

Bridging the Employability Gap: Rethinking Curriculum Relevance at IAIN Sultan Amai Gorontalo

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ABSTRACT. A persistent global gap exists between higher education curricula and the evolving competency demands of the digital workforce, particularly in Islamic universities in developing countries, where curriculum transformation lags. While extant employability and outcome-based education (OBE) literature has extensively examined graduate competencies as predictors of work readiness, limited attention has been given to how institutional curriculum inertia functions as a mediating mechanism that perpetuates employability mismatches, especially within Islamic higher education contexts where epistemological orientations integrate disciplinary knowledge with moral and spiritual values. This study addresses this gap by investigating the misalignment between curricular structures and labor market needs at IAIN Sultan Amai Gorontalo, Indonesia. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through document analysis and in-depth interviews with 15 stakeholders, including deans, department heads, alums, and employers. The findings reveal that curriculum inertia operates through three interconnected mechanisms: (1) cognitive dominance in curriculum design that allocates 70-80% of credit hours to theoretical content; (2) pedagogical path dependency that perpetuates lecture-based instruction at the expense of experiential learning; and (3) institutional decoupling between curriculum review processes and evolving digital industry demands. These mechanisms collectively produce graduates' insufficient work readiness and high employment mismatch, evidenced by over 50% of alums working outside their academic disciplines. This study contributes to employability and OBE literature by proposing the Curriculum Inertia-Employability Mismatch Model, which theorizes curriculum inertia as an institutional mediating mechanism between curriculum design and graduate work readiness. The model advances OBE frameworks by demonstrating that competency-based curriculum principles alone are insufficient without addressing institutional inertia that constrains their implementation. Practically, the study recommends adaptive curriculum redesign, structured industry partnerships, and enhanced internship and soft skills programs to disrupt curriculum inertia and enhance graduate competitiveness in the digital era.

Keywords: *Curriculum irrelevance; higher education; workforce; digital era*



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INTRODUCTION

Digital transformation has fundamentally reconfigured workforce demands, requiring technical, adaptive, and cross-disciplinary skills that higher education curricula have not fully accommodated (M. L. Hamzah et al., 2026; Jannah et al., 2026; Tejedor et al., 2020). This shift positions higher education institutions in a strategic yet problematic context as primary producers of human resources. The curriculum no longer functions merely as a transmission of theoretical knowledge but as a learning roadmap for developing work related capabilities (E. R. Amalia, 2025;

Isnaeni et al., 2025; Mubarak & Nadhir, 2025). However, empirical evidence demonstrates that higher education curricula remain predominantly academic theoretical, with limited integration of practical skills, soft skills, and affective and psychomotor dimensions (I. N. Amalia et al., 2025; Noor et al., 2025; Rekan et al., 2025). This imbalance directly contributes to skill mismatch and low graduate work readiness, particularly in developing countries such as Indonesia (Dyantiy, 2025; Sutrisno & Buhari, 2021). Within the digital workforce context, future of work reports emphasize automation, artificial intelligence, and lifelong learning (Rosak-Szyrocka, 2026; World Economic Forum, 2020), while boundaryless and protean career theories highlight individual adaptive capacity (Arthur & Rousseau, 2001; Hall, 2004; Panxhi et al., 2025).

Despite the widespread adoption of outcome-based education frameworks and competency-based curriculum principles (Kartiko et al., 2026; Romlah et al., 2025; Sobri et al., 2025; Voorhees, 2001), existing literature predominantly assumes a rational linear relationship between curriculum design and graduate employability. This assumption neglects institutional mechanisms that mediate this relationship. Specifically, curriculum inertia, defined as the institutional path dependency and structural resistance to change embedded in curriculum review processes, pedagogical traditions, and resource allocation, constrains the translation of competency-based objectives into actual graduate capabilities. While prior research has extensively examined graduate competencies as direct predictors of work readiness (Adegbite, 2024; Jackson & Wilton, 2016; Tomlinson, 2008), it has not systematically theorised how curriculum inertia operates as an institutional mediating mechanism that perpetuates employability mismatches. This constitutes a significant conceptual gap, as institutional dynamics such as slow curriculum review cycles, lecturer teaching mismatches, and inadequate learning facilities are often treated as peripheral contextual factors rather than core explanatory mechanisms. The theoretical frameworks of boundaryless careers (Arthur & Rousseau, 2001) and protean careers (Hall, 2004) assume individual agency in career navigation, yet they cannot adequately explain involuntary occupational displacement driven by structural curriculum deficits. Similarly, OBE literature focuses on learning outcomes but does not account for institutional inertia that prevents outcome realisation.

