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Shaping An Exemplary Individual: Implementing Project-Based Learning In Religious Education Courses At Public Universities

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Abstract

The current generation of young people plays a pivotal role in advancing Indonesia towards its vision of a Golden Indonesia by 2045. Within the realm of higher education, particularly in religious studies, there exists a significant emphasis on cultivating the character of students. Islamic education, in particular, holds a crucial position in the development of competent individuals equipped with both technical skills and interpersonal competencies. This research endeavors to explore the implementation of project-based learning (PjBL) within the curriculum of Religious Education programs offered by public universities. The aim is to harness this approach as a means of fostering exemplary student character. Conducted in Tulungagung, Indonesia, this study adopts a qualitative methodology employing a case study design. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with key stakeholders in education as well as experts in Islamic religious education at the university level. Additionally, participatory observation and document analysis were utilized to scrutinize the integration of project-based learning within the religious education curriculum. Findings from this research indicate that the incorporation of the PjBL approach into Religious Education courses at public universities facilitates an interactive and collaborative learning atmosphere. By engaging in practical projects aligned with religious contexts and local customs, students are afforded the opportunity to cultivate practical skills and a profound comprehension of religious principles and local traditions crucial to the development of exemplary character.

Keywords: Religious Education, Public Universities, Project-Based Learning, Character Development

Abstrak

Generasi muda saat ini memiliki peran penting dalam kemajuan Indonesia menuju Indonesia Emas 2045. Dalam konteks pendidikan agama di perguruan tinggi, penting untuk membentuk karakter mahasiswa dengan baik. Pendidikan Agama Islam memiliki peran krusial dalam membentuk sumber daya manusia yang berkualitas baik dalam hard skill maupun soft skill. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi pendekatan project-based learning (PjBL) dalam mata kuliah Pendidikan Agama di perguruan tinggi umum sebagai solusi untuk membangun karakter siswa yang unggul. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain penelitian studi kasus di Tulungagung, Indonesia. Wawancara semi terstruktur dilakukan dengan pemangku kepentingan utama pendidikan dan narasumber yang ahli dalam pendidikan agama Islam di perguruan tinggi. Observasi partisipatif dan analisis dokumen dilakukan untuk mengamati pembelajaran berbasis proyek dan pendidikan agama dalam proses perkuliahan. Penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa pendekatan PjBL dalam mata kuliah Pendidikan Agama di perguruan tinggi umum memberikan lingkungan belajar yang interaktif dan kolaboratif bagi mahasiswa. Melalui proyek-proyek praktis yang relevan dengan konteks agama dan kearifan lokal, mahasiswa dapat mengembangkan keterampilan praktis dan pemahaman yang mendalam tentang nilai-nilai agama dan kearifan lokal yang esensial dalam pembentukan karakter yang unggul. Penelitian ini memberikan wawasan yang berharga bagi praktisi pendidikan, guru, dan pembuat kebijakan tentang efektivitas metode pembelajaran berbasis proyek dalam membentuk karakter mahasiswa di era digital ini. Selain itu, penelitian ini juga memberikan kontribusi bagi perkembangan teori dan penelitian di bidang pendidikan.

Kata Kunci: Pendidikan Agama, Perguruan Tinggi Umum, Project-Based Learning, Karakter

Introduction

The current generation of young people in Indonesia represents the nation's future human capital, poised to steer the country's trajectory towards the realization of Golden Indonesia 2045. Within the realm of higher education, particularly in religious studies, there's a growing recognition of the significance of character development among students.[1] Scholars emphasize the importance of nurturing well-rounded individuals,[2] with character education emerging as a focal point in academic discourse.[3] In instances of character crises, religious education often bears the brunt of scrutiny.[4] This is understandable given the pivotal role Islamic Religious Education plays in shaping high-quality human resources, equipped with both technical expertise and interpersonal skills.[5]

Amidst increasingly intricate dynamics, the complexities in cultivating exemplary individuals are escalating. Hence, an innovative and efficacious learning methodology is imperative to attain this objective, particularly within the realm of Islamic education in the era of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. [6] Islamic religious education has transitioned the role of

educators from being teacher-centric to that of facilitators, with the aim of optimising the process of character development among students.[7] This underscores the criticality of religious education as a remedy in fostering the character of religious scholars in public universities.[8] The project-based learning (PjBL) approach proffers alternative resolutions to the challenges encountered in the learning of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) in universities.[9] Traditionally, PAI pedagogies have leaned towards authoritative and theoretical methodologies such as lectures, rote learning, and textual analysis. Nevertheless, such approaches often prove less efficacious in underpinning a comprehensive understanding and practical application of religious tenets.[10]

