

## PROBLEMS AND STRATEGIC IMPROVEMENTS IN THE TEACHING OF ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES

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### ABSTRACT

**Research Objectives** - To identify the main problems, causal factors, and formulate improvement strategies for Islamic Religious Education (IRE) learning in general universities.

**Method** - This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study design to deeply explore the perceptions of students and lecturers regarding the effectiveness of IRE learning. Data were obtained through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and curriculum document analysis, and then analyzed using the thematic analysis technique based on the framework of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña.

**Research Findings** - The study identified five main problems in IRE learning: an irrelevant curriculum, limited facilities and resources, unequal educational access, low quality of teaching and research, and weak relevance to societal needs. The causal factors for these problems stemmed from low student interest, an unsupportive campus environment, and suboptimal lecturer competence. This condition implies a low effectiveness of learning and a limited contribution of IRE to student character development.

**Theory and Practical Implications** - The implications suggest that reforming IRE learning should be directed toward curriculum renewal, innovation in technology-based methods, and improving lecturer competence to align with contemporary demands. This research also provides input for inter-ministerial policies in synchronizing the management of IRE courses in general universities.

**Novelty** - The novelty of this research lies in its focus on general universities with a heterogeneous student body and a comparative analysis across departments, which has not been extensively studied before.

## INTRODUCTION

Education in Indonesia continues to face significant challenges in an era of rapid change and global competition. According to Tilaar (2004), four core crises quality, relevance, elitism, and management—are at the root of national educational problems, as shown by quantitative comparisons with other Asian countries and various quality indicators. The urgency of improving educational quality is becoming more pressing in light of international demands for accreditation standards, graduate competencies, and the ability to navigate the digital era and social changes. Recent research also indicates that Islamic higher education institutions, in particular, face pressure to bridge religious values with the demands of modernity and technology. For instance, a study on "Academic Reform and Sustainability of Islamic Higher Education" at UIN Sunan Kalijaga found that Islamic universities must formulate an academic reform agenda based on sustainability to effectively respond to both local and global demands.

Despite numerous studies addressing problems in Islamic Religious Education (IRE) at the secondary or madrasah level, research specifically investigating IRE issues in general (non-Islamic) universities remains limited. Studies such as "The Learning Gap in Islamic Religious Education in the

Digital Era" (2023) identified that access to technology and teacher capacity are obstacles, but their focus is on high schools, not general universities. Another study, a "Systematic Literature Review: Obstacles and Strategies to Improve the Competence of IRE Teachers in Senior High Schools" by Adilah, Riyadi, and Suwardi (2024), outlined barriers like a lack of practice-based training and institutional support for technology use; however, its context is still high schools, not universities. The theoretical foundation in Islamic religious education emphasizes that religious curricula must be contextual, relevant, and adaptive to the students' socio-cultural context. Islamic pedagogy and relevance theory support the idea that learning materials and methods should not be merely normative and textual. However, these studies have not critically examined how the characteristics of students in general universities—who come from highly heterogeneous cultural, religious, and social backgrounds—affect the effectiveness of IRE in terms of student interest, teaching methods, and curriculum relevance.

Furthermore, there is a gap in research on innovative IRE teaching methods, such as the use of technology, problem-based learning, the integration of student experience, and adaptation to contemporary developments like digitalization and the Industrial Revolution 4.0/5.0. Although articles like "Towards Islamic Pedagogy by Exploring the Applications of Educational Technology" (Yunita & Mulyadi, 2024) exist, there is little empirical research in Indonesian general universities, and few studies make comparisons across different majors or government ministries. The study "The Integration of Artificial Intelligence as a Teacher's..." (Ilma'Nun, 2025) mentions the need for further research on AI adoption in IRE, but its focus is limited to perceptions or potential rather than systematic implementation in general universities.

Given these research gaps, this study offers novelty by examining IRE in general universities under the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology. It provides an empirical and comparative analysis of different majors, teaching methods, and heterogeneous student backgrounds. The novelty of this research lies in the combination of the following aspects: first, its focus on the perceptions and experiences of general university students regarding IRE in terms of motivation/interest, curriculum relevance, and teaching methods; second, its analysis of innovative methods (e.g., technology use, blended learning, problem-based learning) within the IRE context; and third, its identification of cross-ministerial strategies (spanning the Ministries of Education and Research, and the Ministry of Religious Affairs) to synchronize the implementation of IRE as a university-wide compulsory course (MKWU) to make it more effective, adaptive, and contextual.

