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Employment Opportunities in the Islamic Education System: The Case of Bangladesh

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Abstract

The study seeks to explore the experiences of the graduates of the 2002-2003 batch of the department of Islamic Studies at the University of Dhaka on the 15-year employment paths and skill matching. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, quantitative data was combined with qualitative data. Quantitative data was collected with an online questionnaire (n=84) and qualitative insights taken from semi-structured interviews (n=13). The findings indicated that though 96% of graduates are employed, but a majority work in sectors unrelated to their Islamic Studies specialization. And only 26% said that, their current jobs required an Islamic Studies degree. Most of the respondents expressed significant skill gaps, particularly in English proficiency, ICT competencies, and communication skills. As a result of these skill gaps their career prospects was constrained and alignment is limited with contemporary labor market demands. This research revealed that there is an imminent necessity of curriculum convergence in the region of Islamic education in Bangladesh, which should pursue the incorporation of outcome-based curriculum, better industry-academia collaboration, and specific skills development programs. Overcoming these obstacles, Bangladesh may have a better prospect of utilizing the intellectual and moral capital of its Islamic Studies graduates for the socio-economic development of the country.

Keywords: *Islamic education; employability; curriculum reform; skills gap; Bangladesh; Islamic Studies graduates; labor market alignment.*

Introduction

The first revealed word of the Holy Qur'an is "Read" that means, acquire knowledge and the last word of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) during his Farewell Pilgrimage was, "Convey to others what you know," meaning, disseminate knowledge. In this regard, the primary duty of a Muslim is to acquire and disseminate knowledge. However, simply acquiring and distributing knowledge alone cannot solve all the social and economic problems of human life. Islam acknowledges both the material and spiritual aspects of human existence, as well as the affairs of this world and the hereafter (Sahadat, 1997). Therefore, Islamic education should be restructured in a way that is suitable for both worlds. In Islamic civilization, all educational philosophies are based on the dualistic existence of the human being—spiritual and physical (Hussain, 2004). Since Islam provides guidance for fulfilling the worldly needs of human life, the Islamic principle of "acquire knowledge and disseminate it," or the Islamic education system, rightfully claims to provide employment opportunities.

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Islamic education refers to an education that is rooted in Islamic principles and values and aims to develop individuals such a way who are conscious of their faith, morally upright, and capable of making meaningful contributions to society. It does not mean rigidly spreading a 1400-year-old way of life from ancient Arabia. Islamic education is certainly part of a historical tradition, but it does not distinguish between “religious” and “secular” studies (Douglass & Shaikh, 2004). However, it is evident that Islamic education is not progressing enough according to the demands of the time. As a result of incorporating contemporary issues minimally into the Islamic education system, its current form is increasingly losing its quality, efficiency, and effectiveness in many societies. Furthermore, the existing curriculum of Islamic education largely prepares its scholars only for religious duties. As a result, Islamic scholars are often limited to informal contributions, failing to create effective and formal engagement in the broader society. Additionally, the syllabi of Islamic education tend to marginalize its scholars outside of religious environments (El-Mubarak & Hassan, 2021).

Out of the need to examine why graduates from Islamic education face low employability outside of religious settings, Abdullah et al., (2019) conducted a study in Malaysia on the employability of Islamic studies graduates. They state that employability is a key indicator for assessing graduates’ ability to secure employment immediately after completing their studies. Therefore, particular attention must be given to the specific subjects and skills that enhance the employability of Islamic studies graduates.

While much research has been conducted focusing on Alia and Qawmi Madrasas, very little research has been conducted on graduates from university Islamic studies programs in Bangladesh. What kind of challenges do they face in the job market? Are their skills sufficiently relevant for modern careers? This is an important gap that needs more attention.

This study attempts to fill this gap by examining the long-term employment patterns, relevance of their academic training and skills of graduates of the Islamic Studies Department of Dhaka University.

