed, indicating a relatively high employment rate among graduates. Conversely, 12.8% are unemployed or have resigned from their jobs, reflecting a small yet significant challenge for certain alumni in securing or maintaining employment. A significant proportion of employed alumni, 76.6%, work as contract teachers (*guru honorer*), underscoring the dominant role of the education sector in their career pathways. Only 2.1% of alumni hold civil servant (PNS) positions, suggesting limited opportunities in this prestigious sector. The remaining 21.3% of alumni are employed in diverse roles such as entrepreneurship (*wiraswasta*), religious guidance (*penyuluh*), and other fields, highlighting the varied career paths taken by some graduates.

Figure 1. The competitiveness and employment profiles



The figure 1 above projected that nearly half (46.8%) of employed alumni secured jobs within three months of graduation, reflecting a relatively quick transition for a significant segment of graduates. Additionally, 23.4% found employment within 3-6 months, while 25.5% took 6-12 months. Only 4.3% experienced a job search exceeding 12 months, indicating that a majority of alumni did not face prolonged waiting times. The data reveals that 36.2% of employed alumni have been in their roles for less than six months, indicating either recent employment or high turnover rates. Meanwhile, 29.8% have worked for 6-12 months, 23.4% for 1-2 years, and 10.6% for more than two years. These findings suggest varying levels of job stability and duration among the alumni.

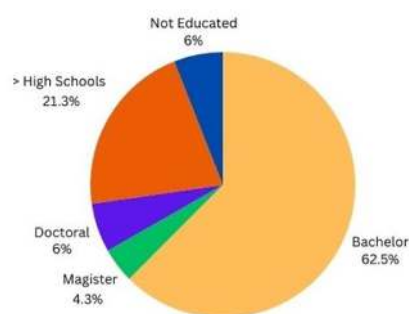
Therefore, the data reveals a strong employment profile for IAIN Langsa PAI alumni, with 87.2% securing employment. The majority (76.6%) find positions within the education sector, primarily as teachers, demonstrating the program's success in preparing graduates for this field. Notably, 46.8% of employed alumni secured positions before graduation, indicating a high level of competitiveness and early integration into the workforce. This suggests that IAIN Langsa PAI graduates possess the necessary skills and qualifications to be competitive, particularly within the local education sector in kota Langsa, Aceh Tamiang, and Aceh Timur.

#### *The Relevancy of PAI Knowledge Acquired during Their Studies*

The survey (Diagram 2) also explored the perceived educational level required for current employment. The majority (72.3%) of respondents indicated that a Bachelor's degree (S1) was the most appropriate, confirming the value of their higher education. A smaller portion (25.5%) felt that education levels from elementary to high school were sufficient, likely reflecting those employed in roles that do not strictly require a university degree.

Figure 2. The Level of Education

The level of education that resemble to occupation that you are now?



The pie chart illustrates respondents' answers to the question regarding the most appropriate or suitable education level for their current employment. From the research results, the data shows that out of 47 respondents who answered the question: (a) The majority of respondents (72.3%) felt that a Bachelor's degree (S1) is the most appropriate for their jobs. (b) A portion of respondents (25.5%) considered education levels from elementary

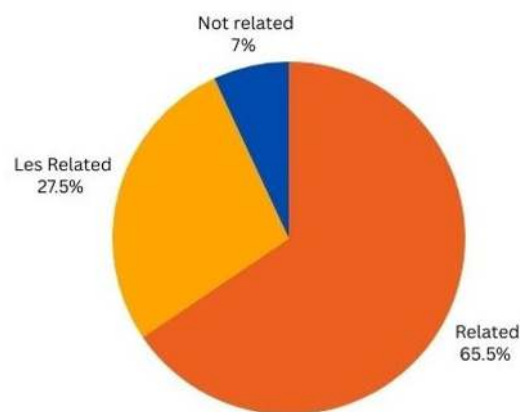
school (SD) to high school (SMA) to be sufficiently relevant for their work. (c) Almost no respondents selected this option; the percentage is very small or insignificant.

From the percentage of respondent answers above, the majority of respondents stated that a Bachelor's degree is the most suitable for their employment. This indicates that the jobs held by alumni require competencies gained at the Bachelor's level, especially in the field of Islamic Education (PAI), which emphasizes pedagogical expertise, religious knowledge, and soft skills. A Bachelor's degree is often the minimum standard for formal professions, particularly in education (teachers, lecturers), religious institutions, or the government sector.

Both quantitative and qualitative data indicate a strong perceived relevance of PAI knowledge to alumni employment, particularly within the education sector. Survey results (Diagram 3) revealed that 66% of respondents felt a “very strong” relationship between their undergraduate PAI education at IAIN Langsa and their current jobs.