The objectives of this research are: a) to identify the main problems in the implementation of IRE learning in general universities; b) to explore the causal factors of these problems (including student background, teaching methods, curriculum, and institutional support); and c) to formulate strategic recommendations to make IRE learning more effective, relevant, and adaptive to the needs of the times. The limitation of this study is its cross-sectional nature and emphasis on qualitative data from interviews and focus group discussions, meaning that the generalization of its findings to all general universities in Indonesia will require further research on a larger scale and with longitudinal or quantitative methods.

## **METHOD**

This research employs a qualitative approach with a case study design, as its main focus is to deeply explore the problems of Islamic Religious Education (IRE) learning in general universities, which are characterized by student heterogeneity. The qualitative approach was chosen to allow the researcher to understand the social reality, perceptions, and experiences of students and lecturers in a contextual manner. This methodological choice is also based on previous research that successfully uncovered educational problems through similar approaches. For instance, the study by Yunita and Mulyadi (2024) on technology-based Islamic pedagogy showed that qualitative analysis can capture the nuances of learning interactions that are not captured in quantitative surveys. Similarly, an international study by Al-Smadi & Hailat (2022) in *Higher Education Research & Development* affirmed that a qualitative approach is highly relevant for understanding the challenges of Islamic education reform in the digital age, especially in the context of student plurality. Therefore, this approach is considered the most suitable for answering the research objectives and filling the existing gap in the literature.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and documentation. Interviews were conducted with students from various majors, lecturers teaching IRE courses, and study program administrators. FGDs were used to explore the collective perspectives of students on the effectiveness of teaching methods, while documentation included syllabi, curricula, and course evaluation reports. Triangulation was used to enhance data validity by comparing the results of interviews, FGDs, and documents. This method aligns with popular qualitative literature such as Creswell & Poth (2018), who emphasize the importance of interviews and FGDs in obtaining rich data, and Flick (2019), who stresses the use of triangulation as a way to increase the credibility of research findings.

The analytical tool used is thematic analysis based on the approach of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2018), which includes three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. This technique allows the researcher to identify main patterns related to the curriculum, teaching methods, and student interest. The analysis was facilitated by qualitative software like NVivo to streamline the coding and theme-finding process. Furthermore, this research also uses a conceptual framework that integrates the theories of Islamic pedagogy, curriculum relevance theory, and innovative technology-based learning models. This framework can be illustrated in the following figure.

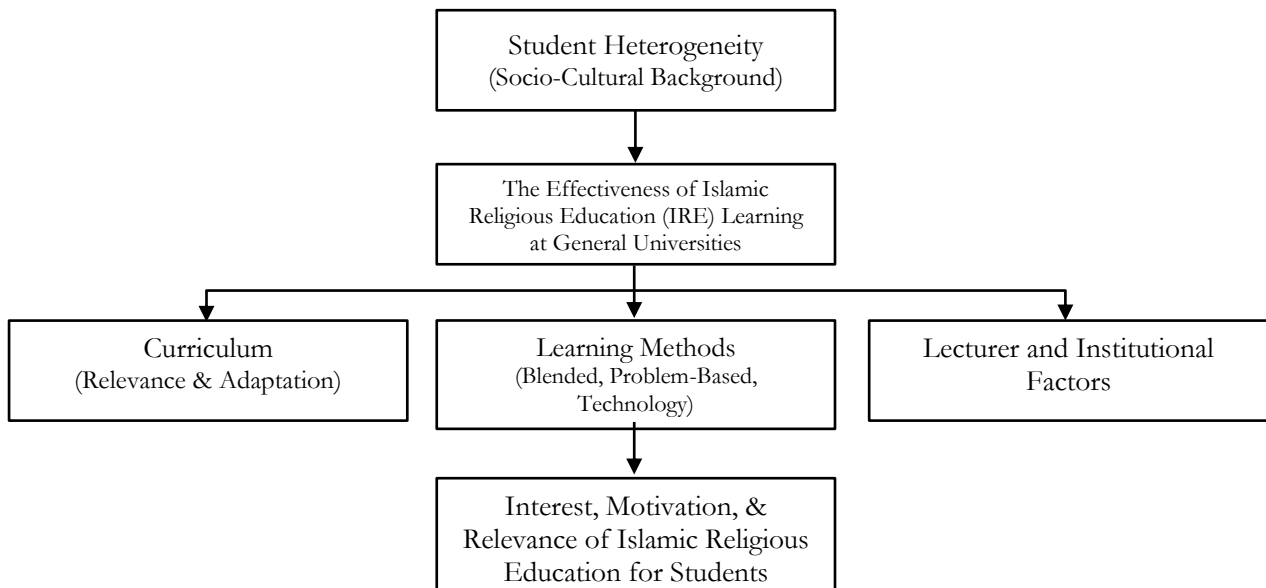


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Allenges in Islamic Religious Education (IRE) Learning at General Universities.