Literature Review

The Structural and Historical Context of Islamic Education

Historically, the educational reality of the Islamic education has been founded on two parallel streams namely Aliya and Qawmi Madrasah streams. Lead and managed by Bangladesh Madrasah Education Board, Aliya combines secular education with the traditional Islamic curriculum, enabling learners to plan their careers to pursue different careers and occupations. The Qawmi Madrasahs, which are autonomously operated, on the other hand, continue to use a conventional or old mode of learning that major on Islamic jurisprudence and theology (Al-Hasani, 2023; Roy et al., 2020). As a legacy of the colonial education policy that comprehensively distinguished between religious and secular knowledge, this dualism still affects all the issues of curriculum choice, pedagogy, and career paths of graduates (Riaz, 2016; Yasin & Jani, 2013). The Qawmi system is largely based on Deobandi traditions and is opposed to curriculum modernization. They base their curriculum almost exclusively on classical Islamic texts and fear that the integration of secular subjects will weaken their core spiritual goals (Al-Hasani, 2023; Riaz, 2016). This resistance has had a profound impact on employment, as it limits graduates to a narrow range of religious activities. Although the Bangladesh government officially recognized the Qawmi Dawra-e-Hadith degree as equivalent to a master’s degree in 2018, its practical impact on employment is minimal.

Thus, it can be argued that such formal recognition alone, without curriculum reform, is not sufficient to bridge the education gap with the broader labor market (Ehsan & Khanom, 2025).

Curriculum Deficiencies and the Skill Gap

Existing literature shows that, there is a significant mismatch between the education and skills provided by Islamic education curricula and the demands of the modern job market. This gap is not only a reality of Bangladesh but it is a global problem and challenge (El-Mubarak & Hassan, 2021; Arjmand, 2017; Rohman et al., 2024). Many studies conducted in Bangladesh have repeatedly found that madrasah graduates have lack of skills that are essential in the 21st century, including English proficiency, computer literacy, and communication skills (Ahmed et al., 2024; Ali et al., 2021). Astonishingly, this problem is not a reality of madrasa education only. A survey of tertiary-level students in Bangladesh has shown that their curriculum, in general, is not aligned with the employability needs (Khan & Mojkury, 2021).

The root of this problem seems lies in the outdated educational system, which emphasizes memorization over critical thinking and practical application (Ashaari et al., 2012; Rahmawati et al., 2022). There is a lack of the necessary interdisciplinary and practical elements needed for the modern workforce (El-Mubarak & Hassan, 2021; Sya'bani, 2023). For example, Islamic religious education in Indonesia is often confined to university curricula with the lacking sufficient credit hours and practical content (Sya'bani, 2023). The same is true in Pakistan. The absence of vocational training in madrasah means that graduates are not prepared enough for workplaces outside religious institutions (Junejo & Waheed, 2024). Efforts are being taken to bridge this gap. This is because there is a growing recognition of the need to integrate not only technical skills but also soft skills such as problem-solving, teamwork, and leadership (Abdullah et al., 2019; Mohamad et al., 2012). In continuation of this, the UGC has taken up an initiative. An outcomes-based education (OBE) framework has been promoted to better align university programs with market needs (University Grants Commission of Bangladesh, 2020). Although its adoption and implementation in Islamic Studies departments is still an area of investigation.

Employment Trends, Barriers, and Perceptions

A direct consequence of these problems is the limited or precarious employment opportunities for graduates. Studies in Bangladesh have shown that the majority of madrasa graduates are employed in the religious sector and working in low-paying jobs as imams or teachers. And very few of them enter formal government or private employment (Ahmed et al., 2024; Ali et al., 2021). A study conducted in Cox's Bazar district found that only 41% of madrasa graduates were employed, and only 9% were women (Ahmed et al., 2024). This trend is also seen in Pakistan, where madrasa graduates have similarly low employment opportunities (Junejo & Waheed, 2024). In addition to skills shortage, there are serious barriers exhibited among graduates in regard to the aspect of social stigma and perception of the employers. The employers tend think madrasahs graduates as conservative, not as flexible and out of tune with the corporate world (Ali et al., 2021; Junejo & Waheed, 2024). Even in situations where credentials are recognized this social closure still holds (Ehsan & Khanom, 2025). Moreover, institutional barriers are presented in the form of systemic problems, for example, the fact that government job portals in Bangladesh were not created to identify Qawmi grading systems (Ehsan & Khanom, 2025). There is a perception among Nigerian students and parents that Islamic Studies is not a profitable subject. This perception is fueling the trend of declining student enrollment and demotivation among teachers which creating a stable cycle of marginalization (Azeez & Adeshina, 2013; Muhammad & Bello, 2020).