Figure 3. The Educational Background

Is your educational background related to your current job?



An additional 27.7% reported a “limited” relationship, while only 6.3% found their education “not relevant”. This suggests that the IAIN Langsa PAI curriculum effectively prepares graduates for careers directly related to their field of study. This is further supported by the quantitative data on employment status which showed that the majority of alumni (76.6%) are employed as teachers in various educational settings (madrasas, PPPK, and ASN positions). The qualitative data from interviews provided further context to these findings. Alumni working as educators consistently emphasized the direct applicability of their religious knowledge and pedagogical training acquired at IAIN Langsa. They highlighted the benefits of their theoretical studies, Islamic education scholarship, internships, practicums, and continued connection with the study program. Some alumni also extended their impact beyond formal institutions by offering private Quranic tutoring within their communities. However, interviews with alumni working outside of traditional educational roles revealed varying degrees of perceived relevance. While some found their PAI background valuable in shaping their ethical framework and approach to work, others felt that the specific content of their studies had limited direct application in fields such as



entrepreneurship, technology, or administration. This aligns with the 27.7% from the survey who reported a “limited” relationship.

The Diagram 3 above illustrates the responses of 47 respondents to the question regarding the extent of the relationship between their undergraduate education background in Islamic Education (PAI) at IAIN Langsa and their current employment. The results reveal that: (a) The majority of respondents (66%) felt a very strong relationship between their undergraduate education and their current employment (very strongly related). (b) Subsequently, 27.7% of respondents felt that their education had a limited relationship with their work or had little relevance. (3) A small portion of respondents (6.3%) felt that their education was not relevant at all to their current jobs.

The high number of responses indicating the relevance of undergraduate education to alumni employment suggests that the competencies acquired during their Bachelor's degree (S1) studies are highly aligned with the demands of the workplace. It is highly probable that these alumni work in fields directly related to their major, such as becoming Islamic Education (PAI) teachers, lecturers, or working in religious institutions. This also demonstrates that the curriculum at the IAIN Langsa PAI Study Program is effective in meeting the needs of the job market, particularly in education or religion-related sectors. Meanwhile, regarding the portion of respondents or alumni who stated that they felt only a small relationship between their undergraduate education and their work, this could occur among alumni working outside the field of PAI or in sectors requiring other skills not taught in-depth within the curriculum, such as entrepreneurship, technology, or administrative work. This could also be an indicator of a gap between the curriculum and the needs of the job market in certain sectors. As for the small portion of respondents who answered that their educational background was not relevant to their jobs, this can occur because these IAIN Langsa PAI alumni or respondents work in sectors completely different from their learned expertise (e.g., technical or business fields). Their jobs emphasize practical experience or soft skills rather than formal knowledge.

In relevance theory, the relationship between education and employment can be measured by the extent to which education provides competencies, skills, and knowledge applicable in the workplace. Based on the data showing that 66% of the majority of alumni felt the relevance of their expertise to the workplace, this reflects high relevance (القوية العلاقة) or *al-'alāqah al-qawwiyah*), where the IAIN Langsa PAI curriculum has been designed in accordance with the needs of the job market, especially in the religious and educational fields. Human Capital theory suggests that education is an investment that yields returns through increased productivity derived from acquired skills (Viphindrartin & Bawono, 2021; Windhani et al., 2023). Throughout the data, the high proportion of alumni (66%) reporting strong relevance between their PAI education and their jobs indicates that the curriculum is successfully providing skills applicable in the workplace, particularly in education and related fields. However, the fact that some alumni experience low or no relevance suggests that the curriculum may not fully address the needs of those pursuing careers outside these traditional sectors. The data highlighted the need for increased curriculum flexibility and broader skill development to support the diverse career aspirations of PAI graduates.

### *The Dynamics of Challenges in Job Market and Survival Strategy*

The job market for IAIN Langsa PAI alumni presents several challenges that affect their competitiveness and career outcomes. Among the most commonly reported challenges are gaps in essential skills such as IT proficiency, foreign language abilities, and public speaking. Alumni also face fierce competition for jobs, low salaries, and limited career advancement opportunities. These difficulties are often linked to insufficient practical skills that are necessary in today's job market, such as IT, communication, and language proficiency. Furthermore, alumni reported challenges in translating their academic knowledge into real-world applications, revealing a gap between theoretical learning and the practical demands of the job market. The dynamics of the job market add further complexity. Many alumni compete for a limited number of job opportunities, particularly in rural areas where job openings are scarce. Additionally, job requirements are constantly evolving, demanding that graduates stay adaptable and continuously update their skills. Socio-cultural expectations, particularly in Aceh, where Sharia Islam is applied, also add pressure on alumni. Graduates often face expectations to conform to traditional roles, especially in religious leadership positions, which can impact their career choices and professional development.

