

# Recruitment and Selection Practices: A Case of an Islamic University in Malaysia

<sup>1</sup>Nurita Juhdi, <sup>2</sup>Nur Arfifah Abdul Sabian, <sup>3</sup>Usmanul Khakim, <sup>4</sup>Suhaiza Safian

<sup>1,2,4</sup>Department of Business Administration, Kulliyah of Economics and Management Sciences, International Islamic University Malaysia, Gombak, Malaysia, <sup>3</sup>Department of Aqeeda and Islamic Philosophy, Universitas Darussalam Gontor, Jawa Timur, Indonesia.

Corresponding Author Email: nurita@iium.edu.my

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## Abstract

The research aimed to examine the recruitment and selection processes at an Islamic university in Malaysia. Given the positive growth in Islamic economy coupled with expanding Muslim population around the world, Muslim organizations are expected to prosper. However, the growth in the business depends on how the organizations manage employees. Hiring people with the right talents and Islamic attributes are pertinent to increase the performance of Muslim organizations. An Islamic university was chosen as the context of the study due to its reputation as one of the prominent international Islamic universities in Malaysia. Data was collected from secondary and primary sources. The secondary data was taken from a report on a focused group discussion with deans from various faculties and the primary data was collected by interviewing two HR employees and a newly employed academic staff. The findings revealed that the university used various recruitment sources such as online job postings, employee referrals and recommendations. In the selection process, specific questions were asked in order to assess the job candidates' talents, personal attributes and religiosity. The study findings are expected to be used as the point of reference for other Islamic universities as well as Muslim organizations in general.

**Keywords:** Islamic University, Islam, IIUM, Recruitment, Selection

## Introduction

The report of the State of the Global Islamic Economy Report 2023/2024 indicated that the Muslim economy has expanded and one of the major drivers is the thriving Islamic economy that grew at the rate of over 41 percent since the last 10 years. It was also projected that from 2022 to 2060, the global Muslim population is going to increase by 45.7 percent that makes up over twenty five percent of the world population. The figures show the optimistic future of Muslim economy in the global arena and the bright prospect of the Muslim economy greatly hinges on the talent management in the organizations. Previous studies showed the prominence of managing human talent that serves as the key to economic development of a nation (such as Florida, 2002; Leikuma-Rimicane, Komarova, Lonska, Selivanova-Fyodorova &

Ostrovskaya, 2021; Cubas, Ravikumar, & Ventura, 2016). In similar vein, on a smaller scale, that is at the organizational level, effective human talent management is able to yield positive business outcomes.

Managing talents is challenging but according to Abbazi and Zarqan (2019), Nasution (2019), Saban, Basalamah & Gani (2020), and Abdul Ghani Azmi (2015), the implementation of Islamic principles in human resource management is able to remedy the challenges. This is based on the studies they conducted in their respective countries. On the contrary, based on a study on Jordanian universities, Ababneh and Avramenko (2016), found Islamic values only have moderate effect on the management of human resource. This is supported by another study by Branine and Pollard (2010), that was conducted in Arab countries that are predominated by Muslims. They asserted that practicing Islamic values in daily life is not a guarantee that the same values are incorporated in the talent management.

Despite the inconsistent findings from prior research, as Muslims, we strongly believe in the power of Islamic teaching in shaping human behavior. Here comes the importance of identifying the right people to work in the organizations. Recruitment and selection practices are therefore pertinent in assessing the skills, knowledge as well as the potential behavior of the job candidates. Khan (2023) postulates that effective recruitment and selection processes are among the determinants for company success. In the same vein, in Muslim organizations, if the recruiter is able to effectively gauge the job candidates' values and competence, the company will be able to hire the right people who possess Islamic traits.

This paper aims to study how an Islamic university applies the Islamic principles in its recruitment and selection practices. As a higher education institution that is based on Islamization, the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) incorporates Islamic values in its management practices including the HRM. The university was established by the government of Malaysia in 1983 and the establishment was inspired by the outcomes of the 1977 First World Conference on Muslim Education in Makkah. The medium of instructions in IIUM are English and Arabic and the academic staff are employed from different countries around the world. The university philosophy is based on the belief that knowledge must be pursued as an ibadah (continuous worship) and amanah (a trust) by all Muslims in order to earn God's recognition and blessings. The vision of IIUM states its objective to be the international centre of excellence in education, research and innovation for the betterment of human life and civilization. The vision is supported by seven missions that encompass the idea of Islamization of human knowledge, integration of human and revealed knowledge, internationalization and comprehensive excellence. To date, there are 26 000 thousand students coming from 117 countries. There are fourteen faculties, three institutes and 2 centres that are located in five different campuses.