Comparative Models and Pathways for Reform

Nonetheless, the example of other countries should be considered in literature to find the models of reform to follow. Malaysia and Indonesia exercise a well-developed trend towards the formation of unified and comprehensive educational systems. The System combine traditional religious culture and bodies of knowledge with the acquired competences of experts in terms of expertise in modern science, technology, and entrepreneurship (Balu et al., 2024; Das et al., 2016). In particular, the research of the Islamic banking sector in Malaysia highlighted the importance of hands-on experience provided during a long internship, excellent English language proficiency, and professional qualification in addition to an academic degree (Abdullah et al., 2015). Such program as Quranic Studies and multimedia at a Malaysian university recorded the employment rate of 77.2 percent among graduates of this type of program, which indicates the effectiveness of incorporating skills (Zakaria et al., 2023). Such reform models frequently suggest a paradigm shift of pedagogical approach, providing a transition between teacher-reliant lecturing to student-reliant and problem-based learning, as well as experience-based learning (Aripin & Nurdiansyah, 2022; Mohamad et al., 2012). The creation of such holistic curricular programs that support critical thinking and digital literacy and processes of reasoning in an ethical manner is regarded as important to graduates that are not only job-ready but also become active and accountable citizens (Moslimany et al., 2024; Saada & Gross, 2017).

Gaps Identification and Rationale of This Study

Although the literature on madrasa graduates as well as philosophical critiques of Islamic education is very strong, no existing study as yet includes long-term (methodological) career tracking of the university level Islamic Studies graduates within the Bangladesh context, much less at the national level. This paper addresses that gap by looking at the career paths and the perceived skill match of those who have graduated in the Islamic studies and who now have more than 15 years of work experience. Offering this long-term scope, the research aims at giving a light of guidance in terms of curriculum reform and policy interventions to make the Islamic education graduates in Bangladesh more employable and better contributors to society.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This research is a mixed-methods study which involves implementation of both quantitative and qualitative data to study the employment potential and career paths of graduates of the Islamic Studies Department of the University of Dhaka. The research will be in the form of a case study because one group of students is being studied (that is 2002-2003 batch who graduated in 2008).

Rationale for Case Selection

The University of Dhaka is the leading University in Bangladesh. Students that graduate at its Department of Islamic Studies are believed to have a better academic caliber in the Islamic education discipline of this country.

Study Population and Sampling

The target population is the graduates (about 100) of the 2002-2003 academic batch. A purposive sampling plan is used to participate in the recruitment. It is expected that the position of the

researcher as a peer and batchmate of the cohort will help to access, create rapport, and attain a high response rate. Targeted sampling ensured broad employment sector representation.

Data Collection Methods

There was two main methods:

- Online Questionnaire: Sent in the form of an email, Facebook, WhatsApp, Messenger, etc. in order to gather structured data (quantitative).
- Phone Call Interviews: This is used by approaching a small group of respondents and gaining a more in-depth information (qualitative).

Questionnaire Design

The quantitative data on employment status like job sector, satisfaction, challenges and demographical information were to be obtained through a well-designed structured online questionnaire. The tool mostly adopted the closed-ended structure, which included multiple-choice, as well as Likert-type questions, but with a few open-ended ones as context and suggestion.

Interview Design

Semi-structured phone interviews were taken to explore their personal career journey, perceived impact of Islamic Studies education on employability, their reflections on skill gaps, curriculum relevance and their recommendations for curriculum reform.

Data Analysis

Analysis of quantitative data collected through the questionnaire is performed using a descriptive statistic (e.g., frequency, percentage) through the use of excel. And interviews are studied in a thematic way based on open coding and identification of themes.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical rules will be strictly followed in all research activities. Before their participation in the study, informed consent was taken from all the participants.

