

Indicators and Components of Religious Education Curriculum in Higher Education: A Synthesis Study

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ABSTRACT

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Objective: Religious education constitutes a significant component of academic curricula for students. Beyond its function in reinforcing the religious identity of learners, this vital aspect contributes to the realization of additional educational objectives within the higher education framework. An understanding of the elements and indicators inherent in the religious education curriculum lays the groundwork for the development of a comprehensive model in the domain of religious education. Consequently, the primary objective of the present study is to delineate the dimensions and components of the religious education curriculum model.

Methods: The methodological approach employed in this research is qualitative, utilizing synthesis research as its methodological framework. The research population encompasses all articles (153 in total) that have been published in specialized and scholarly databases from 2008 to 2024. The research sample consists of 27 articles, which were selected through thematic monitoring, theoretical data saturation, and purposeful sampling. For the purpose of data analysis, content analysis was employed utilizing a categorization method grounded in Roberts' synthesis research model.

Results: To verify the validity of the findings, the recoding of results was conducted in accordance with the Scott method (2012), yielding an agreement coefficient of 87% between evaluators.

Conclusions: The components and indicators of the religious education curriculum model were systematically organized into seven dimensions, 30 axes, and 102 categories, which include the dimensions of objectives, comprehensive characteristics, teacher attributes, evaluation methods, environmental factors, teaching-learning strategies, and content.

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Introduction

One of the most fundamental and enduring challenges facing humanity since its earliest days has been the issue of *education*. This matter continues to possess unknown dimensions for human beings, and its inherently problematic nature remains unresolved. As such, any effort or investment aimed at improving and addressing it is deemed justified ([Mead et al., 2015](#)). *Religious education* represents that aspect of education which acquaints individuals with religious duties and obligations, while simultaneously reinforcing their doctrinal beliefs ([White, 2004](#)).

Numerous studies have reported deficiencies and challenges within the religious education programs of the national education system ([Guna & Yuwantiningrum, 2024](#); [Komariah & Nihayah, 2023](#); [Mansir, 2022](#); [Rahmawati et al., 2022](#); [RazmAra et al., 2023](#)). Importantly, these challenges are not exclusive to Iran's educational system. Similar concerns have been raised in other systems globally and have been emphasized in international research ([Aripin & Nurdiansyah, 2022](#); [Badriah et al., 2023](#); [Muzakki & Nurdin, 2022](#)).

In particular, the inadequacy of religious education programs for university students has drawn scholarly attention. Numerous studies have investigated factors influencing religious education, including the role of teaching methods ([Akhlaghi & Jamali, 2013](#)), and the impact of various educational approaches such as cognitive ([Talkhabi, 2017](#)) and emotional models ([Aripin & Nurdiansyah, 2022](#)). The importance of emphasizing religious education alongside specialized academic training in universities has been underscored in multiple studies ([Marvian Hoseini et al., 2025](#); [Tavan & Solimani Fard, 2022](#)). Research further suggests that religious education can serve as a powerful factor in fostering social cohesion and collective justice. Prioritizing religious education can also enhance other aspects of educational development within academic systems ([Amrin et al., 2022](#)). More broadly, education and training are deeply influenced by religious frameworks ([Wahyuni & Bhattacharya, 2021](#)).

As previously mentioned, religious education at the university level requires particular care and attention, and neglecting it can result in serious ideological, cultural, political, and social consequences ([Yazdkhasti et al., 2018](#)). Thus, the religious education curriculum for university students deserves dedicated focus. Existing literature has documented several deficiencies in the current religious education curriculum within Iran's educational system ([Babaiefard, 2021](#); [Yazdkhasti et al., 2018](#)).

A comprehensive review and analysis of prior research and expert commentary reveals various shortcomings and challenges in the religious education curriculum in higher education. While many national and international studies have explored religious education and its indicators, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, no study has provided a synthesis or summary of the key indicators for a religious education curriculum in higher education.

Accordingly, the present study aims to address this gap by adopting a *research synthesis approach* to identify and examine the core components and indicators of an effective religious education curriculum for university students. This effort intends to provide a foundational framework for enhancing the design and implementation of religious education in higher education institutions.

Material and Methods

The present study employs a *research synthesis* methodology, which involves the integration of specific characteristics and factors identified in the existing body of literature. Research synthesis is, in some instances, referred to as *qualitative meta-analysis* ([Hedges & Maier, 2013](#); [Ulloa & Schwerer, 2024](#)), and one of its primary objectives is to generate generalizations through the combination of findings from empirical studies ([Timulak, 2014](#)).

In conducting the research synthesis, available scientific documents and literature related to the study were analyzed using a content analysis method based on categorical coding. The data extracted from the reviewed sources were analyzed through a three-level coding process: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding.