Education plays a crucial role in a nation's development. In Indonesia, Islamic higher education institutions bear a significant responsibility for shaping a new generation of citizens with integrity who can contribute positively to society. However, in practice, a number of challenges must be addressed.

Education, being dynamic and ever-evolving, inevitably encounters obstacles at every stage, including at the higher education level. The problems faced are diverse, ranging from issues concerning curriculum, facilities and infrastructure, and resources to the quality of education itself and the relevance of graduates to societal needs. While complex, these issues are indicative of a dynamic educational system in motion rather than a stagnant one.

In his introduction to the textbook *Islamic Religious Education at General Universities*, Dr. Komaruddin Hidayat points to a fundamental issue in Islamic religious education, namely an incorrect or inappropriate educational orientation. He further outlines three indicators of this misdirection: First, contemporary religious education is overly oriented toward learning *about* religious knowledge. As a result, it is not uncommon in this country to find individuals who possess extensive knowledge of religious values, yet their behavior fails to reflect those values. Second, there is a lack of strategy in the structuring and selection of religious education materials, which often results in core, foundational

principles being overlooked. Third, there is insufficient broad and in-depth explanation, alongside a lack of semantic and generic mastery of key terms in religious teachings. This often leads to explanations that are far removed from their original meaning, spirit, and context.

Islamic religious education has played a significant role as a component of nation-building, particularly in Indonesia, since long before the country's independence. This is evident in the historical practice of Islamic education provided by the Muslim community through traditional institutions such as *majelis taklim*, *pengajian* forums, *surau*s, and *pesantrens*, which have flourished and continue to exist. In the context of IRE learning at general universities, five common problems are prevalent.

One of the primary issues at general higher education institutions in Indonesia is a curriculum that lacks relevance to the needs of society and the professional world. A rigid and overly theoretical curriculum produces graduates who are inadequately prepared to face the dynamic challenges of the workforce. A frequent disparity exists between what is taught in the classroom and the real-world demands of the field. Therefore, curriculum reform by Islamic higher education institutions must accommodate the latest developments in science and technology while also considering the needs of the job market. Education must adapt to the times, and relevance is a necessity for navigating change. A curriculum that is not aligned with contemporary developments is one that fails to adjust to the current needs of society, technology, and the workforce, often by teaching outdated information and neglecting to integrate the most recent knowledge.

Facilities and resources are crucial for ensuring an effective and profound IRE learning process at general universities, especially with the growing discourse on *deep learning*. In a speech, Minister Mu'ti explained that deep learning is a learning approach focused on a deep understanding and better application of concepts. "Deep learning is not merely about memorizing or solving exam questions, but about how students comprehensively understand concepts, connect them with other disciplines, and apply them in real life," stated Minister Mu'ti at the Auditorium of Universitas Muhammadiyah Prof. Dr. Hamka (Uhamka). The necessary facilities and resources include physical infrastructure such as adequate buildings, comfortable classrooms, libraries, and laboratories, all of which contribute to a conducive learning environment. High-quality human resources are also a critical need, encompassing both academic staff and administrators. A lack of funding and difficulty in recruiting and retaining qualified lecturers can significantly impact the quality of education provided. The need for robust infrastructure and resources is a vital element for the development of general higher education institutions, as these factors directly influence the depth and effectiveness of academic activities. To this day, some universities still have minimal access to essential infrastructure like educational laboratories, media development tools, and advanced learning equipment.

A further challenge is the disparity in access and quality among general higher education institutions in Indonesia. Universities remain heavily concentrated on the island of Java, while regions outside of Java often have limited access to other institutions. This leads to an imbalance in educational opportunities and regional inequality. Moreover, the varying quality of education among institutions is a serious issue, as not all share the same standards and accreditation, which can ultimately affect the quality of the graduates they produce.

