



International credit earning in Islamic higher education: Mixed-methods evidence from Syekh Abdul Halim Hasan Institute

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the feasibility and determinants of developing an international credit earning program for the Sharia Economics Study Program at Syekh Abdul Halim Hasan Institute Binjai. Using a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design, the quantitative phase surveyed 200 respondents, revealing strong institutional support and positive attitudes toward internationalization, with mean scores above 4.30 related to improving academic quality and graduate competitiveness. However, financial limitations emerged as the most severe challenge (mean = 4.70), followed by insufficient English proficiency (mean = 2.85) and low curriculum flexibility (mean = 3.20). Qualitative findings from six key informants complement these results, emphasizing institutional readiness, curriculum alignment, and strategic partnerships as core enablers. Informants stressed the need for standardized course mapping, targeted English training, and collaboration with universities that share Islamic economics perspectives. The novelty of this study lies in its integrated model that links attitudinal support, structural readiness, and partnership strategies, offering empirical insights for Islamic higher education internationalization. The study recommends establishing dedicated funding schemes, institutionalizing language support, harmonizing curricula, and implementing pilot collaborations to minimize operational risks. These measures provide practical guidance for building a sustainable and globally competitive credit earning program in Islamic higher education.

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1. Introduction

The rapid pace of globalization compels higher education institutions to continuously adapt their academic systems to remain competitive. Globalization has reshaped the educational landscape by influencing curricula, teaching models, and graduate competencies needed in an interconnected world (Clarke & Kirby, 2022; Syahrianti, 2024). Within this context, internationalization has become a strategic pathway to enhance academic quality, strengthen institutional reputation, and promote intercultural engagement (Avolio & Benzaquen, 2024). One key instrument of this process is the Internationalization of Curriculum (IoC), which incorporates global perspectives into learning and encourages students to develop critical thinking and cross-cultural competencies (Bizarria et al., 2024).

Credit earning programs represent a practical mechanism to operationalize internationalization by enabling students to take courses abroad and transfer credits upon return (Bound et al., 2021). Such programs are often aligned with international accreditation frameworks like ECTS or ACTS to ensure transparency and academic equivalence (Fernandes & Singh, 2021). However, implementing these initiatives remains challenging in developing contexts. Variations in grading systems, curriculum structures, administrative capacity, and resource availability hinder effective collaboration (Khelifi et al., 2020). For Islamic higher education institutions, the challenge becomes more complex as internationalization must be harmonized with Islamic educational values and sector-specific expertise in sharia economics.

Existing studies predominantly discuss internationalization from a macro-policy or curriculum perspective, yet they rarely examine how Islamic higher education institutions operationalize international credit earning initiatives at the program level. There is limited empirical evidence on the institutional readiness, stakeholder perceptions, and partnership mechanisms required to implement such programs sustainably—particularly outside leading Indonesian universities. This research gap becomes critical for smaller institutions seeking to internationalize while facing structural and cultural constraints.

Therefore, this study aims to investigate the feasibility and determinants of developing an international credit earning program in the Sharia Economics Study Program at Syekh Abdul Halim Hasan Institute Binjai. Specifically, it analyzes stakeholder readiness, institutional capabilities, and partnership strategies, while identifying key barriers and potential solutions to support sustainable international collaboration in Islamic higher education.

2. Research Method

This study employed a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the determinants shaping the development of an international credit earning program at the Sharia Economics Study Program, Syekh Abdul Halim Hasan Institute Binjai. The unit of analysis was the program-level institutional ecosystem, which includes faculty members, students, and administrative personnel as key internal stakeholders, and selected international partners as external stakeholders. This design was chosen to quantify stakeholder perceptions and constraints in the first phase, and then qualitatively explain the underlying institutional and strategic factors behind those quantitative patterns.

The quantitative phase involved 200 respondents: 30 faculty members, 150 students, and 20 administrative staff selected through stratified random sampling to ensure representation across stakeholder groups. A structured questionnaire adapted from prior internationalization and mobility studies examined four dimensions: (1) attitudes toward international collaboration, (2) readiness for program implementation, (3) institutional support, and (4) perceived challenges. Instrument validity was established through expert judgement by three senior researchers in international education, followed by a pilot test involving 25 respondents to refine ambiguous items. Construct reliability showed strong internal consistency (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.85). Data were analyzed using SPSS 26.0, employing descriptive statistics and inferential tests (t-test, ANOVA, and Pearson correlations) to identify group differences and inter-variable relationships.

