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Author Name(s): Khalimatus Sadiyah, Mahalli Mahalli, Ma'as Shobirin

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Academic cultural barriers in the implementation of project-based curriculum in private Islamic universities

Khalimatus Sadiyah^{1*)}, Mahalli Mahalli¹, Ma'as Shobirin²

¹ Universitas Islam Nahdlatul Ulama Jepara, Indonesia

² Universitas Wahid Hasyim Semarang, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This study explores cultural and structural barriers to implementing project-based curricula in private Islamic universities through a qualitative case study at Wahid Hasyim University (Semarang) and Nahdlatul Ulama Islamic University (Jepara). Data were collected from 18 key informants' university leaders, programmed heads, and lecturers using in-depth interviews, classroom observations, and curriculum document analysis. Conservative academic culture is reflected in lecturer-centred teaching, rigid curriculum interpretation, limited interdisciplinary collaboration, and restricted student autonomy. Findings reveal uneven adoption of project-based curricula across programmed, continued dominance of lecturer-centered practices shaped by leadership commitment and institutional policies, and limited readiness of lecturers and students for collaborative learning. Structural constraints, including assessment systems and workload regulations, further impede innovation and student participation. The study concludes that curriculum reform must be accompanied by transformation in academic culture and governance. It recommends capacity-building initiatives, policy alignment, and participatory academic practices to ensure sustainable implementation of project-based curricula in private Islamic higher education institutions.



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Corresponding Author:

Khalimatus Sadiyah
Universitas Islam Nahdlatul Ulama Jepara
Email: elkhasya@unisnu.ac.id

Introduction

Project-based curriculum innovation has become a central component of the global higher education reform agenda, particularly in efforts to develop 21st-century skills such as collaboration, problem solving, and contextual learning. However, it is conceptually important to distinguish between project-based learning as a pedagogical approach at the course level and project-based curricula as an institutional curriculum framework. Project-based curricula require cross-course integration, alignment of programme learning outcomes, collaborative assessment systems, and sustained institutional policy support; therefore, their implementation complexity extends far beyond individual

pedagogical innovation. Studies on project-based curricula are frequently associated with strengthening 21st-century skills such as critical thinking, collaboration, and problem solving in higher education (Artama et al., 2023; Mudinillah et al., 2024; Paudel, 2024; Sah et al., 2024). As emphasised by Chang et al. (2024), Mudinillah et al. (2024), and Sah et al. (2024), project-based curricula encourage students to construct knowledge through active engagement in authentic learning contexts integrated with real-world situations.

In the context of Islamic higher education, several studies have begun to link the implementation of project-based curricula with local and religious values as a form of institutional curriculum adaptation and academic policy alignment (Juzwik et al., 2022; Maarif et al., 2022; Mardhiah et al., 2021; Nurhayani et al., 2024; Solehuddin et al., 2023; Susilawati et al., 2022; Trisnowali et al., 2022). Nevertheless, most existing research continues to focus on curriculum design and implementation effectiveness rather than on culturally embedded structural barriers within the curriculum implementation process (Hassanpour et al., 2022). Within broader academic debates, studies on curriculum innovation tend to prioritise design features, learning effectiveness, and lecturer readiness, while academic culture is often treated as a neutral background variable (Ocsis, 2024). Several studies report low levels of project-based curriculum adoption in higher education institutions; however, these empirical findings are rarely critically examined in relation to data collection contexts, institutional diversity, or disciplinary variation. Consequently, claims of “implementation failure” are frequently presented in general terms without clear indicators, such as fragmented cross-course projects, low student participation, limited inter-lecturer collaboration, or misalignment between curriculum design and assessment systems. In private Islamic universities, the implementation of project-based curricula unfolds within a distinctive academic cultural landscape (Masruhim, 2025). These structures include lecturer workload policies, individually oriented assessment systems, centralised curriculum decision-making mechanisms, and academic regulations that inadequately support cross-course collaboration.