By employing a project-based learning (PjBL) approach within Religious Education courses at public universities, students are provided with a more interactive and collaborative learning environment.[11] This enables them to engage directly in the learning process through a variety of practical projects that are pertinent to the religious context and local traditions. PjBL not only offers students opportunities to develop practical skills but also enhances their understanding of religious values and local wisdom, which are crucial for the cultivation of exemplary character.[12] Through collaboration among educators, community leaders, families, and local communities, character education grounded in faith and local wisdom can serve as a means to address moral crises by emphasising values such as teamwork, honesty, and discipline.[13] Consequently, religious education in public universities serves not only as a platform for theoretical learning but also as an arena for students to put into practice the values they learn through real projects that contribute to their character development.[14]

Numerous preceding studies examining character education have underscored the necessity for structured planning assistance in executing character education initiatives within the college setting.[15] Concurrently, with the rapid advancement of information technology, project-based learning (PjBL) in education can aid students in honing problem-solving abilities, critical thinking skills, and teamwork.[16] Students are involved in activities centred on values, reflective practices, learning projects, technology integration, and character development. These findings substantiate that such an approach to character education can enhance student engagement and listening skills.[17]

In an educational setting that prioritises the cultivation of student voices, this approach holds the potential to

empower students and enhance their engagement within the community.[18] Furthermore, the project affords students the opportunity to develop digital skills pertinent to the contemporary era. It is imperative for educators, headteachers, and policymakers to ensure that students have access to a curriculum that facilitates the demonstration of responsible behaviour in both online and offline contexts.[19]

Through this research, it is anticipated to offer valuable insights for educational practitioners, teachers, and policymakers regarding the significance and efficacy of project-based learning methodologies in moulding and fostering student character in this digital age. Additionally, it is envisaged to contribute to the advancement of theory and research within the realm of education.

Method

This study employs a qualitative approach with a case study research design conducted in Tulungagung, Indonesia, focusing on Bhinneka PGRI University. The research spanned one semester, specifically during the odd academic year 2023/2024. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key education stakeholders and resource persons possessing expertise in the field of Islamic religious education within public universities. Participatory observations were undertaken to observe the implementation of project-based learning and religious education during lectures. Document analysis was utilised to identify references to project-based learning and religious education within the curriculum, involving examination of curriculum documents, course materials, and institutional policies.

Several lecturers engaged in project-based learning, alongside 150 student participants from five distinct study programmes within Universitas Bhinneka PGRI Tulungagung, were involved in this research. Data collection encompassed semi-structured interviews, research inquiries, and document scrutiny. Furthermore, expert opinions were solicited to provide insights and interpretations regarding project-based learning and religious education. The research's validity was assured through data triangulation, involving comparison of data from multiple sources such as interviews, observations, and document studies. Data analysis followed the Miles and Huberman model, entailing stages of data collection, condensation, presentation, and conclusions.

Results and Discussion

1. The Role of Islamic Religious Education in Public Universities

Islamic religious education courses, included in the Compulsory Curriculum (MKWK) courses in Higher Education, play a strategic role in imparting knowledge and influencing the attitudes and behaviours of Indonesian students through the learning process.[20] To enhance the quality of graduates and foster national character formation, it is imperative to enhance and refine dynamic materials that adapt to ongoing developments and are updated in accordance with the evolving needs and changes of the times, as well as instil a sense of patriotism.[21] In accordance with the provisions of Law No. 12 of 2012 Article 35 paragraph 3, undergraduate and D3 students are required to undertake several compulsory courses at universities, including Religion, Pancasila, Citizenship, and Indonesian. Among the religious materials encompassed within the Compulsory Curriculum Course (MKWK) is Islamic Religious Education. Presently, Islamic Religious Education constitutes an integral component of the institutional curriculum at both State Universities (PTN) and Private Universities (PTS).