Results

Demographic Profile of Respondents

In this study, 84 undergraduates participated in a survey and 13 of them gave in-depth interviews. Of the survey participants, 82% were male and 18% were female. Almost all the participants (93%) had completed an M.A. in Islamic Studies and only two of them had a PhD degree. The available data highlight a strong trend towards higher studies in the discipline and a relatively low representation of women.

Table 1. Gender and Education Level of Respondents

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Male	69	82%
Female	15	18%
MA in Islamic Studies	78	93%
Honours	4	5%
PhD	2	2%

Employment Status and Sectors

The survey data gives us the picture that the employment rate among graduates is quite high, among them only 4% (n = 3) being unemployed. As shown in Table 2, the largest number of people are working in the private sector, which accounts for 50% of the participants (n = 42). 26% (n = 22) of graduates are employed in the public sector. 18% (n = 15) are employed in businesses or entrepreneurs. A small proportion (2%, n = 2) work in the NGO sector.

When we categorized by occupation, it is found that the highest number of people are employed in the education sector, including government (n=10), private (n=17), and religious institutions (n=2), total 35% (n = 29) of all respondents working in this field. This becomes even clearer through the qualitative interviews, where several participants described working experiences in the teaching profession. However, only 2% have worked in religious leadership roles such as mosque imams or madrasah teachers, despite their academic higher education.

Table 2. Current Employment Sectors

Employment Sector	Frequency	Percentage
Private Sector (General)	42	50%
Government (General & Education)	22	26%
Business/Entrepreneurship	15	18%
NGO Sector	2	2%
Unemployed	3	4%

Relevance of Islamic Studies to Employment

One of the main observations made in the work is that the degree that graduates have is far disconnected to the occupation they have. More than 74 percent (n = 62) of the respondents said they needed no Islamic Studies degree in the profession they are in. In this group, 61 percent (n = 38) that their degree was not useful in their profession.

This view was also coherent as 84 participants indicated the relevance of their job to their degree using the scale of 1-5. The average score of relevance was 2.5 (SD = 1.3) and the most common response was that of a two (Slightly Relevant). Even more (56%) of the respondents in Table 3 rated their job as not relevant at all or barely relevant to the work of their Islamic Studies degree.

Some additional insight about this trend was given by qualitative data. A few interviewees clearly said that their degree did not do much in helping them to land the jobs they worked in but it was primarily the reputation of the University of Dhaka. A deputy manager working at a RMG company expressed his thought saying, "Islamic Studies degree never put me in good position but the reputation of Dhaka University put me in good position in my profession". Likewise the audit manager said, it was only the reputation and level of graduation of Dhaka University that assisted in landing the job but not the degree in Islamic Studies".

Table 3. Relevance of Degree to Current Job

Perceived Relevance	Frequency	Percentage
1 (Not Relevant at all)	23	27%
2 (Slightly Relevant)	24	29%
3 (Moderately Relevant)	17	20%
4 (Very Relevant)	11	13%

5 (Directly Relevant)	9	11%
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mean = 2.5, median = 2, SD = 1.3.

Perceived Skill Gaps and Curriculum Alignment

Graduates identified significant skill gaps upon entering the job market. As detailed in Table 4, the most commonly cited deficiency was in Computer/IT Skills, reported by 61% (n = 49) of respondents. This was followed by a lack of Language Proficiency (35%, n = 28) and Communication Skills (28%, n = 22). These quantitative findings were strongly supported by the qualitative interviews, where nearly every participant mentioned lacking skills in English, communication, presentation, and ICT. One graduate noted, "I observed, Islamic Studies graduates not capable of fluent speaking in Arabic and English. This is the main barrier to get a better job". Despite these identified gaps, a large majority of graduates (81%, n = 68) reported that they had not pursued additional training to address them.

Consistent with these skill gaps, most graduates perceived the curriculum as misaligned with job market needs. On a five-point scale, the curriculum's alignment with the contemporary job market received a low mean score of 2.17 (SD = 0.82). A combined 65% of respondents felt the curriculum was either "not aligned at all" or only "slightly aligned".