To deepen interpretation, the qualitative phase consisted of semi-structured interviews with six key informants purposively selected for their strategic roles: academic leaders, international office staff, and partner university representatives from Malaysia and Thailand. The interviews focused on institutional vision, curriculum mapping, funding mechanisms, and language preparation. Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis. Reliability was ensured through researcher triangulation and member checking; preliminary themes were presented back to informants to verify their accuracy and contextual relevance. The integration of both phases enabled a holistic interpretation of readiness, institutional gaps, and partnership strategies, forming an evidence-based framework for developing a sustainable international credit earning program in Islamic higher education.

3. Result and Discussion

Result

This study presents the findings derived from both the quantitative and qualitative phases, integrated to provide a comprehensive understanding of the institutional readiness, stakeholder attitudes, and strategic challenges in developing an international credit earning program at the Sharia Economics Study Program, Syekh Abdul Halim Hasan Institute Binjai. The quantitative results establish the general trends and perceptions among key stakeholder groups, while the qualitative insights elaborate on these findings and explain the contextual realities that shape the institution's internationalization process.

1) Quantitative Findings

The quantitative phase involved 200 respondents, consisting of 30 faculty members (15%), 150 students (75%), and 20 administrative staff (10%). Among student respondents, the majority were in their fifth semester (40%), followed by the seventh semester (35%) and the third semester (25%), reflecting diverse academic exposure levels within the program. Overall, the survey results revealed a positive orientation toward international collaboration and an emerging awareness of the potential benefits of international academic engagement.

Attitudes toward international collaboration were notably favorable across all respondent groups. The statement "International collaboration is crucial for enhancing academic quality" recorded a mean score of 4.52 (SD = 0.68) on a five-point Likert scale, indicating strong agreement. Students expressed the highest enthusiasm, with a mean score of 4.65 on the importance of international exposure for improving career prospects. Faculty members

emphasized the role of international cooperation in expanding research opportunities (mean = 4.30), while administrative staff associated it with institutional visibility and accreditation potential. These results indicate a strong institutional mindset aligned with the goals of global engagement and academic improvement.

However, while the overall attitude was positive, perceptions of readiness showed variation across dimensions. The statement “Our curriculum is flexible enough to accommodate credit transfer” yielded a moderate mean of 3.20 (SD = 0.95), with faculty members expressing lower confidence (mean = 2.90) compared to administrative staff (mean = 3.50). Regarding English language proficiency, the mean score was 2.85 (SD = 1.02), suggesting that both students and faculty recognize a need for improvement. Notably, 60% of students rated their English proficiency as “basic” or “intermediate.” In contrast, institutional support for international programs was perceived relatively positively, with a mean score of 3.80 (SD = 0.70), indicating that administrative mechanisms are viewed as fairly adequate for facilitating collaboration.

The survey also identified major perceived challenges that may hinder the implementation of the credit earning program. Financial constraints emerged as the most critical barrier, with the item “Lack of sufficient funding for student mobility and program development” scoring a mean of 4.70 (SD = 0.55). Other challenges included “Difficulty in finding suitable partner institutions” (mean = 4.10, SD = 0.78), “Differences in academic calendars and grading systems” (mean = 3.95, SD = 0.82), and “Bureaucratic procedures and visa issues” (mean = 3.70, SD = 0.85). These findings highlight that while institutional readiness is progressing, significant logistical and financial issues remain unresolved.