The dominance of lecturers in academic decision-making within private Islamic universities cannot be understood merely as an individual preference or attitude; rather, it is institutionalised through policies, governance structures, and academic management mechanisms that reinforce hierarchical relationships (Nata, 2022). This pattern is reflected in top-down curriculum design processes, evaluation systems centred on lecturer authority, and limited opportunities for student participation and inter-lecturer collaboration across courses. As a result, curriculum innovation often remains at the level of formal documentation, without being accompanied by substantive changes in classroom practices and academic relationships. Although several studies have identified academic cultural barriers as an important factor in the implementation of project-based curricula, much of the literature continues to rely on similar references to explain diverse issues ranging from lecturer resistance and limited student readiness to weak institutional support without sufficient critical engagement with institutional context and variation. This tendency produces relatively homogeneous perspectives that inadequately explain why project-based curricula fail or operate suboptimally in particular settings, especially in private Islamic universities with distinctive cultural and governance characteristics.

Academic cultural barriers become even more pronounced when confronted with the demands of project-based curricula, which inherently require a paradigm shift in learning. Project-based curricula necessitate horizontal collaboration, student learning autonomy, cross-course integration, and contextual problem solving grounded in real-world issues. However, academic cultures that remain hierarchical and lecturer-oriented are often incompatible with these characteristics. In practice, many lecturers continue to employ conventional instructional approaches that position students primarily as knowledge recipients, resulting in incomplete integration of constructivist principles in curriculum design and implementation (Apriwijayanti et al., 2025; Gudjonsson & Kristinsson, 2025; Shakeela & Vijayalakshmi, 2023).

Empirical findings also indicate low adoption rates of project-based curricula in private higher education institutions. Data from several studies suggest that only approximately 40% of study programmes have implemented project-based curricula in a structured and systematic manner, while the remainder remain at the stage of limited experimentation or partial application within individual courses (Sarumaha et al., 2024; Evenddy et al., 2023; Shpeizer, 2019). This low adoption rate cannot be separated from resistance among lecturers and students to curriculum change, particularly in the

implementation of cross-course assignments that require collaborative work, inter-lecturer coordination, and changes in assessment practices (Oloba et al., 2024; Hasibuan et al., 2024; Kucukkaragoz & Meylani, 2025; Micallef, 2025; Price & Regehr, 2022).

In private Islamic universities, such resistance is further complicated by its entanglement with institutional values, work habits, and long-established academic traditions. Academic cultures that emphasise respect for scholarly authority and seniority while valuable for maintaining academic ethics may indirectly reinforce one-way communication patterns and inhibit collaborative learning. When these values become institutionalised within policy and governance frameworks, curriculum change cannot be achieved solely through document revision or technical training.

Therefore, this article is significant in positioning academic cultural barriers institutionalised within governance systems and curriculum practices as a key factor hindering the optimisation of comprehensive and sustainable project-based curriculum implementation in private Islamic universities. By conceptualising these barriers as structural and cultural phenomena, this study seeks to open space for curriculum transformation approaches that extend beyond learning design to include changes in underlying academic values, relationships, and practices.

At the same time, an exclusive focus on cultural resistance may obscure the presence of potential enabling factors, such as progressive institutional leadership, innovative lecturer initiatives, or experimental curriculum spaces. This study does not disregard these factors but instead positions them as comparative contexts for understanding variation in academic cultures across institutions. Accordingly, academic culture is not assumed to be homogeneous but is understood as a spectrum of practices shaped by institutional history, leadership, and internal policy. Empirical realities indicate persistent academic cultural resistance to the implementation of project-based curricula, yet existing studies have not systematically analysed the relationship between academic culture and curriculum implementation failure. Very few studies explicitly position academic cultural barriers as the primary factor in the failure of innovative curriculum implementation in private Islamic universities.

This article aims to offer a new perspective by positioning academic cultural barriers as a central factor in the failure to implement project-based curricula in private Islamic universities through an exploration of the relationship between these barriers and institutionally embedded academic cultures. These barriers are not merely technical but are structured within academic relationship patterns, work routines, and institutional values deeply embedded in curriculum management and implementation practices (Bustomi et al., 2023; Noor & Nurhayati, 2024; Zulaikha et al., 2024). This study specifically selects cross-course integration as a strategic focus because this approach directly challenges fragmented academic structures, necessitates inter-lecturer coordination, and creates opportunities for redistributing academic authority.