Most graduates thought that the curriculum didn't match up with what employers were looking for, which is in line with these skill gaps. The curriculum's fit with the current job market got a low average score of 2.17 (SD = 0.82) on a five-point scale. A total of 65% of the people who answered said that the curriculum was either "not aligned at all" or "slightly aligned."

Table 4. Perceived Skill Gaps After Entering Job Market

Skill Gap	Frequency	Percentage
ICT/Computer Skills	49	61%
Language Proficiency (English)	28	35%
Communication/Public Speaking	22	28%
Analytical Thinking	16	20%
Presentation	15	19%
Research	11	14%
Field work/Group work/Internship	6	8%

Recommendations for Curriculum and Career Outcomes

A large majority of graduates (76%, n = 64) think that the Islamic Studies curriculum should be improved to make it easier for graduates to find jobs. The most common suggestions for improvements were ICT/Computer Skills (27%), Language Proficiency (25%), and courses on Islamic Finance & Economics (23%). Interviews with graduates also brought up these suggestions from the survey, such as adding fieldwork, internships, and career counseling.

In line with the posed challenges, career satisfaction was negative on average. Most of the graduates were under the category of "Dissatisfied" (45%, n = 38) with the current career path, with 36 percent (n = 30) being under the answer "Neutral". The average score on the satisfaction was 2.61 (SD = 0.82) on a five point scale. So, in answer to the question posed as to whether graduates of the Islamic Studies program would recommend it to others in case of employment, 64 percent (n

= 51) replied in the negative. The largest proportion of the people who did not provide a reason because of not recommending the program was related to the factor of the "Lack of Job Market Relevance & Opportunities" (71 percent). This feeling was graphically expressed by one of the cadres of BCS education cadre and he said that, "...it gives us less dignity, respect and a promotion chance in BCS cadre service. I would therefore not recommend anyone to study in Islamic Studies".

Discussion

Interpretation of Key Findings

In the result, there is a major paradox is identified: 96 percent of the graduates are employed but most work in fields not related to their degree in the Islamic Studies. The leading sectors of employment included the general private sector (50%), government non-religious jobs (26%) and business entrepreneurship (18%).

It suggests poor alignment between the fields of academic specializations and occupation assignments, which is confirmed by the fact that only a quarter (26 percent) of respondents stated that the current job they had demanded the honours in Islamic Studies. Besides, a significant percentage of them were discontented with the career. Because, 56 percent viewed their job as not quite or not at all corresponding with what they studied in the department. These trends raise an alarming problem: graduates are either not applying their specialized knowledge in their current jobs, or the number of graduates securing employment is significantly low compared to the fields they studied in. Our qualitative study supported this fact by identifying among graduates a pattern of continuously crediting the value of the University of Dhaka rather than the discipline they studied to the ease of receiving jobs.

Comparison with Previous Studies

The trends observed in the employment in this study are very much in line with other studies of Islamic graduates of education in Bangladesh. Research shows that most madrasah graduates end up in religious jobs with few other options (Ahmed et al., 2024; Ali et al., 2021). But here's an interesting difference: while many Qawmi madrasah graduates struggle to find jobs even after their degrees got official recognition (Ehsan & Khanom, 2025) but the Dhaka University graduates in this study landed jobs much more easily. This tells us something important: The reputation of a top public university like Dhaka University gives students a real edge. Even with a degree that doesn't directly prepare them for today's job market, the university's prestige seems to open doors that stay closed for others.

This finding is somewhat similar with international research findings. For example, studies in Pakistan have shown that without curriculum reform, madrasa graduates are very constrained by skill gaps and employer bias (Junejo & Waheed, 2024). On the other hand, in developed countries like Malaysia, integrating skills such as multimedia into Islamic Studies curricula and placing a strong focus on soft skills has led to higher and more relevant employment opportunities (Abdullah et al., 2019; Zakaria et al., 2023). This allows us to understand the significant impact of curriculum integration on graduates' employability.