For the analysis of findings, the study adopted the six-stage synthesis model proposed by Roberts. To ensure the reliability of the coding process, four independent evaluators were recruited to re-code the findings. The Scott method ([Scott, 2004](#)) was applied to verify inter-rater reliability. The agreement coefficient among evaluators was calculated to be 0.87, indicating an 87% level of agreement, which confirms a high level of consistency in the coding process.

Results

Based on the process and outcomes of the research synthesis, the indicators and components of a curricular model for students' religious education are examined from a general perspective. The

analysis of prior research findings led to the identification of seven dimensions (selective codes), which represent the core elements of the curriculum model.

The results of the axial and selective coding are presented in Tables 1-6, which outlines the key components and indicators of the proposed curriculum framework for religious education in higher education.

Table 1. Components and Indicators of the Religious Education Curriculum Model for University Students (Goals)

Selective code	Axial code	Open code	articles
Goals	Ultimate goals	Monotheism and duty-oriented	Vaghari Zamhrir et al., 2016) and Hui-Chin Lin et Al, 2009
		Strengthening faith and knowledge	Rezaee et al., 2011 and Mohammadvand et al., 2015
		Exaltation of the soul	Biati et al., 2017 and Lafrarchi, 2020
	Intermediate goals	Insight	Rezaee et al., 2021, (Hosseinpour, 2015 and Assa'idi, 2021
		Justice and freedom	Marzooghi et al., 2019, Vaghari Zamhrir et al., 2016
		Awareness of the system of creation and finality	Mahir et al., 2018, Bayati et al., 2017 and Andreassen, 2019, Andreassen, 2018
		Adornment with moral virtues	Rajabizadeh et al., 2019, Bayati et al., 2017
		Awareness of oneself and others (creation)	Mahir et al., 2018, (Hosseinpour, 2015, Andreassen, 2019, Andreassen, 2018
		Cultivation of religious sense	Bayati et al., 2017, Talkhabi, 2016
		Psychological well-being	Talkhabi, 2016 and Hosseinpour, 2015
		Development of religious identity	Mahir et al., 2018 and Keshavarz, 2008
	Minor goals	Cultivating the will	Rajabizadeh et al., 2019 and Monique van Dijk-Groeneboer, 2020
		Cultivating the senses	(Mohammadvand et al., 2015) and (Monique van Dijk-Groeneboer, 2020)
		Empathy and compassion (emotional attitude)	Rezaee et al., 2021, (Marzooghi et al., 2019, Addai-Mununkum, 2018
		A spirit of independence and self-actualization	Rajabizadeh et al., 2019 and Hosseinpour, 2015
		Argument and critical attitude	Talkhabi, 2015, Monique van Dijk-Groeneboer, 2020

Table 2. Components and Indicators of the Religious Education Curriculum Model for University Students (Student characteristics)

Selective code	Axial code	Open code	articles
Student characteristics	Beliefs and attitudes	Religious feelings and emotions	Rezaee et al., 2021 and Hosseinpour, 2015
		Religious self-perception and attitude	Talkhabi, 2015 and Hosseinpour, 2015
		Inner experiences	Vaghari-Zamhrir et al., 2015 and (Hosseinpour, 2015
	Motivation	Intrinsic motivation	Talkhabi, 2015, Vaghari-Zamhrir et al., 2015
		Personal orientation	Hosseinpour, 2015
		Self-confidence	Lafrarchi, 2020

	Individual characteristic	Self-management (self-direction)	Rezaee et al., 2021 and Lafrarchi, 2020) and Addai-Mununkum, 2018
		Humility and humility	Hosseinpour, 2015
		Analyst	Rajbizadeh et al., 2019 and Talkhabi, 2015 and McNair, 2010

Table 3. Components and Indicators of the Religious Education Curriculum Model for University Students (Teacher characteristics)

Selective code	Axial code	Open code	articles
Instructor (Teacher) characteristics	Personality traits	Self-respect	Mavroudis & Kondoyianni, 2022, Lafrarchi, 2020
		Moderation	Marzooghi et al., 2019, and Andreassen, 2018
		Patient and kind	Marzooghi et al., 2019 and Talkhabi, 2016
		Freedom and independence	Rezaei et al., 2019 and Hosseinpour, 2011
		Good character	Rezaei et al., 2019
		Critical thinking	Hosseinpour, 2019
	Cognitive skills	Having knowledge and insight	Monique van Dijk-Groeneboer, 2020
		Thinking	Rezaei et al., 2019
	Religious and national commitment	Acting on religious obligations	Mohammadvand et al., 2019
		Piety and piety	Hosseinpour, 2019
		Ownership	Andreassen, 2019
		Chastity and purity	Hosseinpour, 2015
	Interactions	Appropriate and justice-oriented organizational communications	Hosseinpour, 2015
		Appropriate social communications	Monique van Dijk-Groeneboer, 2020, Andreassen, 2019, Addai-Mununkum, 2018
		Correct communications	Rajbizadeh et al., 2019 and Monique van Dijk-Groeneboer, 2020
	Responsibility	Social commitment	Rezaei et al., 2000, Hosseinpour, 2015 , Andreassen, 2019
		Professional commitment	Marzooghi et al., 2019
	Qualifications	Professional expertise and competence	Lafrarchi, 2020
		Moral competence	Talkhabi, 2016 and, Andreassen, 2019
	Motivation	Teacher motivation	Mahir et al., 2018 and Andreassen, 2018