Considering the limitations of a single case study, the research questions are formulated in a focused manner: (1) how academic cultural barriers manifest in the implementation of project-based curricula at the programme level; (2) how policy structures and academic relationships influence lecturer and student readiness; and (3) how cross-course integration may reduce cultural resistance. The relationship between student readiness and academic culture is analysed causally through patterns of participation, learning autonomy, and collaborative experiences facilitated by institutional practices.

Method

This study was conducted amid ongoing discourse on project-based curriculum innovation in private Islamic universities. Rather than presupposing academic culture as the cause of implementation failure, this research treats academic cultural barriers as an analytical object to be empirically examined. Preliminary field observations and interviews indicate a persistent gap between curriculum reform policies and everyday academic practices. Field data from Wahid Hasyim University in Semarang and Nahdlatul Ulama Islamic University in Jepara show that lecturers and students continue to operate within a conservative academic paradigm characterised by lecture-oriented instruction and fragmented, subject-based curricula. Accordingly, this study examines how such academic cultural structures shape the implementation of project-based curricula at the programme level.

Research Design and Case Selection

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach to address research questions that focus on how academic cultural barriers manifest and how they relate to curriculum practices and institutional structures. These questions require interpretive analysis of meanings, practices, and relationships that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative measurement alone. A multiple-case study design (Gustafsson, 2024) was adopted, involving two private Islamic universities in Central Java: Wahid Hasyim University (Semarang) and Nahdlatul Ulama Islamic University (Jepara). The study does not aim to generalise statistically but to enable analytical comparison across institutional contexts. The distinction between an urban campus and a semi-urban campus functions as a contextual lens to examine variations in academic governance, curriculum coordination, and lecturer–student interaction patterns, rather than as a variable for direct comparison.

Data Sources and Participants

Primary data were obtained from 12 informants at each institution, comprising six lecturers, four students, and two academic administrators. Each group contributed distinct analytical insights to the study. Lecturers provided information on curriculum planning processes, instructional strategies, and their responses to project-based curriculum initiatives. Students offered experiential perspectives regarding learning autonomy, collaboration, and participation in project-related activities, highlighting how the curriculum was enacted in practice. Meanwhile, academic administrators contributed institutional-level insights into curriculum governance, policy implementation, and organizational constraints that influenced the adoption and sustainability of project-based approaches.

Informants were selected purposively based on their involvement in the planning, implementation, or evaluation of project-based curricula at the programme level. Secondary data from academic literature were used to support conceptual framing and interpretation, not as empirical evidence. These sources functioned to contextualise findings and strengthen analytical discussion (Alexandersen et al., 2025; Apriwijayanti et al., 2025; Chang et al., 2024; Evenddy et al., 2023; Marnewick, 2023; Novalia et al., 2025; Dean et al., 2023).

Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected over a three-month period, allowing for repeated engagement with informants and observation of routine academic activities. This duration was considered sufficient to capture relatively stable patterns of academic culture rather than short-term behavioural changes.

Three data collection techniques were employed in this study. First, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with lecturers, students, and academic administrators to explore their experiences with project-based curriculum implementation and perceived cultural barriers. Second, non-participant observations of regular lectures and selected project-based activities, including cross-course initiatives, were carried out to identify interaction patterns and instructional practices. Third, document analysis was undertaken on curriculum documents, Semester Learning Plans, academic evaluation reports, and internal publications related to curriculum policies and practices (Chand, 2025; De Sordi, 2024; Klingebiel et al., 2024). Interviews were conducted through face-to-face meetings and online sessions using the Zoom application to ensure continuity of data collection.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the Miles and Huberman (2014) framework, comprising data reduction, data display, and data verification. To improve transparency, the analysis involved an explicit coding process. Initial coding identified recurring concepts related to academic culture, curriculum practices, and resistance to innovation. These codes were then grouped into broader categories namely conservative academic culture, curriculum actor readiness, and resistance to curriculum innovation. Finally, thematic patterns were identified to explain how academic cultural barriers influence the implementation of project-based curricula. Data displays were presented in tables, matrices, and descriptive narratives to facilitate cross-case comparison. Verification was conducted through triangulation across informant groups and data sources, including primary field data and supporting literature.

