

Economic Empowerment Strategy for Students and Alumni of Islamic Boarding School through the Community-Based Work Training Center

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Abstract

This study is grounded in the large number of Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia, which have not been fully matched by the economic readiness of their graduates to compete in the modern labor market. The community training center program emerges as a policy innovation that integrates vocational education with Islamic boarding school values. This study aims to analyze the strategies of economic empowerment of Islamic boarding schools graduates through the implementation of the Community Training Center Program and to examine its implications for their socio-economic welfare. A qualitative approach with a multi-site case study design was employed in two Islamic boarding schools in Blitar City. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation. The findings reveal that both BLKKs implement asset-based planning, instructor capacity strengthening, sustainable facility management, learning-by-doing training methods, post-training mentoring, multi-stakeholder partnerships, and learning-oriented monitoring and evaluation. The program significantly improves alumni technical and non-technical skills, expands employment and entrepreneurship opportunities, and enhances income as well as multidimensional welfare. These findings imply that strengthening community-based vocational training in Islamic boarding schools can serve as an effective strategy for promoting sustainable economic empowerment and inclusive local development.

Keywords

Community Vocational Training, Community Welfare, Economic Empowerment, Islamic Boarding School.

1. Introduction

Indonesia has more than 36,000 Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) spread across the archipelago, reaching more than four million active students (Kementerian Agama RI, 2022). This vast network positions Islamic boarding schools as one of the largest non-formal education systems in the world. Beyond its quantitative magnitude, this system plays a crucial role in shaping moral, religious, and social values within Indonesian society. However, beneath this strength lies a persistent challenge: ensuring that graduates of Islamic boarding schools, commonly known as alumni students (*santri*), are able to survive and contribute productively within the modern economic ecosystem. The transition from religious-based education to competitive labor markets remains a critical issue that requires systematic attention.

The employment situation of Islamic boarding school graduates reflects a deeper structural problem in Indonesia's labor market. Data from the Central Bureau of Statistics (BPS, 2023) indicates that the open unemployment rate among graduates of religious schools remains higher compared to vocational school graduates. This condition is further exacerbated by social stigma, where alumni *santri* are often perceived as individuals with strong religious knowledge but limited practical skills required in formal industries. Although this perception is not entirely accurate, it influences hiring decisions and limits access to employment opportunities in both formal and informal sectors.

In response to these challenges, the Indonesian government has introduced the Community Training Center Program (*Balai Latihan Kerja Komunitas/BLKK*) under the Ministry of Manpower since 2017. The program is a vocational training initiative managed by community-based institutions, including Islamic boarding schools, community organizations, and non-formal educational institutions (Minister of Manpower Regulation, 2017). BLKK within Islamic boarding schools offers an opportunity to integrate vocational competencies with religious education, strengthening graduates' employability without compromising cultural and spiritual identity. In Blitar City, two Islamic boarding schools implement BLKK in different vocational fields. One focuses on fishery product processing, while the other emphasizes information and communication technology. Both initiatives show encouraging outcomes in graduate employment and entrepreneurship. These cases provide empirical settings to examine vocational training in Islamic boarding schools and economic empowerment.

Despite growing attention to the role of Islamic boarding schools in community empowerment, empirical studies that specifically analyze the implementation strategies of BLKK and their socio-economic impacts on alumni remain limited. Furthermore, the integration of Islamic values within vocational training frameworks has not been extensively explored in the fields of educational management and Islamic economics. This gap highlights the need for more context-specific research that bridges religious education and labor market readiness (Amalia et al., 2024).