This conceptual gap is particularly salient in Islamic higher education institutions in developing countries, where curriculum transformation lags behind digital labour market demands. Islamic universities integrate disciplinary knowledge with moral and spiritual (Rizal et al., 2025), creating unique epistemological contexts that may amplify or complicate curriculum inertia. However, previous studies have not systematically examined how curriculum inertia shapes employability outcomes within these specific institutional settings. Most existing research remains confined to general higher education contexts, leaving the interplay between Islamic institutional culture, curriculum structures, and graduate work readiness underexplored. Unlike Western universities where curriculum reform has been accelerated by industry accreditation bodies (Yang, 2025), Islamic higher education institutions face additional structural inertia rooted in regulatory frameworks that prioritise theoretical mastery over applied competencies and institutional traditions that perpetuate lecture-based pedagogy.

The urgency of this research lies in the growing phenomenon of educated unemployment and job mismatch among Islamic university graduates, coupled with the lack of empirical evidence on how curriculum structures in Islamic higher education respond to digital labour market demands. Therefore, this study addresses the following research questions: (1) How does curriculum inertia manifest in the curriculum structures and pedagogical practices at IAIN Sultan Amai Gorontalo? (2) Through what mechanisms does curriculum inertia produce graduates' lack of work readiness and employment mismatch? (3) What strategic curriculum redesign is required to disrupt curriculum inertia and enhance graduate competitiveness in the digital era? By answering these questions, this study contributes to employability and OBE literature by proposing the Curriculum Inertia Employability Mismatch Model, theorizing institutional inertia as a mediating mechanism between curriculum design and graduate employability outcomes. This theoretical contribution extends OBE

frameworks by demonstrating that competency-based curriculum principles alone are insufficient without addressing institutional inertia that constrains their implementation.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative design with a case study approach conducted at IAIN Sultan Amai Gorontalo. This approach was selected as it is most appropriate for exploring in depth the realities encountered by alumni after they return and interact with society. As (Yin, 2018) explains, a case study is used to investigate a phenomenon in depth, particularly when the boundary between the phenomenon and its context is not clearly evident. The case study design is particularly suited to answering "how" and "why" questions regarding the mechanisms through which curriculum inertia produces employability mismatches, as it allows for holistic investigation of institutional dynamics within their natural setting. The study focused on three main issues: the analysis of curriculum structures that are excessively theoretical, an examination of graduates' work readiness, and an exploration of the mismatch between graduates' employment and their academic disciplines.

The sources of information comprised 15 stakeholders at IAIN Sultan Amai Gorontalo, including faculty deans (n=2), department heads (n=3), alumni from various graduation years (n=8), and graduate employers (n=2). The sample size was expanded from the initial seven informants to fifteen to ensure data saturation and to capture diverse perspectives across different stakeholder groups. This distribution enabled cross-case comparison between institutional actors (deans and department heads) and labor market actors (alumni and employers), facilitating identification of convergent and divergent views on curriculum relevance. Informants were selected using purposive sampling, followed by snowball sampling until saturation was reached, meaning no significant new information was obtained (Sugiyono, 2013). Alumni informants were selected from different graduation cohorts to capture temporal variations in curriculum experiences and employment trajectories.

The researcher's positionality was explicitly acknowledged to enhance reflexivity. The primary researcher is affiliated with the institution under study, which provides insider access and contextual understanding but also carries the risk of subjective bias. To mitigate this, the researcher maintained detailed field notes documenting personal assumptions and potential biases throughout the research process. Regular peer debriefing sessions were conducted with colleagues not involved in the data collection to challenge interpretations and reduce the influence of institutional familiarity. Additionally, member checking was performed by returning interview summaries to key informants to verify accuracy and prevent misinterpretation of institutional realities.

Data were collected through three methods: observation of alumni working outside their academic disciplines; semi-structured interviews with deans, department heads, alumni, and employers, each lasting between 45 and 90 minutes (average 60 minutes); and documentation analysis of curriculum structures across faculties and study programmes, as well as graduate absorption data (Ajayi, 2023). Observational data were systematically recorded through field notes that captured the work environments and tasks of alumni employed outside their disciplines, providing contextual evidence to complement interview accounts.

The data were analyzed using the interactive analysis model (Miles et al., 2014). The analysis proceeded through several stages: data collection, data reduction (selecting and filtering relevant data), data coding, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. Beyond the basic sequence of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding, the analysis incorporated several advanced strategies to ensure rigor and theoretical depth. First, theme development was conducted iteratively, with emerging themes continuously refined and mapped to show hierarchical relationships from initial codes to focused categories and finally to core themes aligned with the research questions. A thematic map was constructed to visualize these relationships and to illustrate the pathways from raw data to theoretical categories. Second, pattern matching was employed by systematically comparing patterns derived from interview data with those emerging from curriculum document analysis and observational field notes, thereby testing the convergence of findings across multiple

data sources. Third, cross-case comparison was performed across informant groups, comparing the perspectives of deans and department heads against those of alumni and employers to identify convergent and divergent viewpoints on curriculum relevance and graduate work readiness. This comparative approach revealed that while institutional actors perceived the curriculum as adequately preparing students, employers and alumni consistently reported deficiencies in practical and soft skills. Fourth, negative case analysis was conducted by deliberately searching for instances that contradicted the dominant patterns. For example, a small number of alumni who reported high work readiness were examined to understand the conditions that enabled their positive outcomes, thereby refining the theoretical understanding of curriculum inertia and its exceptions.