To navigate these challenges, IAIN Langsa PAI alumni employ various survival strategies. Many invest in skill development by taking additional courses, engaging in self-learning, and seeking mentorship to fill gaps in their skill set. Networking also plays a vital role, with alumni leveraging professional connections and utilizing alumni networks to uncover job opportunities. Adaptability is another key strategy, as many graduates explore diverse career paths and focus on developing transferable skills that improve their employability. Resilience, driven by perseverance and a strong commitment to overcoming obstacles, is a recurring theme. These strategies help alumni continue to thrive and find success in their careers, even in the face of numerous challenges in the job market. In addition, the interviews result revealed four key challenges impacting alumni in the job market: (a) Competency Gaps: Alumni reported deficiencies in technical skills, particularly in IT and foreign languages, hindering their performance in non-educational and non-religious sectors. Examples include MedReps needing pharmacology and sales training, business owners requiring stock management and marketing skills, and BKKBN extension workers needing knowledge of reproductive health and demographics. These gaps present opportunities for curriculum revisions and additional training. (b) Work Environment Adaptation: Adapting to work environments differing from their academic background posed difficulties, especially in fast-paced or competitive sectors. BKKBN extension workers needed to adjust communication with conservative communities, while MedReps faced initial skepticism about their ability to handle technical pharmaceutical information, which they overcame through intensive learning and leveraging existing communication skills. (c) Social Stigma: Societal expectations often limit perceptions of PAI graduates to traditional religious roles (e.g., imams, religious teachers), hindering recognition of their broader potential in social, business, and government sectors. This stigma, stemming from the curriculum's focus on religious studies, societal association with traditional roles, and limited exposure to successful PAI alumni in non-religious fields, restricts job opportunities in private companies, which often prefer candidates with business, technology, or management

backgrounds. (d) Market Competition: Alumni in business face intense market competition, requiring constant innovation to navigate fluctuating conditions (e.g., seasonal changes, price increases in the laundry business). Within the education sector, high competition for limited teaching positions in Aceh Timur, Aceh Tamiang, and Kota Langsa creates additional challenges for new graduates.

The interview also projected the alumni face distinct challenges depending on whether their employment aligns with their academic background, i.e., Their aligned with Background, while many alumni find employment as teachers (civil servants, contract-based, or honorary), they often juggle multiple jobs, including business ventures (laundry services, online sales, street vending), leading to time management difficulties. However, with experience, they develop effective prioritization skills. A significant challenge is also intense competition for teaching positions in Kota Langsa, Aceh Tamiang, and Aceh Timur from graduates of other universities, requiring resilience and adaptability in seeking alternative employment opportunities. Furthermore, the alumni in non-educational sectors (not aligned), who working outside education (e.g., medical representatives, BKKBN extension workers, village office staff, business owners) face significant skills gaps, requiring substantial on-the-job training to acquire necessary technical knowledge in areas like pharmacology, sales, reproductive health, demographics, stock management, and marketing.

The encounter societal stigma due to the perception that PAI graduates should primarily work as teachers. This necessitates demonstrating the relevance of their skills and expertise in non-traditional roles. Faced with challenges ranging from skills gaps and adaptation to new work environments to societal stigma and market competition, IAIN Langsa PAI alumni employ several key survival strategies, i.e., (a) persuasive communication. Effective communication skills are utilized to build professional networks, seek mentorship, and access job opportunities. This highlights the importance of interpersonal skills in navigating the job market and overcoming potential biases. (b) utilization of religious values. Alumni draw upon their religious values as a source of strength and guidance in their professional lives. Viewing their work as a form of worship and social contribution provides motivation and resilience in the face of challenges. This is particularly relevant in the Aceh context, where religious values are deeply ingrained in society. (c) effective time management. Alumni who juggle multiple jobs, often combining teaching with entrepreneurial ventures, prioritize effective time management to maintain productivity and balance their responsibilities. This adaptability and resourcefulness are crucial for navigating the demands of a diverse job market.

The dynamics of the alumni's survival strategies are further influenced by the unique characteristics of Aceh Timur, Kota Langsa, and Aceh Tamiang, are relatively developed compared to other areas in Aceh Province, creating a heterogeneous environment where job opportunities in various sectors abound. This diversity provides IAIN Langsa PAI alumni with the chance to gain work experience while still studying. Many students hold part-time or side jobs during their studies, which provides them with valuable work experience and the opportunity to build skills that will later serve them in their careers. The researchers in capital building and development said that the exposure to diverse jobs, including teaching, entrepreneurship, and trade, allows alumni to seamlessly transition into the workforce after

graduation, quickly adapting to new job environments and overcoming the technical knowledge gaps they might face (Cairns, 2021; Hampole, 2022; Nolan & Molla, 2017). These survival strategies, shaped by both individual initiative and the socio-cultural context of East Aceh, help alumni thrive in the job market despite facing challenges such as skills gaps, competition for jobs, and societal expectations. Through continuous learning, effective communication, and resilience, IAIN Langsa PAI alumni are well-equipped to succeed in a variety of professional fields.