The purpose of this study is to analyze the strategies implemented by the Islamic boarding school in Blitar City in managing BLKK to empower alumni students economically, as well as to examine the implications of the BLKK program on the economic and social welfare of alumni students. The novelty of this research lies in its integrative approach that combines vocational training implementation with value-based Islamic education within an Islamic boarding school. The findings are expected to contribute to the development of a replicable empowerment model, provide policy recommendations for vocational training programs, and enrich the literature on Islamic economics and non-formal education in Indonesia.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Community Economic Empowerment Theory

Community economic empowerment has developed significantly over the past two decades alongside growing criticism of top-down and centralized development approaches. At the theoretical level, Rappaport (1987) established an important foundation by defining empowerment as a process through which individuals, organizations, and communities gain greater control over their lives. This perspective has since evolved through interdisciplinary engagement, particularly in sociology, development economics, and community psychology. In the context of economic empowerment, Kabeer (2017) highlights three interrelated dimensions: resources, agency, and achievements. This framework is particularly relevant because it emphasizes that empowerment cannot be achieved solely through training or financial assistance, but must also strengthen individuals' capacity for autonomous economic decision-making. In the BLKK context, training programs function as resources through skill development, while entrepreneurial mentoring enhances agency, and program outcomes are reflected in alumni welfare achievements.

In parallel, human capital theory developed by Becker (1989) provides a strong analytical foundation, positing that investment in education and vocational training increases individual productivity and income. Empirical evidence in Indonesia supports this argument, as Pritadrajati (2022) found a significant positive relationship between participation in vocational training and income growth in the informal sector, reinforcing the relevance of BLKK as an empowerment strategy. Beyond economic dimensions, social capital theory introduced by Putnam (2000) emphasizes networks, trust, and social relations that facilitate collective action. Within an Islamic boarding school, strong bonds between Islamic cleric, teacher, and student, as well as cohesive alumni networks, represent substantial social capital. When strategically developed, Islamic boarding school-based BLKK programs can transform this social capital into tangible economic capital (Kurniawan et al., 2023).

2.2. Islamic Boarding Schools as Agents of Economic Empowerment

The history of Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia is inseparable from their socio-economic role. Since the 15th century, Islamic boarding schools have functioned not only as centers of religious education but also as community economic hubs, where *santri* learn farming, trading, and collectively managing resources. Zarkasyi (2015) notes that traditional Islamic boarding schools had already implemented a community-based economic model long before this concept became mainstream in development literature. In recent decades, Islamic boarding schools have increasingly transformed into more structured centers of economic development. Fauzi (2017), in his study of 50 Islamic boarding schools in East Java, found that institutions with active business units demonstrate higher financial independence and generate broader economic benefits for surrounding communities. This transformation is not merely pragmatic but is also grounded in a theological foundation, as Islamic boarding schools view economic empowerment as part of *dakwah bil-hal*, or preaching through exemplary conduct and tangible actions.

The Islamic approach to economic empowerment, often referred to as *tamkin*, emphasizes the development of human capacity to manage Allah SWT's entrusted resources responsibly and with dignity. Sanrego and Taufik (2016) explain that *tamkin* operates at three interconnected levels: individual capacity development, communal solidarity, and institutional strengthening of community economic systems. Vocational training centers based in Islamic boarding schools operate across these three levels simultaneously, making them a theoretically comprehensive empowerment model. Furthermore, Sutadji and Hanafi (2025) critically argue that many empowerment programs in Islamic boarding schools remain fragmented and insufficiently aligned with labor market demands. They emphasize the importance of integrating character education (*tarbiyah akhlaqiyah*) with vocational training within a coherent curriculum framework, providing a critical foundation for evaluating Islamic boarding school-based economic empowerment initiatives.

2.3. Community Training Centers: Regulation and Practice

Community training centers are a relatively new but rapidly expanding employment policy instrument in Indonesia. Based on Minister of Manpower Regulation Number 8 of 2017, BLKK are community-based vocational training institutions aligned with local labor needs, independently managed by community organizations, and technically supported by government Vocational Training Centers (*Unit Pelaksana Teknis Pelatihan/UPTP*). They are required to meet standards such as a minimum land area of 225 m², feasibility studies, certified instructors, and curricula aligned with the Indonesian National Work Competency Standards (*Standar Kompetensi Kerja Nasional Indonesia/SKKNI*). According to the Ministry of Manpower (2023), by 2022, there were over 3,000 BLKK nationwide, with around 45% located in Islamic boarding schools, indicating strong governmental trust in Islamic boarding schools as workforce development partners. However, Nuraeni et

al. (2022) argue that expansion in number does not automatically ensure program quality or strong labor market absorption.