Table 4. Components and Indicators of the Religious Education Curriculum Model for University Students (Content)

Selective code	Axial code	Open code	articles
Content	Based on needs assessment	Attention to the individual needs of students	Mohammadvand et al., 2015 and Assa'idi, 2021
		Based on the requirements of the time	Mahir et al., 2018 and , Addai-Mununkum, 2018
	Based on scientific principles	Based on the principles of psychology	Talkhabi, 2015 and Andreassen, 2018
		Content suitability with mental development	Lafrarchi, 2020
		Use of reliable sources	Vaghari-Zamhrir et al., 2015 and Jamali et al., 2012

	Pluralist	Balance in religious values	Jamali et al., 2012
		Based on religious and value criteria	Mahir et al., 2018, Hosseinpour, 2015 and , Andreassen, 2019
		Based on the cooperation and participation of learners	Mahir et al., 2018 Addai-Mununkum, 2018
	Utility	Comprehensive and pluralistic	Rajabizadeh et al., 2018) and Andreassen, 2019, McNair, 2010
		Adaptable to digital content	Assa'idi, 2021 , Addai-Mununkum, 2018
		Practicality	Mohammadvand et al., 2015, Monique van Dijk-Groeneboer, 2020
		Suitable for presentation	Mohammadvand et al., 2015

Table 5. Components and Indicators of the Religious Education Curriculum Model for University Students (Teaching-learning approach)

Selective code	Axial code	Open code	articles
Teaching-learning approach	Indirect methods	Demonstration and storytelling method	Jamali et al. 2012 , Lafrarchi, 2020
		Representation)Monique van Dijk-Groeneboer, 2020(
		Habit formation	Jamali et al. 2012
	Direct methods	Free and enjoyable group activities	Mohammadvand et al., 2015, Mavroudis & Kondoyianni, 2022, Addai-Mununkum, 2018
		Learners' participation in implementing rules	Hasanpour et al., 2015, Andreassen, 2018
		Learners' participation in religious activities	Marzoghi et al., 2019
	Positive methods	Providing a model	Vaghari-Zamhrir et al., 2015 and Jamali et al., 2012
		Imitation	Marzoghi et al., 2019
	The priority of cognition over emotion	Priority of cognition over emotion in religious issues	McNair, 2010
		Rational religious education	Talkhabi et al., 2016
	Active approach	Discussion (discourse-based)	Rezaei et al., 2000 Monique van Dijk-Groeneboer, 2020
		Teaching concepts in a practical way	Jamali et al. 2012 , Lafrarchi, 2020
		Process-based and inclusive education	Mavroudis & Kondoyianni, 2022
		Community-based approach	Rajabizadeh et al., 2018

Table 6. Components and Indicators of the Religious Education Curriculum Model for University Students (Evaluation and Environment)

Selective code	Axial code	Open code	articles
Evaluation	Effective Assessment	Effective Evaluation Approach	Andreassen, 2018
		Process Evaluation	McNair, 2010
	Individual Approaches	Self-Evaluation	Marzoghi et al., 2019
	Performance Approaches	Project	Rajabizadeh et al., 2018 and Andreassen, 2019, McNair, 2010
	Participatory Approach	Group Evaluation)Andreassen, 2018)
Environment	Ethical and accepting	Ethical Climate of the University Environment	Mahir et al., 2018 and , Addai-Mununkum, 2018

		Emotional Climate of the Environment	Marzoghi et al., 2019
		Cultural Growth	Mahir et al., 2018 and , Addai-Mununkum, 2018
		Respect for Different Cultures and Beliefs	Mavroudis & Kondoyianni, 2022, Monique van Dijk-Groeneboer, 2020, McNair, 2010)
	Intimate and attractive	Friendly Atmosphere	Andreassen, 2018)
		Intimate Atmosphere	Talkhabi et al., 2016
	Dynamics and richness	Environmental Dynamics	Marzoghi et al., 2019
		Availability of Worship Facilities	Andreassen, 2018)
	Socio-cultural contexts	Cultural Dimensions of the Environment	Talkhabi et al., 2016
		Social Beliefs and Norms	Marzoghi et al., 2019

Discussion

This study employed a *research synthesis* approach to identify the key components and indicators of religious education curricula in higher education, drawing on existing literature and prior studies. The following section presents and elaborates upon the main findings.