This study contributes to the existing body of knowledge on graduate employability and adaptation in several significant ways. The study provided a focused examination of the experiences of Islamic Education (PAI) alumni from IAIN Langsa within the specific context of Aceh Timur. While previous research has explored broader trends in graduate employment in Indonesia, there is a relative scarcity of studies that delve into the unique challenges and opportunities faced by graduates in specific regions. Aceh Timur, with its distinct socio-cultural landscape shaped by the implementation of Sharia law, presents a particularly compelling context for this investigation. By focusing on this specific region, this study offers valuable insights into the interplay between religious education, local culture, and labor market dynamics, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of graduate transitions in similar contexts.

This study explicitly examines the influence of socio-cultural expectations on the career pathways of PAI graduates. This is a crucial aspect that is often overlooked in broader studies of graduate employability. In Aceh, where religious values and community expectations play a significant role in shaping individual choices, understanding how these factors influence career decisions is essential (Sabirin et al., 2022; Srimulyani, 2013). This research investigates how these socio-cultural factors, particularly within the context of Aceh's Sharia implementation, shape both educational and non-educational career paths, impacting alumni's perceptions of competitiveness, their job search strategies, and their overall professional integration. This focus on socio-cultural context, combined with the examination of both educational and non-educational career paths, distinguishes this study from previous research and contributes to a deeper understanding of the complexities faced by PAI graduates in this specific context. While the purposive sampling strategy ensured diverse perspectives, a larger sample size could have provided even greater breadth and depth. Additionally, the quantitative data relied on self-reported information from alumni, which may be subject to recall bias or social desirability bias. Alumni may have been inclined to present themselves in a more positive light, potentially affecting the accuracy of their responses regarding income, job satisfaction, or competency levels. This reliance on self-reported data is a common limitation in survey research. Furthermore, while the study focused on Aceh Timur, the findings may not be fully generalizable to other regions of Aceh or Indonesia, which may have different socio-cultural contexts and labor market conditions. The specific influence of Sharia implementation on career choices, for example, may be less pronounced in other areas.

## **Conclusion**

This study investigated the competitiveness, employment profiles, relevance of PAI knowledge, challenges, and survival strategies of IAIN Langsa PAI alumni (2021-2023) in Aceh Timur, Kota Langsa, and Aceh Tamiang. The findings reveal a complex picture of graduate experiences in navigating the contemporary job market. The data indicates strong competitiveness, with 87.2% of alumni employed, often before graduation. The majority (76%) work as teachers (honorary, contract-based, or civil servant), demonstrating the program's success in preparing educators. However, a notable portion (23.6%) pursue diverse careers as extension workers or entrepreneurs, showcasing adaptability. PAI knowledge is highly relevant, particularly for those in education. Alumni effectively utilize their Islamic knowledge and skills in their work, directly applying concepts and principles from the curriculum. Alumni face challenges including: (a) gaps in technical skills (e.g., IT, foreign languages); (b) adapting to diverse work environments; (c) managing time with multiple jobs; (d) societal stigma associated with PAI graduates working outside traditional religious roles; and (e) intense market competition. To navigate these challenges, alumni employ several strategies: (a) developing additional skills; (b) using persuasive communication; (c) practicing effective time management; and (d) drawing strength and guidance from their religious values. IAIN Langsa PAI alumni demonstrate significant competitiveness and adaptability in the workforce. While the program effectively prepares graduates for careers in education, a substantial portion successfully navigate diverse career paths, highlighting the transferable value of their PAI education. However, addressing identified skills gaps, particularly in technical areas, and mitigating societal stigma are crucial for further enhancing graduate employability and maximizing their potential contributions across various sectors. The alumni's reliance on religious values as a source of resilience and motivation underscores the importance of integrating these values within the PAI curriculum to better equip graduates for the challenges and opportunities of the modern job market.

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## **Conflict of Interests**

The motivation for the composition of this article is the advancement of knowledge, with no financial or other vested interests in the institutions under study. The research data presented herein have not been previously published.

## **Ethical Considerations**

The data presented in this article are original, and all sources cited, including journals, books, and websites, have been verified to be free from copyright infringement.

## Disclaimer

It is imperative to acknowledge the underlying context of this study, which is characterized by a disclaimer that all statements presented in this article are derived from the researchers' meticulous analysis. It is crucial to emphasize that these statements are not influenced by any external interpretation or affiliation with the institutions under study.

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