Evaluation evidence identifies key determinants of BLKK effectiveness in Islamic boarding schools, including leadership commitment, instructor competence, program relevance to labor market needs, and alumni network strength (Safiudin et al., 2024). These findings are consistent with international evidence. In Bangladesh, Ali et al. (2021) found that integrating religious values with vocational training in madrasahs enhances learner motivation and post-employment social responsibility. Similarly, in Malaysia, Nor et al. (2021) argue that the integration of spiritual and ethical values into TVET programs contributes to holistic human capital development by strengthening both technical competence and character formation among learners. These comparative insights reinforce Islamic boarding school-based BLKK as a value-driven vocational empowerment model.

This study develops a conceptual framework integrating community economic empowerment theory, the Islamic concept of *tamkin*, and institutional vocational empowerment theory (Sanrego & Taufik, 2016; Kabeer, 2017; Nuraeni et al., 2022). Islamic boarding school-based BLKK are conceptualized as multi-level systems comprising input (infrastructure, instructors, curriculum), process (training, mentoring, Islamic boarding school culture), and output (skills, employment, income, welfare). These components interact dynamically and are shaped by Islamic boarding school characteristics and local labor market conditions (Anwari, 2022).

3. Methods

This study adopts an interpretivist paradigm with a qualitative approach, chosen for its ability to explore meanings, processes, and social contexts in a deep and holistic manner (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The research design employed is a multi-site case study following the framework proposed by Yin (2018). This design enables cross-case analysis to identify broader patterns while still preserving the uniqueness of each research site. Such an approach is considered appropriate because both sites operate within the same policy framework but differ in terms of vocational focus and institutional management, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

The population of this study includes all stakeholders involved in the management and implementation of the BLKK program in two Islamic boarding schools in Blitar City, namely BLKK Bustanul Muta'allimin, which focuses on fishery product processing, and BLKK As-Sunnah Nabawi, which focuses on information and communication technology. The sites were selected purposively based on several criteria: the BLKK had been operational for at least two years, the Islamic boarding school demonstrated active involvement in program management rather than merely providing facilities, and full access was granted to the researcher. Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on the principle of information richness,

resulting in 24 informants consisting of BLKK managers, instructors, current trainees, and alumni with varied employment outcomes.

Data collection was conducted through three complementary methods. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were carried out for 45–90 minutes per session to obtain detailed insights from informants. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim. Participant observation was conducted over a period of 60 days to examine training processes, interactions between instructors and participants, and post-training mentoring activities. In addition, documentation was collected, including program archives, internal evaluation reports, activity photographs, and relevant policy documents.

Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles et al. (2014), which consists of data condensation, data display, conclusion drawing, and verification. NVivo 12 software was utilized to support thematic coding, data management, and visualization of relationships among emerging themes. To ensure data trustworthiness, the study applied triangulation of sources, triangulation of methods, member checking, and peer debriefing, in line with the criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985). These strategies were employed to enhance the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the research findings.

4. Results

4.1. *Strategies for the Economic Empowerment of Alumni*

To understand the empowerment strategies implemented, it is necessary to first examine the institutional context of both BLKKs. BLKK Bustanul Muta'allimin emerged from an organic initiative of the Islamic boarding school caretaker who recognized the potential synergy between existing fish farming activities within the Islamic boarding school environment and government support programs. When the Ministry of Manpower opened opportunities for BLKK proposals in 2017, the Islamic boarding school responded quickly, as fishery product processing was seen as a natural extension of its existing local value chain. This asset-based approach prevented the institution from adopting programs that were disconnected from community realities. In contrast, BLKK As-Sunnah Nabawi adopted a different yet equally strategic path by focusing on information and communication technology, which is considered a cross-sector competency required in the digital era. This choice was also influenced by gender inclusivity considerations, as ICT training can be accessed by both male and female students without significant physical or social barriers (Gebhardt et al., 2019).