Indonesia as a developing and archipelagic nation, has a vast territory, which presents several challenges, including the uneven implementation of policies. This is because policies are often first implemented on the island of Java, and it takes time for them to be disseminated to other islands due to various factors, including infrastructure disparities across regions. Another issue that needs attention is the quality of teaching and research at general higher education institutions. Many institutions still face challenges in recruiting lecturers with adequate competence and experience. Low teaching quality can negatively impact the development of students' character and intellectual capacity. Furthermore, limited research is a major obstacle to generating significant innovation and scholarly contributions to society and the broader Islamic world. Conventional and less interactive teaching methods, which often center on the lecturer as the primary source of information, position students as passive recipients.

Similarly, many lecturers and educators at the university level are preoccupied with administrative tasks, which consume a considerable amount of time. This also hinders their creativity in developing new learning models, as they are often required to follow existing pedagogical guidelines. Consequently, lecturers become less innovative in creating modern teaching methods, materials, and

models. Another problem is the low relevance of general higher education institutions to the needs of society. There is often a disconnect between what is taught at these institutions and what is required by society. A greater focus on a deep understanding of religion does not always align with the practical needs of the professional world. Therefore, it is crucial to enhance collaboration between Islamic higher education institutions and industry and society to ensure the curriculum's relevance to real-world needs.

Islamic religious education produces many Islamic thinkers, but this is not always coupled with the needs of the job market and industry. As a result, many graduates of Islamic Religious Education from general universities feel confused because what they studied in college does not align with the demands of the professional world. This often leaves some graduates unable to compete, leading them to seek more opportunistic ventures. In this context, smart and innovative thinking is needed, as not all of us are destined to become government employees or corporate workers, as affirmed in the Qur'an, Surah At-Taubah (9:122).

وَمَا كَانَ الْمُؤْمِنُونَ لِيَنْفِرُوا كَافَّةً فَلَوْلَا نَفَرَ مِنْ كُلِّ فِرْقَةٍ مِّنْهُمْ طَائِفَةٌ لِّيَتَفَقَّهُوا فِي الدِّينِ وَلِيُنذِرُوا قَوْمَهُمْ إِذَا رَجَعُوا إِلَيْهِمْ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَحْذَرُونَ

It is not appropriate for all the believers to go forth to battle. Why should a group from each of their divisions not stay behind to deepen their understanding of the religion and to admonish their people when they return to them, so that they may be cautious.

This verse clarifies that striving on the battlefield is not the sole form of *jihad*. Another equally important form of *jihad* is seeking religious knowledge and disseminating it to the community. By having a group that deepens its religious understanding, they can become a source of information and guidance for other Muslims. When they return from the battlefield or other activities, they can provide knowledge and warnings to the community about the importance of holding firm to religious principles and safeguarding themselves from falsehood. This is intended to ensure that Muslims remain steadfast in truth and do not go astray.

Regardless of the aforementioned problems, the most striking issue is the low level of student interest in this course. This is exacerbated by a monotonous teaching approach that lacks relevance to students' daily lives. As Muttaqin points out, IRE learning in higher education tends to be normative and doctrinal, without a contextual approach that adapts to the needs of students across various disciplines. Meanwhile, Jamali states that the limited instructional time (generally 2 SKS) is a serious obstacle to achieving the comprehensive learning objectives of IRE.

**Factors Contributing to the Emergence of Problems in the Teaching of Islamic Religious Education.** Islamic Religious Education (IRE) constitutes an essential component in shaping the character and morality of students. However, in its implementation, various obstacles are often encountered that hinder the optimal achievement of learning objectives.

These obstacles can generally be classified into two main categories, namely those related to students and those related to educators (lecturers). The first category concerns student-related factors, which include: a) Deviant student behavior. Through both print and electronic media, reports are frequently encountered that reveal various forms of student conduct deviating from academic values. For instance, many students are involved in immoral incidents, such as cases of pornographic videos, violent clashes, physical fights, and serious criminal acts, including murder committed by a student against his pregnant partner, among others.

The phenomenon described above illustrates that religious education in universities is almost entirely "misdirected." The problems surrounding religious education are essentially a reflection of the broader issues of religious life in the country, which has become trapped in the formalism of religion. The government appears satisfied with requiring religious education as a compulsory subject in the curriculum. Religious teachers or lecturers feel content with delivering the subject matter in accordance with the curriculum. Students, in turn, perceive themselves as sufficiently religious by memorizing religious lessons. All parties seem content with the objectification of religion in the form of curricula and grades, yet its implementation in daily life remains distant. It is important to note that attributing the failure of such cases solely to religious education would be unwise; nevertheless, such an image frequently emerges within society.

b) The campus environment. The socio-cultural environment of the university must also receive serious attention from educators. A central issue in this regard is whether lecturers and students should adapt alloplastically or autoplastically. Furthermore, the immediate environment that influences students within the university, and even within the classroom, needs to be developed into a religious environment. This includes the provision of prayer facilities on campus, the commemoration of Islamic holy days, and the cultivation of ethical norms in social interactions, dress, polite behavior, and related practices.