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was obtained from all informants prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without

consequences. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained through the use of codes for all participants and institutions. The study was conducted following institutional research ethics procedures, and approval was obtained from the relevant academic authority before the research commenced.

Results and Discussions

The results and discussion section of this study reveals three main findings that are interrelated in explaining the academic cultural barriers to the implementation of project-based curricula in private Islamic universities. The first finding shows the low adoption of project-based curricula at the study programme level, which is still dominated by teacher-centred learning practices. The second finding confirms the strong lecturer-oriented academic culture, particularly in relation to the limited readiness of lecturers and students in implementing project-based learning across courses. Furthermore, the third finding describes institutional and academic policy factors that do not fully support systemic and sustainable curriculum transformation. Together, these three findings show that the obstacles to implementing project-based curricula do not stand alone but are formed from the interaction between academic culture, the readiness of learning actors, and institutional structures, which ultimately require a comprehensive and strategic approach to change.

Low adoption of project-based curricula at the study programme level

Conservative academic culture remains a dominant feature at Wahid Hasyim University (Unwahas) in Semarang and Nahdlatul Ulama Islamic University in Jepara. Based on interviews with lecturers at both universities, the majority of curriculum implementation is still oriented towards lecturer-centred learning patterns because they are considered easier to control and in line with hierarchical academic traditions. Observations of a number of courses show that more than two-thirds of lectures still refer to a curriculum design that emphasises one-way lectures, while space for project-based activities and collaborative work only appears in a small number of courses. The implementation of project-based curricula is even relatively limited and is generally only applied to certain courses that explicitly require practical skills. This condition has an impact on limited student participation and suboptimal development of collaborative and problem-solving skills within the framework of the study programme curriculum. These findings confirm that the dominance of a teacher-centred academic culture at both universities is one of the main obstacles to the adoption of project-based curricula at the study programme level.

Classroom observations at Wahid Hasyim University (Unwahas) in Semarang and Nahdlatul Ulama Islamic University in Jepara indicate that learning activities generally take place in a conventional lecture-based format. In most of the observed classes, lecturers delivered course material orally for approximately 60–90 minutes, using presentation slides or whiteboards, followed by brief question-and-answer sessions that were primarily clarificatory rather than open discussions. Learning activities rarely involved structured group work, contextual problem solving, or cross-course projects. This classroom situation illustrates that learning interactions remain dominated by one-way communication, with lecturers functioning as the primary source of knowledge. As presented in Figure 1, the proportions of instructional patterns are displayed in graphical form as a descriptive summary of qualitative findings, rather than as statistical generalisations. The figure was constructed based on the coding of classroom observation data and the analysis of curriculum documents from both institutions. Approximately 70% of classes remained oriented toward one-way lecture methods, 20% demonstrated limited elements of discussion, and only about 10% integrated structured project-based activities. When compared with ideal project-based curriculum practices which emphasise cross-course integration, sustained collaboration, and process-oriented assessment these proportions indicate that the adoption of Project-Based Learning (PjBL) at the programme level remains partial and non-systemic.

Interview findings suggest that reliance on lecture-based methods is not solely the result of individual lecturer resistance, but is also shaped by interrelated structural and psychological factors, including pressures to complete course content, cognitively oriented assessment systems, limited cross-course curriculum guidelines, and perceptions of student readiness. Lecturers tend to choose

approaches perceived as the safest and most efficient within existing academic policy frameworks, rather than due to outright rejection of pedagogical innovation.