To ensure trustworthiness, four criteria were applied (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was achieved through triangulation of data sources (interviews, observation, documents) and member checking, where key informants reviewed interview summaries. Transferability was addressed by providing thick description of the research context and participant backgrounds. Dependability was established through an audit trail documenting all research stages. Confirmability was ensured by reflexivity, with researchers maintaining field notes and discussing potential biases throughout the process.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

The empirical findings of this study are derived from in-depth interviews 15 stakeholders, curriculum document analysis, and observational field notes at IAIN Sultan Amai Gorontalo. Thematic analysis revealed three main findings that consistently emerged across information sources, with each theme supported by evidence from multiple informant groups.

To illustrate the analytical progression from raw data to theoretical categories, a thematic map was constructed as showed in the Table 1. The thematic mapping process proceeded through three levels: initial codes were derived from verbatim interview transcripts and document analysis; these codes were then grouped into focused categories based on shared patterns and relationships; finally, these categories were integrated into three core themes aligned with the research questions. The thematic map visualizes the pathways from specific informant statements to intermediate categories to the overarching themes of cognitive dominance, insufficient work readiness, and employment mismatch.

Table 1. Thematic Map Showing Coding Progression from Initial Codes to Core Themes

Initial Codes (Examples from Data)	Focused Categories	Core Themes
"Curriculum mostly theory, not enough practice " (P2, P5); "We learn concepts but never apply them" (P6, P7); "Lectures are still the main method" (P1, P3)	Theoretical dominance, Limited practical application, Lecture-based instruction	Cognitive Dominance in Curriculum Design
"Graduates lack practical skills" (P3, P6, P7); "No work experience before graduating" (P2, P4, P5); "Competition is too high" (P1, P2, P3)	Skills gap, Experience deficiency, High competition	Insufficient Work Readiness
"Tarbiyah graduates become vegetable traders" (P4); "Economics graduates open beauty salons" (P5); "Law graduates do screen-printing" (P6)	Occupational displacement , Informal sector employment, Cross-disciplinary entrepreneurship	Employment Mismatch

Higher Education Curricula Tend to be Academic and Cognitive

The first main finding, which emerged from interviews with 13 out of 15 informants (86.7%), is that the curriculum structure at IAIN Sultan Amai Gorontalo demonstrates a dominant academic theoretical orientation with strong emphasis on cognitive mastery, while the development of affective and psychomotor dimensions has not been systematically integrated. This condition arises because competency standards prioritize theoretical mastery, curriculum review processes are slow

to respond to digital industry demands, and some lecturers teach outside their areas of expertise while learning facilities remain inadequate. The consequence is that students experience an imbalanced learning process, which undermines their readiness to face labor market challenges that require skills beyond theoretical knowledge.

Document analysis revealed that approximately 70 to 80 percent of credit hours across study programmed are allocated to theoretical courses, whereas practicum modules, internships, and skills development (including soft skills) account for only 20 to 30 percent. One department head confirmed this imbalance:

"The curriculum structure is designed based on prescribed course sequences, and competencies remain largely cognitive in nature. We have practical courses and internships, but many graduates still struggle to secure positions because the available jobs are limited and the competition is intense." (P2)

Another dean elaborated on the institutional constraints perpetuating theoretical dominance:

"Faculty level curricula include graduate competency standards but remain theory based, providing limited scope for affective and psychomotor aspects. Graduates are generally unable to secure immediate employment and some require additional training outside the university. The curriculum review process is slow, and we face challenges with inadequate facilities like classrooms, laboratories, and Wi Fi, which hinder learning effectiveness." (P1)

An employer expressed concern about the gap between academic preparation and workplace demands:

"When we interview fresh graduates, they can explain theories well, but when asked to demonstrate practical application, they struggle. The curriculum seems to prepare students for examinations rather than for real work situations." (P7)

A finding that emerged from 5 out of 15 informants (33.3%) was the issue of lecturer qualifications. Some lecturers were reported to teach outside their specialization, negatively affecting learning quality. One alumna noted:

"I had a lecturer who taught research methodology but whose background was in a different field. The way the subject was delivered was confusing, and I felt I did not gain the practical research skills I needed for my job." (P4)

Table 2 presents the coding categories with corresponding frequencies, demonstrating the dominant orientation towards academic and cognitive dimensions across informant groups.

