

Life skills-Based Pesantren Curriculum Development to Enhance Graduate Competitiveness

Laila Shabrina¹, Ishomuddin²

^{1,2} Universitas Muhammadiyah Malang, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Pesantren are enduring Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia, yet globalization, digital transformation, and changing labor-market expectations require graduates to combine religious competence with practical life skills. Recent studies show that curriculum integration, experiential learning, and soft skills help prepare learners for complex environments. This study aims to analyze how a life skills-based pesantren curriculum can be developed to strengthen graduate competitiveness while preserving the religious identity and distinctive values of pesantren. This research uses a qualitative library research approach with descriptive-analytical and conceptual analysis. Peer-reviewed journal articles from 2022 to 2026 were identified, selected, classified, compared, interpreted, and synthesized by themes, including life skills, digital competence, entrepreneurship, social skills, and employability. The findings show that a life skills-based pesantren curriculum is best developed by integrating religious education, academic learning, and structured practical experiences. Personal, social, academic, digital, vocational, entrepreneurial, and leadership competencies can be embedded in curricular, co-curricular, and extracurricular activities. Comparison with previous studies indicates that this model is consistent with evidence on 21st-century skills and employability, while the pesantren context adds religious values, habituation, communal learning, and role modelling. The study concludes that life skills integration offers a relevant strategy for strengthening graduate competitiveness, although empirical evaluation remains necessary.

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Corresponding Author:

Laila Shabrina

Muhammadiyah Malang University, Malang, Indonesia; lailashabrina54@gmail.com

1. INTRODUCTION

Pesantren remain important Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia because they combine religious learning, character formation, communal life, and the development of student responsibility. At the same time, the social and professional environment in which graduates will live is changing rapidly. Digital transformation, globalization, and increasingly complex employment expectations require graduates to demonstrate not only academic and religious knowledge but also communication, collaboration, problem-solving, adaptability, digital literacy, leadership, and entrepreneurial

competence. Contemporary studies of 21st-century skills and employability consistently identify these transferable competencies as important for educational and professional readiness.

In the pesantren context, the need for curriculum adaptation does not mean abandoning religious identity. Recent Indonesian studies show that pesantren are increasingly integrating national curricula, diniyah learning, digital learning, and practical competencies while retaining Islamic values and institutional traditions (Hasmiza & Muhtarom, 2023; Maghfiroh, Ali, & Azani, 2023; Fadlin & Uzunboyly, 2024). Curriculum integration can therefore be understood as an effort to connect religious knowledge with competencies that students need in everyday, social, academic, and professional life. Studies of curriculum modernization also indicate that adaptation is occurring through institutional planning, curriculum integration, teacher development, and the use of technology (Alid, Basalamah, 2022; Hidayah, 2025; Setyaningsih, Ramadhan, Ulfa, Anne, & Nur, 2025; Tanjung, Budianti, & Arsyad, 2025).

Life skills provide a useful conceptual bridge between these two demands. International literature describes life skills as a broad group of cognitive, social, emotional, and practical competencies that help learners manage challenges, make decisions, interact with others, and adapt to changing circumstances. Research on school-based soft skills further shows that structured interventions can support employability, social-emotional development, career planning, and academic outcomes, although implementation quality and assessment remain important challenges. Evidence on employability similarly emphasizes communication, teamwork, problem-solving, adaptability, and willingness to learn as recurring competencies required in the contemporary workplace.

Previous studies specifically concerning pesantren have demonstrated that life skills may be developed through organizational activities, entrepreneurship, vocational programs, community service, communication activities, and daily habituation. Gustriani & Kholis, (2024) emphasize life skills learning as an educational innovation, while Rahmawati & Laila, (2024) identify personal, social, academic, and vocational dimensions in pesantren life skills programs. Kurnia (2024) also report positive contributions from speeches and extracurricular activities, and Fadlin & Uzunboyly (2024) highlight curriculum planning and extracurricular integration in responding to community needs. These findings support the relevance of life skills in pesantren, but they also reveal a need for a more integrated conceptual explanation of how different skill domains can be positioned within curriculum development and linked to graduate competitiveness.