1. Educational Objectives

Curricular goals define the trajectory of the educational program and form the basis for all related activities. A review of the theoretical foundations related to students' religious education indicates that objectives can be categorized into three levels: ultimate, intermediate, and specific goals. These findings align with the studies of [Anwar \(2016\)](#) and [Cush and Robinson \(2014\)](#).

2. Learner Characteristics

In any curriculum, learners are regarded as the central and most critical element. In the context of religious education for university students, theoretical frameworks highlight specific attributes of students as target participants. The beliefs and attitudes of learners play a crucial role in shaping their religious and spiritual development, and factors such as motivation and interest act as facilitators in this process. The present findings are consistent with those reported by [Skeie \(2017\)](#) and [Andreassen \(2019\)](#).

3. Instructor Characteristics

The delivery of religious education, particularly values-based instruction, requires specific personal and professional qualities on the part of educators. Theoretical contributions emphasize the importance of attributes such as moderation, good temperament, patience, tolerance, and

flexibility in instructors. These traits are essential for the effective transmission of religious concepts. This section of the findings is primarily informed by the research of [McNair \(2010\)](#) and [Rustan and Hanifah \(2018\)](#).

4. Curriculum Content

According to the research findings, the content of the religious education curriculum should be needs-based and learner-centered. It should allow students a degree of autonomy in their learning, enabling them to engage in thoughtful reflection and critical reasoning. These findings are in agreement with the studies of [McNair \(2010\)](#) and [Winslow et al. \(2011\)](#).

5. Teaching and Learning Approaches

The teaching and learning strategies recommended for religious education curricula emphasize indirect instruction through dialogue and reasoning. Methods such as group activities, discussion, and discursive learning emerged as the most emphasized in the reviewed literature. These results are in alignment with the findings of [Andreassen \(2019\)](#) and [Maarif et al. \(2022\)](#).

6. Learning Environment

Studies have shown that the learning environment significantly shapes learners' psychological and character development. In the context of religious education, the educational setting should be welcoming and engaging, fostering interaction and relationship-building among students. Additionally, a dynamic and resource-rich environment, especially one that leverages technological tools, can significantly enhance students' understanding of religious education. This aspect was particularly emphasized in the works of [Skeie \(2017\)](#) and [Kane and Jacobs \(2010\)](#).

This study aimed to identify and conceptualize the core components and indicators of a religious education curriculum model in higher education through a qualitative research synthesis. Drawing on a comprehensive review of scholarly literature spanning from 2008 to 2024, the study systematically analyzed 27 selected articles using Roberts' synthesis research model. The findings revealed a multi-dimensional framework encompassing seven key dimensions: objectives, learner characteristics, teacher attributes, evaluation methods, teaching-learning strategies, content, and environmental factors. These dimensions were further broken down into 30 thematic axes and 102 specific categories, offering a structured and evidence-based foundation for developing or revising religious education curricula in universities.

The results underscore the critical role of aligning religious education with learners' cognitive, emotional, and social development, while also emphasizing the importance of context-sensitive pedagogy, ethical instructor characteristics, interactive environments, and value-oriented content. The high inter-rater reliability (87%) confirms the robustness of the coding process and supports the validity of the identified components. In sum, the research highlights the necessity of a holistic and student-centered approach in religious education curriculum design, which not only fosters religious identity but also contributes to broader educational and social goals in higher education. Future studies should empirically test the proposed curriculum model in diverse higher education contexts to assess its applicability, relevance, and effectiveness across cultural, institutional, and religious settings. Comparative research could explore how religious education curricula differ across various countries, religious traditions, or educational systems, thereby enriching the global discourse on religious pedagogy in higher education. Also, further investigation is warranted into how religious education can be effectively integrated with secular academic curricula to promote interdisciplinary learning and moral development without compromising academic neutrality. Qualitative studies focusing on students' and instructors' lived experiences, attitudes, and challenges related to religious education could provide deeper insights into how the curriculum is perceived and enacted in practice. Given the growing role of technology in education, future research could examine the use of digital tools and virtual learning environments in delivering religious education and enhancing student engagement. Long-term studies assessing the impact of religious education curricula on students' moral reasoning, civic engagement, and social cohesion would offer valuable data on the enduring outcomes of such educational interventions.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the ethics committee of Islamic Azad University. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

All authors contributed to the study conception and design, material preparation, data collection, and analysis. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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