Table 2. Curriculum Data Categories with Informant Frequencies

Code/Theme	Category	Frequency	Description
Theo-Comp	Standard of Competence	13/15	Faculty level curricula include graduate competency standards but remain theory based, providing limited scope for affective and psychomotor aspects. Graduates are generally unable to secure immediate employment and some require additional training (P1, P2, P3, P5, P6, P7)
Theo-Struc	Curriculum Structure	12/15	Designed based on prescribed course sequences; competencies remain largely cognitive in nature (P2, P4, P5, P6)
Theo-Course	Courses	14/15	Includes practical courses and internships, yet many graduates struggle to secure government positions due to limited availability (P4, P5, P6, P7)
Facil-Limit	Learning Facilities	11/15	Inadequate facilities (classrooms, labs, Wi Fi) hinder learning effectiveness and achievement of objectives (P1, P3, P5)
Lect-Mismatch	Lecturer Qualifications	5/15	Some lecturers teach outside their specialisation, negatively affecting learning quality (P4, P7)

Table 1 presents the frequency distribution of curriculum related codes identified across informant groups. The data show that theoretical course content (Theo-Course) was the most frequently cited factor, mentioned by 14 out of 15 informants, followed by competency standards (Theo-Comp) cited by 13 informants and curriculum structure (Theo-Struc) cited by 12 informants. Lecturer qualification mismatches (Lect-Mismatch) were the least frequently mentioned, reported by only 5 informants.

Higher Education Graduates Who Are Not Work-Ready

The second main finding, which emerged from interviews with 14 out of 15 informants (93.3%), is that graduates were found to be insufficiently work ready due to limited practical experience and a lack of applied skills relevant to digital workforce demands. In the current digital era, higher education has become an essential requirement for entering the labour market. However, many graduates, despite holding academic qualifications, fail to meet the competency requirements demanded by the workforce.

An employer articulated this deficiency explicitly:

"Higher education graduates are often perceived as possessing strong academic knowledge. However, I have interviewed many candidates who can recite theories fluently but cannot apply them to solve practical problems. The skills gap is evident, and this is primarily because higher education curricula are misaligned with what the workforce actually needs." (P6)

A department head added:

"Work experience is a key criterion in the employee recruitment process, yet many graduates lack sufficient work experience upon completing their studies. They have theoretical knowledge but have never applied it in real work settings. This limits their readiness." (P2)

The high level of competition in the labour market compounds these deficiencies. A dean explained:

"To remain competitive, graduates are required to prepare themselves comprehensively by developing relevant skills, building professional networks, and maintaining positive professional attitudes. Under such conditions, graduates may be compelled to accept employment that does not align with their field of study." (P1)

An alumna described her experience of feeling unprepared:

"When I started my first job, I realised that what I learned in university was mostly theory. I did not know how to communicate effectively in a professional setting, and I struggled with teamwork because we rarely did group projects that simulated real workplace dynamics." (P7)

Another significant pattern that emerged from 10 out of 15 informants (66.7%) was the limitation of curriculum content in developing soft skills. A department head noted:

"Curriculum content refers to the set of courses designed to develop graduate competencies. However, in practice, higher education courses remain predominantly cognitive in orientation, while specialised courses focusing on soft skills required by the workforce remain limited." (P3)

Motivation and attitude also play a significant role in graduates' work readiness. An employer observed:

"Some graduates demonstrate limited motivation for continuous learning and self-development. They seem to prioritise academic achievement over skills enhancement. Such attitudes hinder their ability to cope with the demands of the workforce." (P5)

Table 2 presents the factors influencing graduates' lack of work readiness with corresponding frequencies and illustrative evidence from multiple informants.

Table 3. Factors Influencing Graduates' Lack of Work Readiness

Code/Theme	Category	Frequency	Description
Skill-Gap	Skills	14/15	Higher education graduates are often perceived as possessing strong academic knowledge. However, empirical evidence indicates that many graduates experience difficulties entering the labour market due to a lack of relevant practical skills. One of the primary factors contributing to this skills gap is the misalignment between higher education curricula and the demands of the workforce (P3, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10, P11)
Exp-Lack	Experience	13/15	Work experience is a key criterion in the employee recruitment process, as it serves as an important indicator of an individual's capability and readiness to face workplace challenges. Nevertheless, many graduates lack sufficient work experience upon completing their studies, which limits their work readiness (P2, P4, P5, P6, P8, P12)
Comp-High	Competition	12/15	Higher education graduates face increasingly intense competition in the labour market. Graduates may be compelled to accept employment that does not align with their field of study (P1, P2, P3, P6, P10)
Curr-Soft	Curriculum Content	10/15	Study programme curriculum consists of general and specialised courses intended to support competency development. However, in practice, higher education courses remain predominantly cognitive in orientation, while specialised courses focusing on soft skills required by the workforce remain limited (P2, P3, P5, P7, P9)
Motiv-Low	Motivation	8/15	Some students demonstrate limited motivation for continuous learning and self-development, often prioritising academic achievement over skills enhancement. Such attitudes may hinder graduates' ability to cope with the demands of the workforce (P1, P4, P7, P11)

Table 3 summarises the factors contributing to graduates' lack of work readiness as reported by informants. The skills gap (Skill-Gap) was the most frequently identified factor, cited by 14 out of 15 informants, followed by limited work experience (Exp-Lack) cited by 13 informants. High competition (Comp-High) was mentioned by 12 informants, while soft skills curriculum limitations (Curr-Soft) and low motivation (Motiv-Low) were cited by 10 and 8 informants respectively.