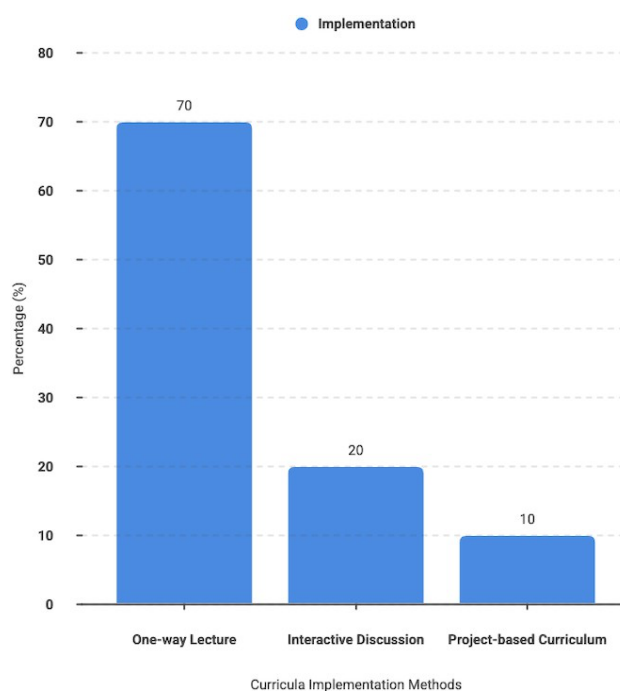


Figure 1. Curriculum Implementation Methods in Classroom Observations

Findings related to low levels of student participation should also be understood in relation to students' prior learning experiences. Interviews with students revealed that most of them came from secondary education systems that emphasised teacher-centred instruction and examination-based evaluation. These learning experiences fostered passive learning habits and influenced students' readiness to engage in collaborative and project-based learning. Consequently, limited student engagement in PjBL activities should not be interpreted solely as an individual disposition, but rather as the outcome of a continuity of learning culture established prior to entry into higher education.

The classroom observation and interview findings of this study are reinforced by several previous studies that report similar patterns in the implementation of project-based curricula in higher education. Some studies indicate that although institutions have formally adopted innovative curriculum policies, classroom learning practices remain dominated by lecture-based methods and lecturer-centred approaches (Purwoko, 2025). This gap between written curriculum design and actual instructional practice suggests that curriculum innovation is often not accompanied by adequate pedagogical change and assessment system reform. Other studies emphasise that the low adoption of Project-Based Learning (PjBL) at the programme level is typically characterised by the absence of cross-course project integration, the dominance of individual, examination-oriented assessment, and limited coordination among lecturers in designing collaborative learning experiences (Apriliyanto et al., 2024; Sapiyah et al., 2025). These indicators align with the findings of this study, which show that project-based activities remain sporadic and confined to specific courses emphasising practical skills, rather than functioning as a systematically integrated curriculum framework.

From the lecturers' perspective, several studies suggest that resistance to project-based learning does not stem solely from individual conservative attitudes, but rather from structural and institutional factors such as heavy workloads, limited access to sustained pedagogical training, and academic evaluation systems that have yet to accommodate collaborative and process-oriented learning (Alfaridzi, 2025). These findings reinforce the interview results of this study, which indicate that lecturers tend to retain lecture-based methods because they are perceived as the most realistic means of meeting curriculum demands and existing academic policy requirements. From the students' perspective, other studies demonstrate that low participation in collaborative learning is closely

related to prior learning experiences dominated by teacher-centred approaches and an emphasis on individual cognitive achievement (Sawitri, 2024). Students who are unaccustomed to structured group work and open-ended problem solving often experience confusion and lack of confidence when confronted with project-based tasks. This finding is consistent with student interview data in this study, which indicate that limited student engagement in PjBL reflects long-term learning trajectories rather than a lack of personal motivation.