Both BLKKs implement a 240-hour training system in accordance with SKKNI standards, with each cohort consisting of 16 participants, 70% internal *santri* and 30% community members. This inclusion reflects the Islamic boarding school's social orientation as an agent of community empowerment, consistent with Sudiapermana and Muslikhah (2020), who describe Islamic boarding schools as

centers of social transformation. However, BLKK As-Sunnah Nabawi experienced operational disruption during the COVID-19 pandemic, requiring significant managerial restructuring afterward. Although challenging, this process strengthened institutional resilience by improving documentation systems, renewing management structures, and revising curricula to remain relevant in the post-pandemic context.

The first and most fundamental strategy is careful and context-sensitive planning. Both Islamic boarding schools do not merely follow trends or passively adopt government programs, but instead conduct an in-depth analysis of internal strengths and local labor market opportunities. At Bustanul Muta'allimin, the selection of fishery product processing as a vocational field was not an impulsive decision, but the result of extensive deliberation considering the existence of fish ponds as productive assets, the growing frozen food market in Blitar, and the Islamic boarding school's capacity to provide internal mentors. This approach aligns with the concept of asset-based community development, which emphasizes building on existing strengths rather than focusing on deficiencies (Tamam & Afif, 2022). In the context of Islamic boarding schools, assets are not limited to material resources but also include alumni networks, community trust, and institutional integrity. Furthermore, both institutions design sustainability strategies by establishing internal business units to support BLKK operations and strengthening alumni networks as long-term sources of collaboration and support.

Instructors are the core of the vocational training system. This study finds that both BLKKs apply highly selective recruitment standards that go beyond technical competence alone. Instructor candidates are required to possess certified technical expertise from the national training center through 40–60 days of training, pedagogical and communication skills, and an understanding of Islamic boarding school values to be integrated into the training process. Professional development does not stop at initial certification; both institutions implement Continuous Professional Development (CPD) through regular workshops, industrial internships, and advanced pedagogical training. This approach is consistent with the findings of Basuki and Joko (2022), who found that continuous professional development contributes to strengthening vocational instructors' competencies and supports more effective training implementation. In addition, both BLKKs recruit outstanding alumni as assistant instructors, creating a clear career pathway while strengthening instructional capacity and fostering a sustainable empowerment cycle across generations.

Physical facilities are an essential prerequisite for vocational training programs; however, their management determines long-term sustainability. Initial support from the Ministry of Manpower, including workshop buildings, production equipment (fish processing machines, freezers, and packaging tools for BLKK Bustanul Muta'allimin, 16 licensed computers, and design software for BLKK As-Sunnah Nabawi), and initial operational funding, is treated as seed capital rather than program termination. Both Islamic boarding schools implement systematic asset

management through equipment condition records, scheduled maintenance, and usage procedures to prevent premature damage. When upgrades are needed, independent procurement is conducted through proposals to BLK UPTP, allocation of surplus institutional business units, and donations from alumni and parents. Nevertheless, resource limitations persist and are addressed through scheduling strategies, small group rotations, and utilizing waiting time for theoretical discussions that also strengthen resource management skills (Madihah, 2020).

The training methodology represents a key distinction between Islamic boarding school-based BLKs and conventional training institutions. Both BLKs apply a 30:70 theory-to-practice ratio grounded in a learning-by-doing approach. Each session begins with instructor demonstrations, followed by participant practice and reflective discussion, integrating work ethics. Islamic values are substantively embedded, including opening prayers, flexible scheduling for congregational worship, and Islamic business ethics in marketing modules. This holistic approach develops both technical competencies and moral character. Assessment is conducted formatively and summatively through portfolios, guided practice, and practical examinations. This system aligns with Knowles et al. (2020), emphasizing adult learning environments that are safe, respectful, and contextually relevant.