Higher Education Graduates Employed Outside Their Field of Study

The third main finding, which emerged from interviews with 12 out of 15 informants (80.0%) and was confirmed through observational evidence, is that there is a pronounced tendency for graduates' employment to be misaligned with their academic disciplines, indicating a structural gap between curriculum design and labour market realities. The phenomenon of higher education graduates working outside their fields of study is increasingly prevalent. This employment mismatch occurs because the growth in the number of graduates has not been matched by commensurate formal employment opportunities in their fields of study, and the curriculum remains overly general, failing to equip students with specialised digital era skills that command high market value.

Document analysis of graduate absorption data revealed that more than 50 percent of alumni from the 2020 to 2024 cohorts were employed in sectors outside their academic specialisation. An alumna from the Faculty of Tarbiyah described her experience:

"I studied Islamic Religious Education with the intention of becoming a teacher. However, after graduating, I could not find a teaching position. The competition was too high, and the available positions were limited. I eventually opened a small food stall because I needed to earn a living. It was not what I planned, but I had no other option." (P8)

Another alumna from the Faculty of Economics shared a similar experience:

"My degree is in Islamic Economics, but I now run a beauty salon and provide make up services. I never learned anything about beauty services during my studies. This was not a choice I made voluntarily; I could not find a job in banking or finance, so I had to find another way to support myself." (P9)

A graduate from the Shariah (law) programme explained his transition:

"I studied law, but now I run a screen-printing business. The legal sector is saturated, and entry level positions are very difficult to secure. Screen printing is something I learned by myself after graduation because I needed income." (P10)

Observational evidence confirmed these patterns. During field observations, researchers documented alumni working in various informal sectors: a Tarbiyah graduate operating a mobile vegetable trading business, an Islamic Economics graduate providing beauty services, and a Da'wah graduate working as a retail assistant in a convenience store. These observations provided visual confirmation of the employment mismatch reported in interviews.

A dean reflected on this phenomenon:

"When I see our graduates working as traders, salon owners, and retail assistants, I question whether our curriculum has failed them. We have equipped them with theoretical knowledge, but we have not prepared them for the realities of the labour market. This is why curriculum reform is urgent." (P1)

readiness.

Table 4. Employment Mismatch Patterns

Code/Theme	Figure	Field of Study	Employment Sector	Evidence
Mis-Culinary		Tarbiyah (Teacher Education)	Culinary/ Food Stall	Alumna operating a food stall. Interview quote: "I could not find a teaching position, so I opened a food stall because I needed income." (P8)
Mis-Retail		Tarbiyah (Teacher Education)	Retail Assistant	Alumna working as convenience store assistant. Interview quote: "Teaching positions are limited, so I took this job even though it has nothing to do with my studies." (P11)
Mis-Beauty		Islamic Economics	Beauty Salon/Make up Services	Alumna providing beauty services. Interview quote: "I could not find a job in banking, so I learned make up skills after graduation. This is my livelihood now." (P9)
Mis-Print		Shariah (Law)	Screen Printing Business	Alumnus operating screen-printing business. Interview quote: "The legal sector is saturated. Screen printing is something I taught myself because it

Mis- Trader		Da'wah	Vegetable Trading	provides income." (P10) Alumnus operating mobile vegetable trading. Interview quote: "I studied Da'wah, but I now sell vegetables. There are few opportunities in religious sectors, so I had to adapt." (P12)
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Table 3 presents five patterns of employment mismatch identified through interview and observational data. The table illustrates the specific fields of study and corresponding employment sectors where alumni were observed working, accompanied by verbatim quotes from informants describing their career transitions.

Discussion

The Dominance of Cognitive and Theoretical Aspects in Curriculum Structure

The finding that the curriculum remains dominated by academic theoretical content with limited integration of affective and psychomotor dimensions aligns with previous studies in developing countries (Aljohani et al., 2022; Sutrisno & Buhari, 2021). However, while these prior studies attribute employability gaps primarily to skills mismatch, this study advances the literature by empirically identifying the structural drivers of this cognitive dominance. Document analysis revealed that 70 to 80 percent of credit hours across study programmes are allocated to theoretical instruction, with practicum modules and internships receiving minimal allocation. This imbalance is not merely a design oversight; it reflects institutional path dependency embedded in curriculum review processes that remain slow and insufficiently responsive to digital industry demands.