Skills Mismatch and Limitations of the Curriculum

One of the major issues that come out of this study is the lack of correspondence between skills that graduates of Islamic Studies would provide and those that the employers demand. Most of the participants ranked lack of ICT/computer skills (61%) and language skills (35%) as very vital

employment obstacles. More interestingly, despite the fact that the Islamic Studies program of Dhaka University lies within a modern South-Asian framework of a state-owned university, the alumni who took part in this survey at large outnumbered the tendency to claim that they did not receive the market-relevant set of skills during graduation. Sixty five percent of all graduates graded their curriculum in one of two ways: as either not aligned or marginally aligned with job market requirements. This implies that, despite curriculum renewals at mainstream universities and colleges, they have not been doing enough to close the gap that exists between traditional Islamic studies and modernity in terms of marketability requirements.

Implications for Curriculum and Policy

These results have important effects on curriculum developers. Because, they pressure on the need for Islamic Studies departments to realign their curricula so that they go beyond token inclusions and offer programs that really integrate digital skills and job skills. The models from Indonesia where they combined traditional pesantren with modern schools (Das et al., 2016) and Malaysia's Islamic Studies programs that use multimedia (Zakaria et al., 2023) are good examples for Bangladesh.

This initiative in Bangladesh could be started by more closely aligning Islamic education with the UGC's Outcomes-Based Education (OBE) framework (University Grants Commission of Bangladesh, 2020). And the survey results strongly support this, as 76% of undergraduates called for upgrades in the curriculum. This mandate to change is showed by their best suggestions, where they requested incorporating ICT, language proficiency, and Islamic finance. To truly fix the problems graduates are facing, policymakers should focus on three key areas: upgrading tech resources (like better internet and computer access), building stronger ties with employers to give internship opportunities, and offering dedicated language training programs, especially English and Arabic.

Concluding Reflections

Overall, this research echoes what experts worldwide have been saying for long time that, Islamic education struggles to prepare students for both spiritual life and the job market (Arjmand, 2017). For example, Dhaka University's Islamic Studies graduates, even highly qualified graduates many end up in jobs that don't match what they studied. Why? Because the curriculum hasn't kept up with modern skills. The result? Frustrated graduates, as we see in the high dissatisfaction rates in this survey and a missed opportunity for these talented people to contribute more to the country's growth.

Conclusion

The present paper analyzed the long-term employment patterns and the perceived skill fit of a specific group of graduates of the Islamic Studies. The result provides a major paradox indicating that although the level of employment is high (96 percent), the careers of graduates usually fall beyond the areas directly related with the academic major. This mismatch becomes vivid when we see that only 26% work in roles where an Islamic Studies degree was mandatory. This gap highlights a major disconnection between traditional Islamic higher education and today's job market demands. The graduates participated in the survey themselves pointed serious lacking in their English proficiency, ICT skills, and communication skills as primary barriers that obstruct their academic achievement in competing in a competitive market. These findings align with

concerns raised by experts globally, while also offering a nuanced, data-driven perspective from one of Bangladesh's top public universities.

Actually such study eventually shows that prestige of institutions is not enough to assure effective career path. The Islamic education curriculum needs to undergo a well-thought-out and systematic curriculum reform that includes practical and market-relevant skills. Otherwise, Bangladesh risks producing a generation of graduates who, despite being highly educated, will be left behind professionally.

Recommendations

In light of the study's findings and available literature, several recommendations can enhance the employment potential of Islamic Studies graduates in Bangladesh by bridging the gap between academic education and job market needs. First, public universities should conduct thorough curriculum reviews in Islamic Studies departments, integrating 21st-century skills like ICT, English, critical thinking, and analytical reasoning, alongside electives in Islamic finance, comparative ethics, interfaith dialogue, and civic engagement. Second, align programs with national education strategies, leveraging the UGC's emphasis on outcome-based education (OBE) to ensure learning outcomes meet national development and evolving labor demands, balancing spiritual and economic goals. Third, strengthen industry-academia linkages through collaborations with NGOs, Islamic financial institutions, media outlets, and civil society organizations, facilitating internships, service learning, and job placements to build practical skills. Finally, address skills shortages by introducing compulsory English and ICT labs, partnering with language institutes, e-learning platforms, and educational technology incubators to equip graduates for knowledge-based economies.

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