The primary objective of Islamic Religious Education within the Compulsory Curriculum Course (MKWK) at General Universities is to mould the personality and character of students towards exhibiting religious behaviour.[22] The concept of religiosity encompasses not only aspects of worship practices but also the students' capacity to apply the values of Islamic teachings, such as tolerance and mutual respect, thereby nurturing individuals with noble morals who align with societal expectations.[23] Nevertheless, the design of the Islamic Religious Education learning model in public universities has been perceived to veer towards rigidity, dogmatism, and lack of engagement, leading to challenges in achieving the desired learning outcomes. Amaly,[24] elucidated that one of the factors contributing to this shortfall is an instructional approach still centred on norms without contextualising them within cultural settings, thereby hindering students' ability to grasp Islamic religious values in everyday life. Furthermore, efforts to cultivate interesting, innovative, and effective learning methodologies by educators remain constrained, resulting in a perceived monotony in the learning process.[25]

Although Bhinneka PGRI University is a public university (PTU) and not an Islamic Religious College (PTKI), the university's leadership expects its graduates to embody noble values rooted in religion when they engage with the community. Consequently, the current curriculum is anticipated to be adaptive and pertinent to contemporary contexts. Themes covered in

lectures encompass topics such as Man and Religion, Islam, Sources of Islamic Teachings, Basic Framework of Islamic Teachings, Akidah, Sharia, Worship & Muamalah, Morals, Taqwa, and Science in Islam. However, the theological-normative nature of these themes has led to several issues. Firstly, some students experience boredom and undervalue PAI courses. Secondly, PAI is often perceived merely as a supplementary course without enhancing students' knowledge.[26] Thirdly, religion is sometimes viewed solely as a means for personal purification and salvation in the afterlife. Fourthly, religious insight tends to be limited and superficial.[27] Fifthly, religious understanding is frequently disconnected from real-life contexts, resulting in a disparity between teachings and reality. Lastly, this can foster a secular outlook that dichotomises the world and the afterlife.[28]

Table 1. Themes or Topics of Islamic Religious Education Material in Universities

No	Name	Gender
1	Man and Religion	Man represents God's most perfect creation; his requirement for guidance in life
2	Islamic religion	Similarities among religions; and the stance of Islam
3	Sources of Islamic Teachings	The Qur'an, Hadith, and Ijtihad
4	Basic Framework of Islamic Teachings	Faith, Sharia, and ethics
5	Faith	The interpretation and extent of the creed (pillars of faith)
6	Shari'a, Worship & Muamalah	Comprehension and significance of worship (pillars of Islam)
7	Morality	Morality towards God, humanity, and human rights as well as the environment
8	Taqwa	Humanity's connection with God, others, and the environment
9	Science in Islam	Classification and attributes of science

In an endeavour to cultivate an engaging, innovative, and efficacious learning model, the utilisation of case methods and project-based learning is advocated. The implementation of Islamic education courses at Bhinneka PGRI Tulungagung University during the odd semester of 2023/2024 aligns with the delivery of Compulsory Curriculum Courses (MKWK), guided by the Decree of the Director General of Higher Education Number 84/E/KPT/2020 on the Guidelines for Implementing Compulsory Courses in Higher Education Curricula. As per the Decree of the Minister of Education and Culture Number 3/M/2021 outlining the Key Performance Indicators (IKU) of State Universities and Higher Education Service Institutions within the Ministry of Education and Culture for 2021, MKWK instruction necessitates the incorporation of

case methods and team-based project-based learning, accounting for 50% of the assessment weightage. This ministerial decree underscores the significance of the project-based learning approach in addressing evolving societal needs and aligning with the nation's adopted values.

2. Implementation of Project-Based Religious Education Courses in Universities

The project-based learning approach is a methodology that facilitates students in attaining a deeper comprehension of the material covered and cultivates skills that are aligned with the evolving demands of contemporary times.[29] This approach not only enables students to grasp the correlation between theory and practice but also augments their capacity for critical thinking, problem-solving, and the application of ethical values.[30] Additionally, project-based learning significantly contributes to the practical application of students' knowledge in addressing the challenges posed by an increasingly complex and diverse society.[31]

At Bhinneka PGRI University, Islamic religious education courses incorporated into the compulsory curriculum (MKWK) have embraced a project-based learning approach. This approach aims to imbue deep cultural significance as well as practical relevance to everyday life. Through projects within this curriculum, students are encouraged to actively engage in activities that foster a profound understanding of religious values, ethics, and morality, while also promoting the application of these concepts in real-world scenarios.[32] Ahead of active lectures in the odd semesters of 2023/3034, lecturers convene group discussion forums to delineate several factors that will serve as guidelines in the learning process, including: Purpose, Value, Time, Partner, Student, Time of Implementation, and Complexity. Naturally, there exists a fundamental disparity between lecturers and students who implement project-based learning and those who adopt traditional learning in terms of engagement, motivation, and cognitive depth.[33] Leaders within Universitas Bhinneka PGRI fervently endorse project-based learning, with the aim of ensuring that students possess the requisite skills to navigate the various complexities and changes prevalent in society and within dynamic work environments.[34]

Table 2. Identify The Context in Designing Project-Based Learning

No	Aspects	Question
1	Purpose	What is the purpose of this project?
2	Value	What values are expected to be internalised in students through this project?
3	Time	What duration will be allocated for this project?