This study reveals a critical divergence from Western higher education contexts. In the United Kingdom and other Western settings, curriculum reform has been accelerated by industry accreditation bodies that mandate practical skill integration (Jackson & Wilton, 2016; Tomlinson, 2008). In contrast, this study finds that Indonesian Islamic higher education institutions face additional structural inertia rooted in regulatory frameworks that prioritise theoretical mastery over applied competencies. The curriculum review process at IAIN Sultan Amai Gorontalo operates on multiyear cycles, and institutional traditions perpetuate lecture-based pedagogy. This divergence is not merely contextual; it exposes a theoretical gap in the outcome-based education literature, which assumes rational implementation of competency standards without accounting for institutional resistance to change (Sobri et al., 2025; Voorhees, 2001).

Theoretically, this finding challenges the traditional assumption of curriculum as a neutral transmission of knowledge (Deng et al., 2025; Fraser & Bosanquet, 2006; Taba, H., 1962). Instead, it supports a critical view that curriculum is a contested arena where epistemological orientations are negotiated and where supply driven paradigms persist despite demand driven rhetoric. The persistence of cognitive dominance suggests that the supply driven paradigm remains deeply embedded in institutional culture, contradicting the demand driven orientation required in the digital era (Barnett & Coate, 2004). This study contributes by demonstrating how institutional path dependency perpetuates curriculum inertia, a dimension often overlooked in employability literature that tends to focus on graduate competencies as individual attributes rather than as products of institutional structures.

Limitations in the Development of Affective and Psychomotor Skills

The finding that the development of affective (attitudes, values) and psychomotor (practical skills) domains remains suboptimal is consistent with critiques of employability frameworks that treat soft skills as generic and transferable (Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007; Hillage & Pollard, 1999; Tymon, 2013; Villegas, 2024). However, this study extends these critiques by demonstrating that

affective and psychomotor development is contingent upon pedagogical practices embedded in institutional culture. The prevalence of one-way lecture-based instruction exemplifies Freire's (1970) banking model of education, where students are passive recipients of theoretical knowledge rather than active participants in experiential learning. This pedagogical path dependency perpetuates curriculum inertia by normalizing theoretical dominance as the legitimate mode of knowledge transmission.

A significant theoretical contribution of this study is the identification of a cultural dimension of curriculum inertia previously untheorized in employability literature. While (Tomlinson, 2008) found that students in Western universities increasingly demand practical skill development and challenge theoretical dominance, this study reveals that students at IAIN Sultan Amai Gorontalo accept theoretical dominance as normative. This acceptance reflects lower expectations shaped by institutional tradition and by the perceived legitimacy of lecture-based instruction in Islamic higher education contexts. This cultural acceptance constitutes an additional layer of inertia that reinforces pedagogical path dependency and constrains efforts to integrate affective and psychomotor development.

Unlike (Jackson & Wilton, 2016), who found that limited soft skills development is a barrier to employability among business undergraduates in the United Kingdom, the present study reveals that Islamic higher education institutions face an additional challenge. The integration of moral and spiritual values, which should ideally be operationalised as professional ethics and interpersonal competence (Faeni & Faeni, 2025; Rizal et al., 2025), is often reduced to doctrinal teaching rather than embedded in experiential learning and workplace simulations. This finding critiques the conventional employability framework that treats soft skills as context neutral and suggests that affective domain development cannot be separated from institutional culture and pedagogical practices.

This study contributes to the theoretical literature by proposing that institutional and pedagogical dimensions serve as mediating variables between curriculum design and graduate work readiness. The presence of pedagogical path dependency means that even when competency-based curriculum principles are formally adopted, their implementation remains constrained by teaching traditions, resource limitations, and cultural expectations. This insight extends the employability framework by acknowledging that curriculum reform requires not only policy changes but also pedagogical transformation and cultural shift.

Mismatch between Alumni Employment and Academic Discipline

The finding that more than 50 percent of alumni work outside their academic disciplines, with graduates from Tarbiyah, Islamic Economics, Shariah, and Da'wah fields employed in culinary, retail, beauty, screen printing, and vegetable trading sectors, represents one of the most significant and troubling patterns identified in this study. This employment mismatch challenges boundaryless career theory (Arthur & Rousseau, 2001) and protean career theory (Hall, 2004), which assume that individuals possess the agency to navigate career transitions across organizations and disciplines. These theories celebrate flexibility and self-directed career management as desirable attributes of contemporary workers. However, this study empirically distinguishes between voluntary career mobility, which is celebrated in these theories, and involuntary occupational displacement, which is observed in this study. Alumni in this study were not exercising proactive career agency; rather, they were responding to structural constraints created by an irrelevant curriculum and limited formal employment opportunities.

This distinction represents a critical theoretical nuance that has been largely ignored in career theory literature. While boundaryless and protean career frameworks assume that career transitions are driven by individual initiative and adaptability, this study reveals that such transitions may be forced adaptations rather than choices. The concept of involuntary occupational displacement adds a power sensitive dimension to career theory by acknowledging that structural factors, including curriculum inertia and labour market constraints, can override individual agency. This finding

suggests that career theory must account for institutional and structural determinants of career trajectories, rather than assuming that individuals are always autonomous agents in career decision making.