2) Qualitative Findings

The qualitative phase provided deeper insights into the quantitative findings and uncovered institutional narratives explaining the observed patterns. Thematic analysis of six semi-structured interviews revealed three overarching themes: (1) the strategic imperative for internationalization, (2) opportunities and benefits of credit earning, and (3) key challenges and mitigation strategies.

a. Theme 1: Strategic Imperative for Internationalization

Academic leaders underscored that internationalization—especially through credit earning programs—is a central strategy for institutional growth and competitiveness. The Dean of Faculty emphasized, “We need to expose our students to global perspectives in sharia economics. A credit earning program is the fastest way to achieve this, making our graduates more competitive.” Similarly, the Head of the Sharia Economics Study Program noted that such collaboration would enhance academic quality, attract international students, and facilitate faculty development through joint research initiatives. These perspectives confirm that institutional motivation aligns with the broader goal of globalizing Islamic higher education.

b. Theme 2: Opportunities and Benefits of Credit Earning

Participants consistently acknowledged the multifaceted benefits of credit earning initiatives. The Student Mobility Coordinator highlighted the value of such programs for students’ personal and professional development, noting that international experiences improve language proficiency, cultural adaptability, and global employability. A representative from a Malaysian partner university observed that “Credit earning can serve as a gateway to joint research and even

dual degree programs in the future,” emphasizing long-term academic collaboration and the potential for joint credentials. These findings illustrate that both internal and external stakeholders perceive international collaboration as a mutually beneficial endeavor that strengthens institutional reputation and student outcomes.

c. Theme 3: Key Challenges and Mitigation Strategies

The third theme corroborated the quantitative evidence regarding major implementation barriers while offering detailed strategies for mitigation. Financial limitations were identified as the most pressing concern. The Head of the International Office stated, “Funding is our biggest hurdle. We need to explore scholarships, grants, and perhaps even establish a dedicated endowment for international programs.” Similarly, curriculum harmonization emerged as a critical issue, as highlighted by the Head of the Study Program, who emphasized the need for detailed course mapping to ensure credit equivalency. Language proficiency was also discussed as a constraint, with leaders advocating for intensive English training and the introduction of English-taught courses in Sharia Economics. Moreover, the challenge of identifying suitable partner institutions was echoed by a Thai partner representative, who stressed the importance of finding universities with compatible academic philosophies and shared long-term goals. Finally, administrative and bureaucratic hurdles were discussed, with international office staff recommending more streamlined processes for visa management, application procedures, and student welfare support to enhance program efficiency.

3) Integrated Interpretation

The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings presents a coherent picture of institutional readiness and strategic ambition. The strong positive attitudes toward international collaboration demonstrate a shared vision among faculty, students, and administrators to elevate the institution’s global engagement. However, practical challenges—particularly financial constraints, curriculum alignment, and language readiness—represent significant barriers to effective implementation. The qualitative insights provided by institutional leaders and partner representatives affirm that overcoming these barriers will require targeted investment, strengthened partnerships, and administrative reform. Collectively, these findings suggest that the successful development of an international credit earning program depends not only on institutional will but also on sustainable funding, academic harmonization, and cross-cultural capacity building.

Discussion

The findings of this mixed-methods study reveal that the Sharia Economics Study Program at Syekh Abdul Halim Hasan Institute Binjai is positioned at a pivotal stage in its pursuit of internationalization through the development of an international credit earning program. The overwhelmingly positive attitudes among faculty, students, and administrative staff reflect a shared institutional awareness of the necessity to engage globally—an orientation consistent with global higher education trends that view international exposure as an essential dimension of academic excellence and employability (Li et al., 2023). This disposition aligns with the broader movement toward global citizenship education (GCEd), which emphasizes the formation of graduates who are not only competent in their disciplines but also capable of contributing

meaningfully to an increasingly interconnected world (Karatana, 2025). Thus, the existing enthusiasm among stakeholders provides a strong foundation for developing sustainable and inclusive international collaboration initiatives.

Nevertheless, the study highlights a significant gap between institutional aspirations and actual readiness, particularly concerning financial capacity, curriculum flexibility, and language proficiency. The identification of financial constraints as the most critical challenge mirrors De Wit (2011) and Coldwell et al (2022) argument that the sustainability of internationalization efforts in developing countries often depends on the availability of consistent funding sources. For Syekh Abdul Halim Hasan Institute Binjai, this implies the need for a strategic resource mobilization plan that includes government grants, private sector partnerships, and internal financial reallocation to support student mobility and program development. Similarly, the moderate perception of curriculum flexibility reflects the complexity of aligning Islamic economics education with international academic structures, a process that requires ongoing curriculum mapping and negotiation with partner institutions to ensure credit equivalency (Sleicher, 2016).