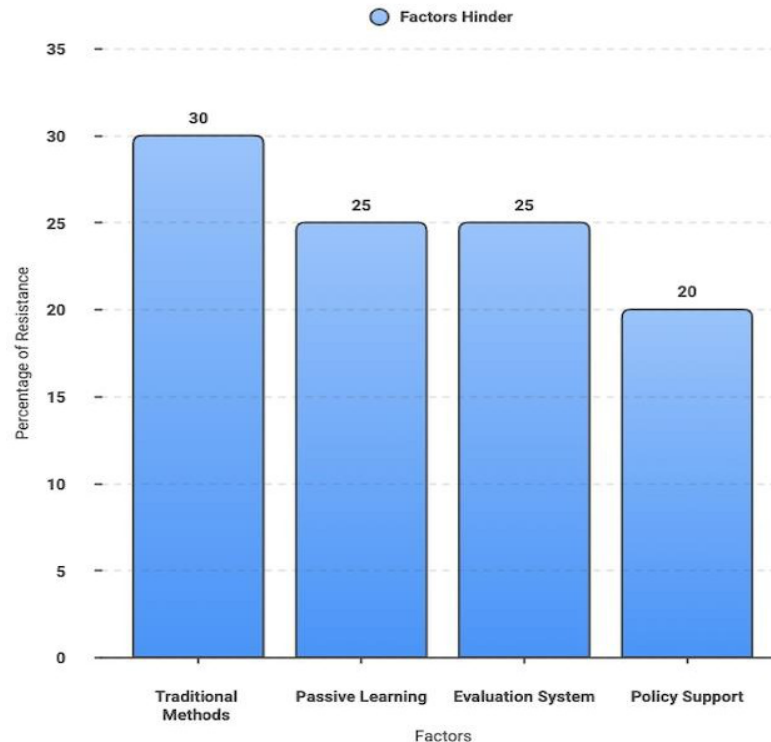


Figure 2. Factors Hindering Project-Based Curricula Implementation

The graph above illustrates the factors that hinder the implementation of project-based curricula at the programme level. Based on triangulated data obtained through interviews with 12 key informants, classroom observations, and curriculum document analysis at Wahid Hasyim University (Semarang) and Nahdlatul Ulama Islamic University (Jepara), four interrelated patterns of resistance were identified. First, lecturers tend to prefer traditional curriculum designs and lecture-based instructional methods because they are perceived as more efficient in achieving content coverage targets (30%). Similar tendencies have been reported in previous studies, which indicate that lecturers often prioritise syllabus completion and examination demands over collaborative learning innovation, particularly in institutions characterised by strong hierarchical academic cultures (Wika, 2025). Second, students are accustomed to passive learning patterns, resulting in limited initiative in engaging with project-based curriculum activities (25%). This finding is consistent with earlier research showing that students entering higher education from teacher-centred secondary education systems often experience difficulties adapting to learning models that require autonomy and collaboration (Muzakir, 2023; Ramatni et al., 2024). Third, the academic evaluation system places greater emphasis on content mastery and individual cognitive achievement than on the development of collaborative and problem-solving skills (25%). This aligns with research findings indicating that assessment regimes dominated by written examinations and individual grading tend to weaken the sustainability of project-based curricula, as they fail to adequately reward collaborative processes and authentic problem solving (Ramdan, 2025). Fourth, limited institutional policy support and unclear regulatory frameworks slow the comprehensive adoption of project-based curricula (20%). This structural constraint is consistent with curriculum innovation research showing that project-based approaches rarely succeed without explicit institutional policies, coordinated curriculum guidelines, and incentives for cross-course collaboration (Talahatu et al., 2024).

Taken together, these four factors form an interconnected academic culture ecosystem that is resistant to curriculum innovation. This pattern reinforces broader empirical evidence suggesting that curriculum reform initiatives are unlikely to be effective when academic culture, assessment systems, and institutional governance structures remain unchanged. Based on the combined evidence from observations, interviews, and document analysis, the overall trend indicates that curriculum implementation in private Islamic universities remains dominated by a conservative, lecturer-centred academic culture. This pattern is reflected in lecturers' strong preference for lecture-based instruction, the low intensity of participatory learning practices, and the limited and fragmented application of project-based curricula, which typically appear only in selected courses. Comparable findings have also been reported in studies of higher education institutions where curriculum innovation has been constrained by entrenched academic norms and institutional routines (Fitria et al., 2023).

The dominance of academic culture oriented towards lecturers

The lack of readiness among lecturers and students remains a significant obstacle in the implementation of cross-course project-based curricula in private Islamic universities. The main factor behind this is the limited experience of lecturers in designing collaborative project activities that are integrated across courses and disciplines. This situation has prompted lecturers to continue relying on traditional learning approaches, which are considered easier to implement and more in line with established academic culture. Interviews conducted at Wahid Hasyim University in Semarang and Nahdlatul Ulama Islamic University in Jepara revealed that most lecturers admitted to having never participated in specialised training related to the implementation of a cross-disciplinary project-based curriculum. This fact confirms that the low level of preparedness among educators remains the primary obstacle to the adoption of cross-disciplinary Project-Based Learning. To clarify this situation, the empirical data is presented in the following Figure 3.