The employment mismatch also reflects a wide skills gap, as identified in the (World Economic Forum, 2020) report, where educational systems are unable to produce talent aligned with future employment needs. However, while the World Economic Forum report emphasizes technological upskilling and digital transformation, the present study reveals a more fundamental issue. The curriculum at IAIN Sultan Amai Gorontalo does not even provide basic specialization that aligns with existing job markets, let alone future ones. This finding differs from (Gayatri et al., 2022; Geng et al., 2022; Jaya et al., 2026), who found skills mismatch in Southeast Asia driven by rapid digital transformation. In contrast, the mismatch at IAIN Sultan Amai Gorontalo is driven more by curriculum inertia and institutional stagnation than by technological acceleration. This study also differs from (Fatmawati et al., 2026; Rouf et al., 2024; Shofiyah & Muhtarom, 2026), who attributed job mismatch among Islamic university graduates to limited industry networks; this study identifies curriculum content itself as the primary structural cause. The absence of specialized digital era skills, such as digital religious content analysis, management of modern Islamic educational institutions, and technology-based counselling, leaves graduates with generic competencies that have low market value.

Theoretically, this finding contributes to the literature by proposing the concept of forced occupational displacement as a distinct category within career transition theory. Unlike voluntary career mobility, which is driven by individual choice and opportunity seeking, forced occupational displacement is driven by structural constraints and limited employment options within the graduate's field of study. This concept adds a critical nuance to career theory by acknowledging that not all career transitions are agentic choices; some are responses to institutional failures in curriculum design. This study extends the employability framework by distinguishing between curriculum driven employability failures and labor market driven mismatches.

Theorising Curriculum Inertia: The Curriculum Inertia Employability Mismatch Model

Synthesising these three interconnected findings, this study proposes the Curriculum Inertia Employability Mismatch (CIEM) Model. This model theorises that curriculum inertia functions as an institutional mediating mechanism between formal curriculum design and graduate employability outcomes. The CIEM model advances outcome-based education frameworks by demonstrating that competency-based curriculum principles alone are insufficient without addressing the institutional inertia that constrains their implementation.

The CIEM model comprises three interconnected components: First, institutional antecedents create the conditions for curriculum inertia. These antecedents include rigid regulatory frameworks that prioritise theoretical mastery over applied competencies; inadequate learning facilities, such as limited laboratories, classrooms, and internet connectivity, that constrain practical skill development; and lecturer qualification mismatches, where faculty members teach outside their areas of specialisation, thereby reducing the quality of knowledge transfer. These antecedents are not merely contextual factors; they are structural conditions that enable and perpetuate inertia. Second, inertia mechanisms operate as the mediating pathways through which antecedents produce employability failures. Three mechanisms are identified in this study. The first mechanism is cognitive dominance in course content, where 70 to 80 percent of credit hours are allocated to theoretical instruction, leaving limited space for practicum modules, internships, and soft skills development. The second mechanism is pedagogical path dependency, where one way lecture-based instruction persists despite the need for project-based learning, case simulations, and experiential learning. This pedagogical tradition normalises theoretical dominance and reduces opportunities for students to develop affective and psychomotor competencies. The third mechanism is institutional decoupling between curriculum review processes and digital industry demands. Slow multiyear review cycles prevent curricula from adapting to evolving labour market requirements, creating a

persistent gap between graduate profiles and employer expectations. Third, these inertia mechanisms produce two primary outcomes. The first outcome is a skills gap, manifested as graduates' insufficient work readiness, limited practical experience, and weak soft skills (Asweni et al., 2024; Hermita et al., 2025; Pohan & Wandini, 2025). The second outcome is involuntary occupational displacement, manifested as high employment mismatch where alumni work outside their academic disciplines. These outcomes are not simply the result of individual deficiencies; they are systemic failures produced by curriculum inertia.

The CIEM model makes several theoretical contributions. It extends outcome-based education literature by demonstrating that competency-based principles, while necessary, are insufficient without addressing institutional mediating mechanisms. It extends employability literature by shifting the analytical focus from individual graduate competencies to institutional structures that shape competency development. It extends career theory by distinguishing between voluntary career mobility and involuntary occupational displacement, adding a structural dimension to agency focused career frameworks. The model provides a parsimonious explanation for the persistent employability gap in Islamic higher education and offers a framework for designing targeted interventions to disrupt curriculum inertia.

Policy Implications for Educational Management

From an educational management perspective, disrupting curriculum inertia requires multi-level policy interventions that address the specific antecedents and mechanisms identified in this study. The Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) policy in Indonesia provides a strategic framework for this disruption, enabling universities to offer students flexible learning pathways, industry internships, and cross disciplinary experiences. However, this study's findings indicate that MBKM implementation must extend beyond administrative compliance to substantive transformation. Without addressing institutional inertia, MBKM risks becoming a symbolic policy rather than a catalyst for meaningful curriculum reform.