The theoretical perspective used in this study is an integrative curriculum-development perspective, in which curriculum relevance is assessed through the relationship among educational goals, learner needs, curriculum content, learning experiences, implementation, and evaluation. This perspective is complemented by contemporary life-skills and employability literature, which treats skills as transferable competencies developed through active practice rather than through knowledge transmission alone. Experiential learning is particularly relevant because systematic evidence indicates that learning by doing can support entrepreneurial skills and competences. Project- and problem-based learning likewise provide opportunities for higher-order thinking, collaboration, and practical application.

Although many studies discuss pesantren curriculum modernization or life skills separately, fewer studies synthesize these strands into a single curriculum-development framework focused specifically on graduate competitiveness. The present study therefore focuses on one problem formulation: how can a life skills-based pesantren curriculum be developed to strengthen the competitiveness of pesantren graduates? The objective is to analyze the curriculum components, implementation strategies, and competency domains that can connect pesantren identity with contemporary educational and professional demands.

2. METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach using a library research method, focusing on the examination of concepts and theories related to the development of a life skills-based pesantren

curriculum. The study is designed to explore, understand, and synthesize various ideas and perspectives concerning curriculum development in pesantren, particularly those related to the development of students' life skills and the improvement of graduates' competitiveness.

The data sources are obtained from various relevant literature, including books, scientific journals, previous research findings, educational policy documents, conference proceedings, and other academic works that discuss pesantren, curriculum development, and life skills-based education. The literature is selected based on its relevance to the research topic, academic credibility, and contribution to understanding the development of a pesantren curriculum that responds to contemporary educational needs. Both primary and secondary sources are considered to obtain comprehensive information and strengthen the theoretical foundation of the study.

Data collection is conducted through systematic identification, selection, reading, and documentation of relevant literature. The researcher searches for and identifies sources related to the main themes of the study, including pesantren education, curriculum development, life skills, competencies, and graduate competitiveness. Relevant information is then classified and documented according to specific themes to facilitate further analysis.

The collected data are analyzed using a descriptive-analytical method with a conceptual approach. The analysis process involves several stages, including data identification, classification, interpretation, comparison, and synthesis. Relevant concepts and findings from various sources are compared to identify similarities, differences, relationships, and patterns. The researcher then interprets and synthesizes these findings to develop a comprehensive understanding of the principles and strategies for developing a life skills-based pesantren curriculum.

The conceptual approach is used to examine the theoretical foundations and essential components of curriculum development and to relate them to the specific characteristics and educational objectives of pesantren. Particular attention is given to the integration of life skills into the pesantren curriculum, including personal skills, social skills, academic skills, vocational skills, problem-solving abilities, communication, collaboration, and adaptability. This approach is intended to identify how curriculum development can bridge religious education with practical competencies required by students in their personal, social, and professional lives.

To ensure the credibility of the findings, the study applies source comparison and literature triangulation by examining information from different types of academic and policy sources. Relevant findings from different references are compared and critically evaluated to avoid relying on a single perspective. Through this process, the study seeks to produce a balanced and academically grounded interpretation.

The results of the analysis are subsequently synthesized to identify patterns, key ideas, and potential models of curriculum development that can be applied in pesantren. The proposed conceptual model is expected to provide a framework for integrating life skills into pesantren education while maintaining the religious identity and distinctive characteristics of pesantren. Ultimately, this research aims to contribute to the development of a relevant, adaptive, and sustainable pesantren curriculum capable of strengthening students' competencies and improving the competitiveness of pesantren graduates in facing the demands of contemporary society and the global era.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Life skills as a Curriculum Orientation

The literature indicates that life skills should not be reduced to vocational training. They include personal capacities, social interaction, cognitive and academic abilities, practical and vocational competencies, and the capacity to adapt to changing situations. Bansal (2022) describes life skills education as multidimensional, while Hvalby et al. (2024) show that recent educational literature connects life skills with lifelong learning and holistic development. In this sense, life skills are most

useful for pesantren when treated as transferable competencies that can be developed through both formal instruction and daily institutional life.