In relation to this matter, Azyumardi Azra asserts that education provides students with encouragement and a sense of achievement through the mastery of their studies. The academic accomplishments they attain, in turn, foster a sense of elitism that gives rise to distinctive attitudes and lifestyles, including in the realm of politics. The more schools are detached from the wider community, the stronger this elitism becomes. This elitism, which originates in educational institutions, eventually produces a form of elitism that is “separate” from society; yet at the same time, those who possess such advantages and privileges hold the belief that they have a natural “right” to govern society. Referring to the foregoing observations, it can be inferred that the campus environment also plays a crucial role in supporting the success of Islamic religious education in public universities. Such an environment encompasses not only material aspects (“hardware”) but also cultural and intellectual dimensions (“software”). The problems highlighted above represent only a small portion of the more complex issues that persist.

The second category relates to educators (lecturers). As the implementers of instruction, IRE lecturers are expected to possess competencies that can be clearly measured. This gives rise to the idea of the necessity of standardizing IRE lecturers in public universities. In this regard, Hidayatullah emphasizes several points. First, IRE lecturers serve as learning agents who are competent in carrying out the task of transferring knowledge as well as values in order to nurture the innate potential and fundamental abilities of students so that they may develop optimally. Their primary roles include those of teacher, mentor, and trainer, which require mastery of a set of skills referred to as competencies. Second, the competencies of IRE lecturers encompass knowledge of Islam, pedagogical skills, and values that are reflected in habitual ways of thinking and acting, which they embody in the process of teaching, guiding, and training their students. Third, IRE lecturers are also expected to continuously develop their competencies. This may be achieved by pursuing higher levels of education to expand their intellectual horizons, participating in seminars, utilizing academic journals, and engaging actively in scientific research. Fourth, the new paradigm of education in the era of globalization presents significant challenges for IRE lecturers, requiring them to enhance both their competence and professionalism, particularly in the field of technology and information. IRE lecturers are expected to develop and introduce innovations in the learning process in order to produce quality outcomes that meet international standards.

Effective learning requires lecturers who possess profound mastery of the subject matter and the ability to present it innovatively. Conversely, lecturers who lack sufficient mastery or who fail to employ innovative methods in delivering their material risk rendering the learning process rigid and unengaging.

**Strategic Solutions for Improving the Quality of Islamic Religious Education in Public Universities.** Strategic solutions to improve the quality of Islamic Religious Education (IRE) in public universities represent a complex yet essential challenge. To achieve this goal, it is necessary to develop integrated strategies that focus on multiple aspects of the learning process. Based on the available references, several strategic solutions may be considered.

The first involves strengthening the curriculum and learning materials. One important solution to be implemented is the renewal of the curriculum so that it is more relevant to the needs of society and the labor market. Islamic higher education institutions must adopt curricula that integrate theoretical instruction with practical application, take into account the latest developments in science and technology, and identify the demands of the job market. This process of curriculum renewal should also involve key stakeholders, including lecturers, industry representatives, and alumni, to ensure both relevance and sustainability.

a) Relevance and Actuality. The IRE curriculum in public universities requires periodic revision to ensure its relevance and alignment with contemporary developments, current issues, and societal needs. Learning materials should be integrated with pressing themes such as technology, globalization, and pluralism, thereby providing students with a comprehensive and contextually relevant understanding. b) Contextual Approach. The teaching of IRE in public universities must employ a contextual approach that links subject matter to the realities of students' lives. This may be achieved by examining contemporary social, cultural, and political issues through the lens of Islam, enabling students to comprehend and apply Islamic values within their everyday experiences. c) Development of Innovative Learning Materials. IRE lecturers need to design innovative and engaging instructional resources, making use of multimedia, animations, and educational videos. Interactive and visually rich materials can enhance students' interest in and understanding of Islamic Religious Education.