Post-training mentoring is implemented through structured systems. BLK Bustanul Muta'allimin develops an integrated production ecosystem, while BLK As-Sunnah Nabawi establishes a service cooperative. Both models facilitate alumni transitions into employment through internships, real projects, and business incubation, supported by partnerships with government agencies and business actors. This is reflected in alumni success stories of independent entrepreneurship and job creation, demonstrating a multiplier effect in economic empowerment (Nisar et al., 2023).

Program success is reinforced by multi-stakeholder partnerships involving government, industry, educational institutions, and community networks. These partnerships are strengthened through active communication, timely reporting, and capacity-building participation (Madihah, 2020). Monitoring and evaluation are conducted as learning-oriented systems through alumni tracking, surveys, and communities of practice. Evaluation data is directly used to improve curricula, such as adding digital marketing and packaging design training. This creates a continuous learning cycle that enhances program relevance and sustainability.

4.2. Implications for the Economic Empowerment of Alumni

Skills transformation represents the most direct implication of the BLK program, where all 16 interviewed alumni reported significant improvements in their technical competencies. Beyond technical mastery, they also internalized a learning mindset, defined as the ability and willingness to continue learning after the formal program ends. One example is H, an alumnus of BLK As-Sunnah Nabawi, who independently follows online tutorials to upgrade his design skills, despite previously

perceiving himself as “unable to use computers.” In addition to technical skills, consistent improvements were also found in soft skills, including time management, teamwork, communication, and self-confidence. These competencies are shaped not only through formal training but also through the Islamic boarding school environment, making them highly valued by employers. Several employers reported a preference for hiring BLKK Islamic boarding school alumni due to their stronger work ethic and reliability (Khawrin & Sahibzada, 2025).

From an employment perspective, data from program managers indicate that approximately 75% of alumni obtained income from fields related to their training within six months after graduation. They are absorbed into formal sectors such as administrative staff, computer operators, and partner-company employees, as well as informal sectors such as design freelancers, fish-based food processing entrepreneurs, and printing services, while some join Islamic boarding school-based cooperatives. Another significant impact is the shift in societal perception toward Islamic boarding school graduates. As alumni demonstrate strong technical competence and work ethics, the long-standing stigma that *santri* only possess religious skills gradually diminishes. Some school principals and local business owners have even begun actively recruiting BLKK Islamic boarding school alumni, viewing them as having a superior combination of technical competence and integrity, thereby strengthening the social capital of Islamic boarding school (Hidayat et al., 2018).

From a welfare perspective, although no quantitative measurement was conducted, qualitative data indicate a consistent increase in income levels. Alumni employed in the formal sector earn between IDR 1.2 million and IDR 2.5 million per month, which is relatively significant in the Blitar context, where the regional minimum wage is around IDR 2 million. Meanwhile, entrepreneurial alumni demonstrate wider income variation, with some exceeding formal wage levels. However, welfare is not understood solely in material terms but also includes social and spiritual dimensions in line with the Islamic concept of *falah*. Alumni consistently report improved life meaning, stronger social contribution, and greater spiritual well-being alongside their economic independence (Chrisman et al., 1995).

Broader ripple effects are observed at the family and community levels. Economically independent alumni reduce household burdens, support their siblings' education, and contribute to village-level social activities. At the institutional level, Islamic boarding schools benefit from reduced operational subsidy burdens and increased potential donor contributions from alumni. These cascading effects demonstrate that empowerment through BLKK extends beyond individual outcomes, generating broader socio-economic transformation and reinforcing the role of Islamic boarding schools as sustainable community development agents (Wahab, 2021).

5. Discussion

The findings indicate that BLKKs based on Islamic boarding schools in Blitar City function not only as vocational training institutions but also as socio-economic empowerment systems rooted in community values. This reflects the transformation of non-formal education in which vocational skills are integrated with Islamic values and community-based social capital. Consistent with Rappaport (1987), empowerment is a process through which individuals and communities gain greater control over resources and opportunities that influence their lives. The BLKK programs facilitate this process by equipping alumni with practical competencies while maintaining their religious and social identities. Furthermore, the asset-based approach adopted by both BLKKs demonstrates that program success depends not only on external support but also on the institution's ability to mobilize internal resources, trust, and community participation. This finding supports Sudiapermana and Muslikhah (2020), who argue that Islamic boarding schools possess the capacity to adapt to socio-economic changes while preserving their cultural values.