Another major constraint relates to limited English proficiency among both students and faculty, which poses a challenge to effective participation in international academic exchanges. This finding resonates with the observation of Stiasny & Gore (2018), who underscore that language competency is a key determinant of the success of student mobility and international engagement. The results suggest that language support must be institutionalized—either through intensive English training or the inclusion of English-medium instruction (EMI) courses in the Sharia Economics curriculum. Strengthening linguistic capacity is not merely a technical requirement but also a strategic investment in global competitiveness. Moreover, enhancing language skills aligns with the Internationalization of Curriculum (IoC) agenda, which integrates intercultural communication and international content into the academic framework to create globally competent graduates (Bizarria et al., 2024; Moshtari & Safarpour, 2023).

The qualitative findings provide additional depth to these quantitative observations by revealing the strategic rationale behind internationalization efforts. Academic leaders perceive the credit earning program as more than a mechanism for student mobility; it is viewed as a transformative platform for institutional development, faculty research collaboration, and the global visibility of Islamic economics education. This perspective is consistent with the logic model of institutional growth (Filho et al., 2025), which emphasizes that program sustainability arises from clear alignment between institutional vision, resource allocation, and stakeholder engagement. Furthermore, the commitment to fostering research partnerships and dual-degree opportunities with foreign universities illustrates a proactive response to the broader challenges of globalization in higher education (Syahrianti, 2024; Clarke & Kirby, 2022). Such initiatives not only promote knowledge exchange but also position the institution within the global discourse on Islamic finance and sustainability.

Despite this strategic alignment, the institution still faces several structural and procedural barriers that are common in international collaboration. The difficulty of finding suitable partner institutions, the existence of bureaucratic procedures, and differences in academic calendars and grading systems all mirror the challenges identified in previous studies on credit transfer and accreditation harmonization (Abdel-Razig et al., 2021; Khelifi et al., 2020). However, the qualitative insights offer practical pathways to address these issues. Strengthening institutional

networks through active participation in international conferences, building alliances within regional associations such as the ASEAN Credit Transfer System (ACTS), and enhancing the capacity of the International Office to manage logistics and communication are concrete steps toward operational readiness. The emphasis on shared academic values and long-term partnership commitment—highlighted by partner universities in Malaysia and Thailand—further underscores the importance of relational trust in sustaining cross-border collaborations (AlKetbi et al., 2024).

In summary, the study reaffirms that the internationalization of Islamic higher education requires a balanced combination of visionary leadership, institutional preparedness, and adaptive policy implementation. The case of Syekh Abdul Halim Hasan Institute Binjai demonstrates that enthusiasm alone is insufficient; it must be accompanied by systemic strategies that address funding, curriculum alignment, and linguistic competence. The credit earning program represents an important step toward positioning the Sharia Economics Study Program as a globally connected, research-oriented, and culturally grounded academic unit. By strengthening internal capacity, leveraging international partnerships, and institutionalizing a culture of global engagement, the Institute can contribute meaningfully to the broader agenda of higher education internationalization while maintaining its Islamic identity and values.

4. Conclusions

This study examined the feasibility and key determinants in developing an international credit earning program for the Sharia Economics Study Program at Syekh Abdul Halim Hasan Institute Binjai. Using a sequential mixed-methods approach, the findings demonstrate strong institutional motivation and positive stakeholder attitudes toward international collaboration, highlighting its perceived benefits for academic quality, graduate employability, and institutional reputation. However, several strategic barriers were identified, including financial limitations, weak English language proficiency, and the need for curriculum harmonization with partner institutions. While the Institute shows promising administrative capacity, the success of internationalization efforts will depend on aligning institutional aspirations with operational readiness through stronger coordination, funding strategies, and academic mapping.

Beyond practical implications, this study contributes scientifically by offering an empirically grounded framework that integrates institutional readiness, stakeholder perceptions, and partnership strategies—an approach that moves beyond macro-level discussions of internationalization commonly found in existing literature. Future research should focus on longitudinal assessments of credit earning program outcomes, such as student mobility performance and post-graduation competencies, as well as comparative analyses across Islamic higher education institutions to better understand contextual variations and scalability of internationalization models.

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