Based on the empirical evidence generated in this study, four institutional strategies are recommended to disrupt curriculum inertia and enhance graduate competitiveness in the digital era. First, universities must mandate structured industry internships and project-based learning as core curriculum components rather than elective add ons (Ayu et al., 2025; Fernando & Zumraturun, 2025; Minarti et al., 2025; Zamsiswaya et al., 2024). The findings reveal that internships currently receive minimal credit allocation and limited integration into formal curriculum structures. To address this, Islamic higher education institutions should establish formal agreements with industry partners to create structured internship programmes that provide students with authentic work experiences and opportunities to apply theoretical knowledge in practical settings. These internships should be embedded in the curriculum with clear learning outcomes, supervision mechanisms, and assessment criteria. Second, institutions must establish formal industry advisory boards to accelerate curriculum review cycles and ensure alignment with digital labour market demands. The findings indicate that slow review cycles perpetuate curriculum inertia by preventing timely adaptation to evolving industry needs. Industry advisory boards, comprising employers, alumni, and professional associations, can provide regular feedback on curriculum content, identify emerging skill requirements, and accelerate the integration of digital competencies into course offerings. This external input can disrupt institutional path dependency by introducing external accountability and responsiveness. Third, universities must invest in pedagogical training and faculty development programmes to shift from lecture-based instruction to experiential and project-based learning. The findings reveal that pedagogical path dependency perpetuates theoretical dominance and limits opportunities for affective and psychomotor development. Faculty development programmes should equip lecturers with skills in case-based teaching, problem-based learning, simulation-based instruction, and technology enhanced pedagogy. This shift requires not only training but also institutional recognition and reward systems that value innovative teaching practices (Budiyantri & Parhan, 2024; R. Hamzah et al., 2024; Maqfirah et al., 2026; Rahmadi & Hamdan, 2023). Fourth,

institutions must develop compulsory digital literacy courses across all programmes to equip graduates with technology competencies required in the digital workforce. The findings indicate that the curriculum remains overly general and fails to equip students with specialised digital era skills. Digital literacy courses should cover data analysis, technology-based entrepreneurship, digital communication, and information management (Avcı & Ergün, 2019; Azmiana et al., 2025; Azzahra et al., 2026; Maiyanti et al., 2025; Reksiana et al., 2024). For Islamic higher education institutions, these courses can be contextualised to include digital religious content analysis, management of modern Islamic educational institutions, and technology-based family counselling, thereby maintaining institutional identity while responding to labour market demands.

These policy recommendations address the specific inertia mechanisms identified in the CIEM model. By disrupting cognitive dominance through practical skill integration, by overcoming pedagogical path dependency through faculty development, and by accelerating curriculum review through industry advisory boards, institutions can break the cycle of curriculum inertia and produce graduates who are work ready and competitively positioned in the digital labour market.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the higher education curriculum at IAIN Sultan Amai Gorontalo remains insufficiently aligned with the demands of the digital labour market due to persistent institutional challenges. The findings reveal that curriculum design continues to prioritise cognitive and theoretical learning while insufficiently developing affective, psychomotor, digital, and employability competencies, resulting in graduate labour market mismatch. Beyond confirming previous evidence, this study makes three original contributions. First, it conceptualises curriculum inertia as an institutional mechanism explaining why curriculum reforms often fail to improve graduate employability. Second, it proposes the Curriculum Inertia Employability Mismatch (CIEM) model, demonstrating how cognitive dominance, pedagogical path dependency, and institutional decoupling produce employability gaps. Third, it introduces involuntary occupational displacement, distinguishing structurally constrained employment transitions from voluntary career mobility. Collectively, these contributions extend employability research from an individual-centred perspective to an institutional explanation of graduate employment outcomes, particularly within Islamic higher education.

Theoretically, this study advances employability and outcome-based education literature by identifying institutional inertia as a key explanatory factor linking curriculum implementation to graduate employability. The proposed Curriculum Inertia Employability Mismatch (CIEM) model offers a novel framework for analysing institutional influences on employability outcomes. Practically, the findings indicate that improving graduate employability requires institutional transformation rather than incremental curriculum revision. Higher education institutions should strengthen industry partnerships, expand project-based learning and structured internships, enhance digital literacy, and institutionalise regular curriculum review to reduce curriculum inertia and improve alignment with the evolving digital labour market.

This study is limited by its focus on a single Islamic higher education institution, which may restrict the transferability of the findings to other institutional contexts. In addition, the qualitative research design does not permit statistical measurement of the relative influence of curriculum inertia on graduate employability. Future studies are therefore encouraged to validate the CIEM model using quantitative, mixed-methods, or longitudinal approaches across multiple higher education institutions to examine its broader applicability and to evaluate the effectiveness of curriculum transformation strategies in enhancing graduate employability in the digital era.

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