Second, implementing effective learning methods. These include: a) Active and participatory methods. The teaching of IRE in public universities must be oriented toward students as active subjects in the learning process. Active methods such as discussions, simulations, role-playing, and case studies can encourage student participation and enhance their comprehension. b) Constructivist approach. IRE lecturers need to adopt a constructivist approach to learning, in which students play an active role in constructing their own knowledge through learning experiences. This method engages students directly in the learning process, encourages critical thinking, and fosters problem-solving skills. c) Utilization of technology. Technology is the application of knowledge for practical purposes. A more formal definition is provided by Galbraith, as cited in Newby et al. (2000: 9), who defines technology as "the systematic application of scientific or other organized knowledge to practical tasks."

Technology can serve as an effective tool for improving the quality of IRE instruction. IRE lecturers may utilize online learning platforms, educational videos, and digital applications to enrich course materials and enhance interaction with students.

Third, improving the quality of human resources. This includes: a) Enhancing lecturer competence. IRE lecturers in public universities must possess adequate competencies, both in religious scholarship and in pedagogy. Professional training and development programs are essential to improve the quality of teaching and to strengthen lecturers' classroom management skills. To elevate instructional quality, efforts should be directed toward lecturer competence through ongoing training and professional development. Lecturers should also be encouraged to engage actively in research and scholarly publications relevant to their field of study. Islamic higher education institutions may facilitate such research and provide support for lecturers in producing high-quality academic works. Moreover, the use of educational technologies such as e-learning and digital-based instruction can further enhance the interactivity and effectiveness of teaching. According to Nuryadin, strategic steps are required to address the challenges faced in learning, which include the development and improvement of human resources, the establishment of technology-based infrastructure, and the utilization of digital learning media.

b) Improving student quality. IRE students need to be encouraged to participate actively in both academic and non-academic activities that can deepen their understanding and practice of religion. Mentoring programs, seminars, and religious activities can assist students in developing their potential and in enhancing the overall quality of the learning process. c) Collaboration with other institutions. Public universities may establish partnerships with religious education institutions, religious organizations, and experts in the field of IRE to strengthen the quality of instruction. Such collaborations may include faculty exchanges, training programs, and joint curriculum development.

Fourth, creating a conducive learning environment. This includes: a) Supporting facilities. Public universities need to provide adequate facilities for IRE instruction, such as comfortable classrooms, well-stocked libraries, and multimedia laboratories. Comprehensive facilities can motivate students and support effective learning processes. Thus, the provision of efficient and effective educational infrastructure is crucial to ensuring optimal instructional quality, as the teaching and learning process is inseparable from adequate facilities and resources. b) Academic culture. Public universities should foster a positive academic culture that supports IRE instruction. This can be achieved by encouraging discussions, seminars, and religious activities involving both students and lecturers. c) Tolerance and harmony. Public universities must serve as spaces that uphold the values of tolerance and interfaith

harmony. A harmonious and tolerant environment can create a conducive atmosphere for learning while fostering students' attitudes of tolerance and empathy.

## CONCLUSION

The challenges of teaching Islamic Religious Education (IRE) in public universities include students' low level of interest, the predominance of normative-textual teaching methods, and a curriculum that has not yet been fully aligned with contemporary needs. Contributing factors to this condition include the heterogeneity of students' backgrounds, the limited pedagogical innovation of lecturers, and the lack of institutional support in developing technology-based learning. These findings indicate that the teaching of IRE is not only confronted with technical issues but also with epistemological challenges, namely how to connect Islamic values with social, cultural, and scientific developments. Accordingly, strategic solutions that can be offered include the renewal of technology-based learning methods, the integration of a problem-based learning approach, and the development of a curriculum that is more contextual and adaptive to the needs of students across disciplines.

Compared to previous studies, the findings of this research demonstrate novelty, particularly in focusing on the context of public universities, which rarely serve as the primary locus in IRE studies. For example, Yunita & Mulyadi (2024) emphasized the importance of technology in Islamic pedagogy but did not address the heterogeneity of non-PTKIN students. Adilah et al. (2024) examined the challenges faced by IRE teachers at the secondary school level rather than in public universities. Meanwhile, international research such as that of Al-Smadi & Hailat (2022) highlighted reforms in Islamic higher education within the framework of globalization, yet this study places greater emphasis on the practical aspects of IRE implementation in multi-disciplinary classrooms. Thus, the novelty of this research lies in its combined analysis of internal student factors, the role of lecturers and institutions, as well as its recommendations for innovative learning models that can bridge the gap between contemporary demands and the characteristics of religious education.

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