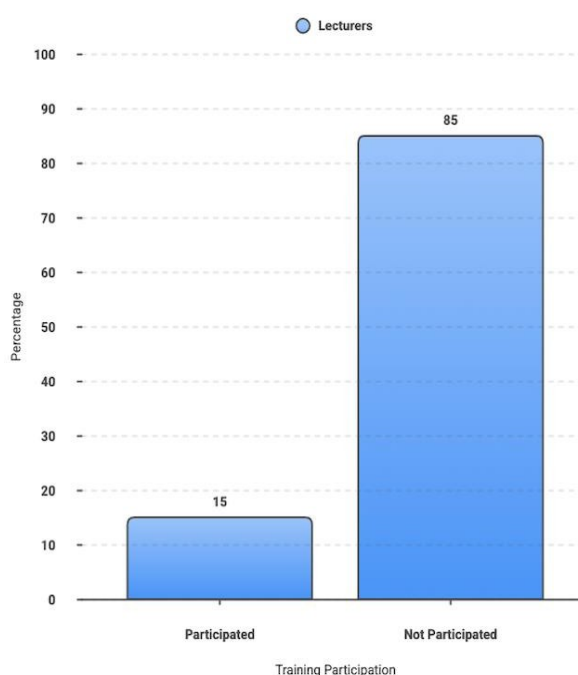


Figure 3. Lecturer Participation in Project-Based Learning (PjBL) Training

The graph above shows a comparison between lecturers who have and have not participated in cross-course project-based learning training. This data is important because lecturer readiness is a key factor in the successful implementation of Project-Based Learning (PjBL) within the framework of the study programme curriculum. Based on the graph, only about 15% of lecturers have participated in PjBL training, while the remaining 85% have no such experience. This gap indicates that most lecturers do not yet have adequate pedagogical competence to design and implement cross-curricular PjBL. This lack of experience causes lecturers to continue to rely on conventional methods such as one-way lectures. Therefore, increasing lecturer capacity through PjBL training is a strategic step towards a more participatory and collaborative curriculum transformation.

The findings show that the main problem lies not only in the availability of project-based curriculum concepts, but also in the readiness of the main actors in their implementation. Lecturers who are not familiar with an interdisciplinary approach tend to have difficulty in developing projects that are in line with the learning outcomes of the study programme. Students also often lack the basic skills to actively participate in projects that require knowledge integration and collaborative work. Interviews with several students at Nahdlatul Ulama Islamic University in Jepara revealed that they often feel confused when they have to connect material from various subjects in one integrated project. The absence of systematic curriculum guidelines at the institutional level further reinforces this obstacle. Thus, the readiness of lecturers and students needs to be understood as a central factor in the successful implementation of cross-subject PjBL.

Overall, the data shows a consistent pattern of low readiness for the implementation of project-based curricula. First, lecturers still have limited methodological experience, particularly in designing cross-course projects. Second, students demonstrate weaknesses in collaborative and integrative skills, making it difficult for them to adapt to the PjBL model. Third, limited institutional support, both in the form of training and curriculum assessment systems, exacerbates this condition. Fourth, the dominance of a lecturer-oriented academic culture further slows down the process of adaptation to curriculum innovation. These four factors form a mutually reinforcing cycle, in which low readiness weakens implementation, and weak implementation reinforces academic cultural resistance. Therefore, increasing the readiness of lecturers and students is a priority agenda in efforts to transform project-based curricula in private Islamic universities.

Resistance from lecturers and students to curriculum changes

The low level of collaborative and innovative skills among students is one of the tangible effects of resistance to cultural change in learning at private Islamic universities. The main reason for this is an academic culture that still emphasises obedience and memorisation over cooperation and creativity. Interviews with students revealed that 68% of respondents found it difficult to work in teams because they were rarely trained to carry out collaborative projects, while the other 32% did not experience such difficulties. This situation indicates that students have few opportunities to hone their 21st-century skills. This fact shows how cultural resistance can directly impact the quality of students' skills. For more details, see the Figure 4.