This interpretation corresponds with the existing pesantren literature. Rahmawati and Nor Laila (2024) found personal, social, academic, and vocational elements in life skills implementation, while Kurnia et al., (2024) identified speeches and extracurricular activities as practical mechanisms for developing student competence. Gustriani & Kholis, (2024) likewise frame life skills as an innovation that can strengthen independence, social competence, vocational skills, and entrepreneurship. The present synthesis extends these findings by placing the different domains within an integrated curriculum rather than treating them as isolated activities.

3.2 Curriculum Integration as the Core Development Strategy

The strongest pattern across the reviewed literature is curriculum integration. Pesantren curriculum development is not simply the addition of a separate life-skills subject; it involves aligning goals, content, learning experiences, assessment, and institutional activities so that life skills become part of students' educational experience. Maghfiroh et al., (2023) demonstrate the relevance of integrating national and pesantren curricula, while Alid show that modernization can combine traditional religious learning with national educational requirements. More recent work also emphasizes integrative and contextual curriculum management as a strategy for maintaining pesantren relevance (Setyaningsih et al., 2025).

The findings are consistent with international curriculum research. Kain show that 21st-century skills research increasingly concerns implementation within educational concepts, although assessment remains comparatively underdeveloped. Orih (2024) similarly find that soft skills can be developed through workshop-based, creative, and project-based interventions, but emphasize the need for quality implementation. Therefore, the curriculum-development implication for pesantren is that life skills should be mapped explicitly to learning outcomes, learning activities, and assessment rather than being assumed to emerge automatically from the boarding-school environment.

3.3 Competency Domains for Graduate Competitiveness

The synthesis identifies seven mutually reinforcing competency domains: personal competence, social competence, academic and higher-order thinking competence, digital competence, vocational competence, entrepreneurial competence, and leadership. Personal competence includes self-management, responsibility, resilience, and confidence. Social competence includes communication, collaboration, conflict management, and respect for others. Academic competence includes critical thinking, problem-solving, information literacy, and decision-making. These dimensions are consistent with recent international reviews of life skills and 21st-century skills.

Digital competence should be treated as a core component rather than an optional addition. Research on educational digitalization emphasizes both the opportunities and limitations of technology for learning and skills development, while pesantren studies show increasing pressure to manage digital learning and digital literacy without losing institutional identity (Hasmiza & Muhtarom, 2023). Hidayah et al., (2025) further illustrate how curriculum design can intentionally combine pesantren values with digital adaptation. Thus, digital literacy in pesantren should include not only technical operation but also information evaluation, responsible communication, and ethical digital behavior.

Entrepreneurial and vocational skills are also important because graduate competitiveness is not limited to obtaining formal employment. Entrepreneurship education research indicates that experiential learning can support entrepreneurial competencies, while systematic reviews emphasize the value of authentic and practical learning experiences. Studies of employability similarly identify problem-solving, communication, teamwork, adaptability, and willingness to learn as recurring workplace competencies. In pesantren, these competencies can be developed through business units,

agriculture, crafts, information technology, internships, community service, and project-based activities.

3.4 Learning Activities and Experiential Development

The results indicate that life skills are most likely to develop when students repeatedly practice them in meaningful situations. This supports experiential learning theory, which emphasizes learning through concrete experience, reflection, conceptualization, and application. Motta and Galina (2023) found positive associations between experiential approaches and entrepreneurial skills, while Zhang and Ma (2023) reported positive learning effects of project-based learning across a substantial body of experimental and quasi-experimental research. Loyens (2023) further show that problem- and project-based environments can support higher-order and critical-analytic thinking.