From an implementation perspective, the effectiveness of BLKK programs is strongly influenced by contextual planning, instructor capacity development, and sustainable resource management. Training programs are designed according to local labor market needs, increasing the relevance of acquired skills and improving graduate employability. This finding is consistent with the objectives of vocational training standards established in the Minister of Manpower Regulation (2017) and previous studies emphasizing the role of BLKKs in preparing skilled workers (Nuraeni et al., 2022). In addition, continuous instructor development contributes to maintaining training quality and responsiveness to changing industry demands. The integration of Islamic values within training activities also strengthens work ethics and character formation, supporting the principles of adult learning that emphasize experiential and meaningful learning processes (Knowles et al., 2020).

The study further reveals that BLKK participation contributes significantly to skills enhancement, employment opportunities, and alumni welfare. High employment absorption rates suggest that vocational training effectively bridges the gap between education and labor market demands. This finding is particularly relevant considering Indonesia's continuing employment challenges. From the perspective of human capital theory, Becker (1989) argues that investment in education and training increases productivity and income. The experiences of BLKK alumni support this proposition, as improved competencies were associated with better employment prospects, entrepreneurial activities, and higher earnings. Similar results were reported by Pritadrajati (2022), who found positive effects of vocational training on productivity and income.

Beyond economic outcomes, the program also strengthens self-confidence, learning motivation, and social recognition among alumni. These findings demonstrate that vocational education generates broader developmental benefits. According to Putnam (2000), social capital in the form of trust, networks, and shared

norms plays an important role in facilitating socio-economic mobility. In this study, the reputation of Islamic boarding school institutions and alumni networks contributed to expanding access to employment and business opportunities. Moreover, welfare improvements extended beyond material income to include social and spiritual dimensions, reflecting the Islamic concept of empowerment that emphasizes both economic independence and human dignity (Sanrego & Taufik, 2016). Despite these positive outcomes, several challenges remain, including limited program scale, dependence on external funding, and the absence of standardized evaluation systems. Therefore, strengthening institutional capacity, expanding partnerships, and adopting digital learning innovations are essential for ensuring the long-term sustainability and impact of BLKK programs (Asai et al., 2024).

6. Conclusion

This study finds that community training centers based on Islamic boarding schools in Blitar City have developed a comprehensive empowerment model through the integration of local potential-based planning, instructor capacity development, strategic infrastructure management, learning-by-doing training methods, post-training mentoring, multi-stakeholder partnerships, and systematic monitoring and evaluation. The integration of religious values is not merely symbolic but substantively contributes to shaping work ethic, integrity, and long-term orientation among alumni, thereby strengthening their competitiveness in the labor market. The program also generates positive socioeconomic impacts, including improved technical and non-technical skills, expanded access to employment and entrepreneurship opportunities, increased income levels, and a shift in societal perceptions regarding graduates of Islamic boarding schools. Furthermore, the program produces a multiplier effect by creating additional employment opportunities beyond the alumni group, while highlighting the central role of social capital as a critical determinant of program success.

However, this study is limited by its focus on only two Islamic boarding schools within a single geographical area, which constrains the generalizability of the findings. In addition, the absence of a longitudinal quantitative approach limits the ability to assess long-term impacts in a more measurable and systematic manner. Future research is recommended to conduct comparative studies between BLKK based on Islamic boarding schools and non-boarding school institutions to isolate the specific contribution of religious values to training outcomes. Longitudinal studies are also needed to examine the long-term effects on alumni economic mobility. Moreover, further investigation into governance and financial sustainability models of BLKK is essential to strengthen program scalability and replication across different regional contexts.

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