The findings emphasize that cultural resistance to pedagogical change is not only an issue for lecturers, but also has a direct impact on students. A learning culture that places too much emphasis on hierarchy makes students accustomed to being passive and reluctant to take the initiative in group work. As a result, opportunities to practise collaborative and innovative skills become very limited. Students at Nahdlatul Ulama Islamic University in Jepara admitted that group assignments were more often divided into parts rather than completed collaboratively. The lack of guidance from lecturers to encourage creativity also exacerbated the situation. Thus, conservative learning patterns have closed off opportunities for students to practise skills that are essential for global challenges.

From the available data, at least four main patterns emerge. First, students find it difficult to collaborate because they are rarely involved in real interdisciplinary projects. Second, innovative skills are weakened by the lack of encouragement from lecturers to provide space for creative exploration. Third, the assessment system, which is still oriented towards individual results, reinforces a passive culture in group work. Fourth, cultural resistance inherent in the academic environment reinforces students' reluctance to participate actively. These patterns indicate that cultural resistance not only hinders the implementation of PjBL, but also hinders the achievement of collaborative and innovative skills, which are the main requirements of 21st century education. Therefore, transforming the learning culture is an important prerequisite for the success of PjBL in private Islamic higher education institutions.

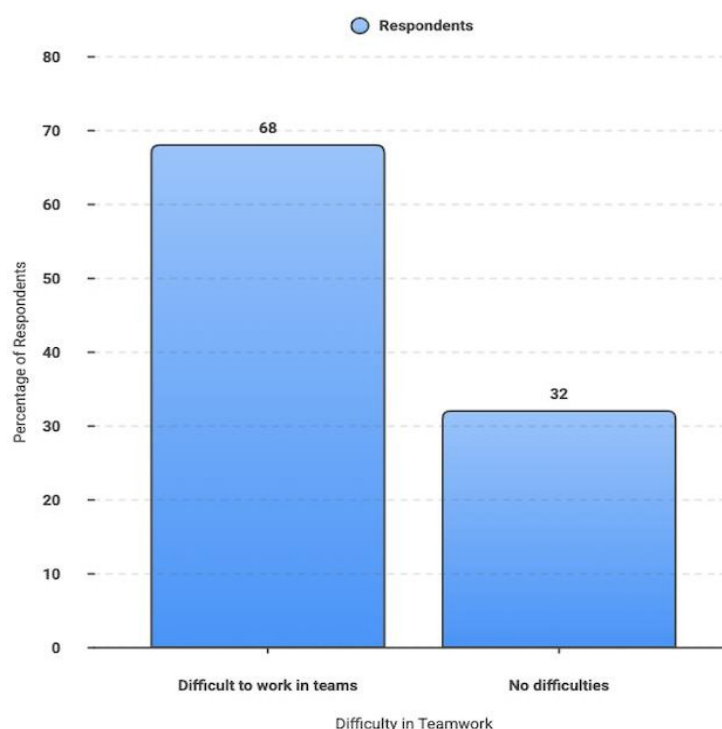


Figure 4. Student Collaboration Skills

Conclusions

This study shows that the low adoption of project-based curricula in private Islamic universities is predominantly influenced by deep-rooted academic cultural barriers, particularly a conservative culture oriented towards lecturers, limited readiness of lecturers and students, and resistance to curriculum change. Findings from Wahid Hasyim University in Semarang and Nahdlatul Ulama Islamic University in Jepara confirm that curriculum innovation cannot run optimally without accompanying reconstruction of academic culture towards a more participatory, collaborative, and open pattern towards renewal. Theoretically, this research contributes by placing academic cultural barriers as a key variable in the study of project-based curriculum implementation, thereby enriching the literature on curriculum development in Islamic higher education. Practically, the results of this study provide a basis for the formulation of policies and strategies for implementing a more contextual and sustainable curriculum. However, the limitations of location and qualitative approach indicate the need for further research with a more diverse range of institutions and methods.

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