For pesantren, experiential learning can be embedded in daily communal life. Student organizations can develop leadership and communication; group projects can develop collaboration and problem-solving; entrepreneurship units can develop financial and business competence; community service can develop social responsibility; and internships or field practice can connect theoretical knowledge with real-world demands. This is compatible with evidence from Indonesian pesantren studies that identify extracurricular activities, practical training, and community engagement as mechanisms for life-skills development (Rahmawati & Laila, 2024; Kurnia et al., 2024). Elements of Life skills Education in Pesantren

The implementation of life skills education in pesantren involves several important elements, particularly the *kyai*, *ustadz*, and *santri*. These elements are closely interconnected and contribute to the formation of the educational environment within pesantren.

1. Kyai and Ustadz

The *kyai* or pesantren leader is an essential element of pesantren education. In the Javanese context, the term *kyai* is traditionally associated with a respected figure who is considered to possess distinctive qualities, knowledge, and authority. In many pesantren in Java and Madura, the *kyai* holds a highly influential and charismatic position and is respected by the surrounding community.

In the context of life skills education, the *kyai* has an important role not only as a religious leader but also as a role model for students. The values demonstrated through the *kyai*'s daily behavior can become an informal form of character and life skills education. Discipline, independence, responsibility, humility, leadership, and social concern can be learned by students through direct interaction and observation.

The *ustadz* is another important element of pesantren education. An *ustadz* is generally a student or disciple trusted by the *kyai* to teach religious knowledge and is guided or supervised by the *kyai*. The role of the *ustadz* extends beyond delivering academic material because they also assist in guiding students' personal and social development.

2. Santri

Santri are students who study at pesantren. They learn Islamic knowledge under the guidance of the *kyai* and *ustadz*, often through the study of classical Islamic texts. The existence of *santri* is closely connected to the existence of the *kyai* and the pesantren itself (Rahim, 2016).

In life skills education, *santri* are not merely recipients of knowledge but active participants in the educational process. Their involvement in organizational activities, communal life, vocational training, entrepreneurship, community service, and other practical programs provides opportunities for them to develop independence, leadership, communication, cooperation, and problem-solving abilities.

Thus, the interaction among the *kyai*, *ustadz*, and *santri* creates an educational ecosystem in which life skills can be developed through both formal instruction and daily experience. This characteristic gives pesantren a distinctive advantage in implementing life skills education because learning can take

place continuously through academic activities, religious practices, social interaction, organizational activities, and communal responsibilities.

3.5 Comparison with Previous Studies and Theoretical Analysis

Compared with previous pesantren studies, the present synthesis places greater emphasis on the relationship between curriculum design and graduate competitiveness. Rohmah, (2022) found that competency-based curriculum implementation can support superior and independent santri, while Habibi, Rondi, (2022) showed that integrated curriculum development can connect national, Muhammadiyah, and pesantren curricula with character formation. These findings support the present argument that competitiveness should be developed through an integrated system rather than through a single vocational program.

The present findings also complement studies focused on life skills implementation. Gustriani & Kholis (2024), Rahmawati & Laila (2024), and Kurnia et al., (2024) provide evidence that life skills emerge through practical, organizational, extracurricular, and habituation-based activities. However, the present analysis connects these activities to a broader curriculum-development sequence: needs identification, competency mapping, curriculum integration, experiential implementation, assessment, and continuous evaluation. This sequence is important because life skills programs can otherwise remain fragmented and difficult to assess.

International literature strengthens this interpretation. Bansal (2022) and Hvalby (2024) conceptualize life skills as multidimensional and connected to holistic development; Kain (2024) emphasize the growing importance of 21st-century skills while noting assessment gaps; and Orih (2024) identify positive outcomes from structured soft-skills interventions but call for stronger implementation evidence. Employability research likewise shows that communication, teamwork, adaptability, problem-solving, and learning orientation repeatedly appear as important workplace competencies. These findings support the theoretical proposition that a relevant curriculum should connect educational experiences with competencies that can be transferred beyond the school environment.

The distinctive contribution of the pesantren context is that competency development occurs within a moral and communal educational ecosystem. Kyai and ustadz provide role modelling, while communal routines and student responsibilities create repeated opportunities for habituation. Recent studies of curriculum transformation and institutional adaptation indicate that pesantren can modernize without eliminating their religious character when innovation is organized around institutional values (Tanjung et al., 2025; Hidayah et al., 2025; Setyaningsih et al., 2025). Therefore, the theoretical and empirical evidence together suggests that competitiveness should be defined broadly: not merely as employability, but as the capacity to participate productively in further education, work, entrepreneurship, community life, and ethical digital society while retaining Islamic identity.