4	Partner	Who will be engaged as collaboration partners?
5	Student	Which semester students will be participating?
6	Implementation Time	When will the project be implemented?
7	Hassle	What is the level of complexity of the project?
8	Courses	How many courses will be involved in this project?

The lecture plan for the Islamic Education course at Bhinneka PGRI University has been meticulously structured. Commencing from the first to the 7th session, learning activities are conducted within the classroom setting and encompass several phases, including the establishment of lecture contracts, exploration of materials, development of empathy, identification of problems, and pre-project discussions and presentations. During the 8th session, a Midterm Exam (UTS) is administered, focusing on the material covered and studied by students throughout sessions 1-7.

Moreover, in each session, every lecturer provides an overview of the final project assigned to the students. The purpose of this overview is to enable students to effectively delve into, explore, and collaborate within groups to address genuine issues.[35] This approach facilitates the integration of knowledge, application of concepts, and development of critical thinking skills essential in shaping outstanding personalities through Religious Education courses in public universities.[36]

After the midterm exam (UTS), which took place during the 9th session, a seminar agenda was arranged, focusing on local wisdom, aimed at providing students with insights related to the forthcoming project implementation. Subsequently, the outlined project proposals were discussed. Following this, during the 10th and 11th sessions, students engaged in discussions with lecturers regarding the approved projects. In the subsequent sessions (12th and 13th), students conducted observations and prepared their projects, sharing their progress on social media platforms such as YouTube and Instagram, provided by the university. During the 14th session, students conducted socialization activities at partner educational institutions in the Tulungagung area, with the aim of ensuring that the projects not only benefited the students but also contributed to the wider community. The 15th session was dedicated to a cultural festival, providing a platform for several projects to be showcased publicly, with some selected as champions. Lastly, during the final session (16th), reflection activities were conducted on the project activities carried out, culminating in the drafting of the final report.

Table 3. Stages of Implementing Project-Based Learning

No	**Stages of Implementation**	**Event description**
1	Supply	This stage involves providing students with an initial understanding of the project to be executed, including its objectives, benefits, and implementation procedures.
2	Project Design	These are the steps undertaken by students to design projects, which include preparing proposals. These stages comprise: a. Explaining the project background. b. Formulating project objectives and benefits. c. Determining project targets and objectives. d. Describing the theoretical basis or concepts utilized in project compilation. e. Presenting the proposed solution or approach for completing the project. f. Preparing a work agenda (project timeline) to establish the schedule of project activities. g. Identifying the resources and budget required for project implementation. h. Including a bibliography and appendices supporting the project proposal.
3	Implementation	This stage involves executing the project according to the plan designed during the design stage. Students carry out activities as per the planned schedule to achieve project objectives.
4	Evaluation and Reflection	This stage encompasses assessing project outcomes and reflecting on the implementation process. Evaluation is conducted to gauge the project's success and rectify any weaknesses for future improvements.

Conclusion

This research investigates the application of Project-Based Learning (PjBL) in Religious Education courses at public universities as a method to cultivate exemplary character traits in students. The PjBL methodology fosters an interactive and collaborative learning milieu, enabling the acquisition of practical skills alongside a profound comprehension of religious values and indigenous wisdom. The study underscores PjBL's notable role in nurturing student character amidst the digital era, offering potential remedies to character-related crises by reinforcing virtues like collaboration, integrity, and discipline. These

findings furnish valuable insights for educators and policymakers, shedding light on the efficacy of project-based learning methodologies in nurturing student character and enriching the theoretical and research framework within the realm of education.

However, the study is subject to limitations as it solely concentrates on public universities, thus limiting the direct applicability of its findings to other religious educational institutions. Additionally, the study's sample size may not represent the entire student populace at Indonesian public universities, posing another constraint. Consequently, subsequent studies incorporating larger and more diverse samples from various educational establishments are imperative to facilitate broader generalizations of these findings.

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