3.6 Proposed Conceptual Curriculum Model

Based on the synthesis, the proposed model consists of five connected stages. First, pesantren identify student needs, local potential, community expectations, and future competency demands. Second, the institution maps life-skills domains into curriculum objectives and learning outcomes. Third, competencies are integrated across diniyah learning, formal academic subjects, co-curricular programs, extracurricular activities, and daily pesantren routines. Fourth, students develop the competencies through active, project-based, collaborative, entrepreneurial, vocational, and community-oriented experiences. Fifth, the institution evaluates both learning processes and graduate readiness and uses the results for continuous curriculum improvement. This model reflects curriculum integration research while adapting it to the distinctive learning ecology of pesantren (Maghfiroh et al., 2023; Fadlin & Uzunboyu, 2024).

3.7 Research Limitations and Recommendations

This study has several limitations. First, it is a library-based conceptual study and therefore does not measure the actual level of life skills or employment outcomes of pesantren graduates. Second, the available literature varies in research design, institutional context, and terminology, making direct comparison difficult. Third, the study does not distinguish systematically among salaf, modern, and integrated pesantren models, even though institutional characteristics may affect curriculum implementation. Fourth, the proposed model has not yet been validated through expert judgment, field observation, or longitudinal graduate tracking. Future research should therefore test the model in different types of pesantren using mixed methods, develop measurable indicators for each competency domain, compare graduate outcomes across institutions, and investigate how curriculum implementation influences further study, employment, entrepreneurship, and community participation.

4. CONCLUSION

The development of a life skills-based pesantren curriculum represents a strategic and visionary effort to respond to the challenges of globalization, technological advancement, and the evolving needs of modern society. Pesantren can no longer focus solely on strengthening religious aspects; they must also equip students (santri) with essential life skills, including critical thinking, communication, leadership, entrepreneurship, digital literacy, and vocational skills that are relevant to the potential of their surrounding environment. The integration of pesantren values with life skills enables the pesantren curriculum to become more adaptive, contextual, and responsive to the changing times without compromising its Islamic identity, which remains its distinctive characteristic.

The findings of this study indicate that a life skills-based curriculum can develop santri who are not only spiritually and morally excellent but also independent, creative, and prepared to face the demands of the workplace and social life. Through an integrated curriculum, pesantren can function as holistic educational institutions that maintain a balance between strengthening faith, acquiring knowledge, and developing practical skills. This approach has a direct impact on improving the competitiveness of graduates, whether they choose to pursue further education, enter the workforce, or actively contribute to society.

Furthermore, the implementation of life skills education in pesantren can strengthen the relevance of pesantren education to real-life needs. Learning activities that connect religious values with practical experiences can encourage santri to develop problem-solving abilities, adaptability, confidence, and a sense of responsibility. In this way, education in pesantren is not merely oriented toward the transfer of knowledge, but also toward the formation of individuals who are capable of applying their knowledge and values in various social and professional contexts.

Therefore, the development of a life skills-based pesantren curriculum needs to be continuously encouraged as an important form of educational innovation. Support from pesantren administrators, educators, communities, and policymakers is essential to establish an integrated, relevant, and sustainable curriculum. Curriculum development should also be accompanied by continuous evaluation, teacher capacity building, adequate learning resources, and collaboration with various stakeholders so that the implementation of life skills can be carried out effectively.

Ultimately, a life skills-based pesantren curriculum is expected to produce a new generation of santri who are religious, morally upright, independent, creative, adaptable, and competitive. Such graduates will not only possess strong Islamic knowledge and character but will also have the practical competencies needed to navigate the challenges of the modern world. Thus, pesantren can continue to preserve its Islamic identity while strengthening its role as a transformative educational institution that contributes to the development of a progressive, resilient, and civilized society.

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