It was stated earlier that human talents are the key to organizational success and thus, the objective of this study is to uncover the recruitment and selection practices in this university. It is pertinent to examine the university's recruitment and selection aspects because as an Islamic institution that upholds Islamic values, the practices implemented in its hiring process is in line with Islamic teaching. Ali et al. (2024) noted the growing concern among scholars over ethical aspects during employee hiring. Some studies (such as Dhiman, 2024; Olaru et al., 2019; Klassen & Kim, 2017; Johnson & Saboe, 2011) reported incidents such as asking

sensitive questions in job selection and favouring certain candidates over others. As an Islamic institution, it is thus important for IIUM to examine the staffing practices whether the processes conform to the religious expectations that are based on fairness and justice. This university was chosen as the study context because it adopted a new framework called Anti-Bribery Management System (ABMS) Framework in 2024. In Malaysia, ABMS was launched in 2017 by the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) with the aim to establish a corporate framework to prevent, detect and investigate cases of unethical practices in organizations. Given the ABMS framework and more importantly the reputation as an Islamic university in Malaysia, the study is expected to shed some lights on how the job candidates are located and how the process of employee selections is conducted.

## Literature Review

### *Employee Recruitment*

Islam prescribes fairness and trustworthiness in all walks of life including in employment that provides sustenance for life. Work from an Islamic perspective is an obligatory activity that fulfils the needs of human beings (Ali, 1988). Islam values work because it is through work that a person can express herself and contributes to the society. However, in order for the job performance to be regarded as a religious observance, Islam obligates the employees to perform the work professionally to the best of their ability (El-Sayyad, 1993).

The Prophet said: *“The workers, if employed and takes what is right and gives what is right, is like a mujahid (struggler in the cause of God) till he returns home”* (cited from Al-Tabarani, 1983). Also in another tradition, the Prophet said: *“When any man does any work, God wishes him to give its perfection and grace.”* Islam urges workers to fulfill all legitimate obligations with respect to their employment (Ali & Al-Owaihian, 2008). This shows the importance of identifying and choosing the right people to be hired and thus, effective recruitment and selection practices play a crucial role in determining the success of an organization (Khan, 2023).

Employee recruitment is a process of generating a pool of qualified candidates to work for the organization (Bhutta & Sabir, 2019). In other words, recruitment is a company's effort to find people with certain criteria and abilities needed who can fulfil the requirements of the vacant jobs in the company. The recruitment process should be able to generate as many applicants as possible so that the company has more to choose from (Ali, 2015) and when it is carried out by a trustworthy manager or team, the right people for the job will be able to be identified.

Trustworthiness and honesty are in line with the Islamic principles. An individual who is trustworthy will act in accordance with the God's commands, work in righteousness and refrain himself from doing harmful acts (Chowdhury et al., 2019). This requirement is stated in the Quran in Surah An-Nisa, verses 58-59: *“Allah command you to render back your trusts to those to whom they are due; and when ye judge between man and man, that ye judge with justice. Verily how excellent is the teaching which He giveth you! Obey Allah and the Messenger, and those charged with authority among you. If you differ in anything among yourselves, refer it to Allah and His Messenger if you do believe in Allah and the Last Day. That is the best and most suitable for final determination.”*

Recruiters who are in charge of identifying the right people to be hired need to be truthful and just (Balla et al., 2016; Razimi, 2017; Chowdhury et al., 2019). Muslim recruiters are prescribed to comply with the *shariah* (i.e. Islamic laws). They must perform the religious obligations such as the five times daily prayers (*solat*), fast in the month of Ramadhan, pay zakat and other pillars of Islam. Compliant Muslim recruiters have the tendency to conduct employee recruitment in fair manner and give a just treatment to all applicants.

### *Employee Selection*

After employee recruitment is accomplished, employee selection is to be done by carefully assessing the applicants' background in terms of their knowledge, skills and abilities (Amin et al., 2014). According to Syed and Ali (2010), Islam discourages discrimination based on class and socio-economic status. This is consistent with the teaching of Islam that emphasizes fairness and justice. Organizations are not supposed to treat people differently based on ethnicity or race because doing so is considered as discrimination. Thus, it is important for Muslim managers to understand and follow the guidelines that are in line with the Islamic practices. In employee selection, managers must not be biased and commit unprofessional acts of favoritism or nepotism that lead to discrimination.

Based on his study in an Islamic country in the Middle East, Sabir (2022) wrote about the element of nepotism and favoritism that exist in the employee selection. He noted that the favoritism there is too rampant that recruiters tend to favor people based on geographic areas, political affiliation and family or friends. If favoritism becomes prevalent, it will lead to unemployable graduates, resentment, demoralization and poor university image (Joseph & Alhassan, 2023).

Nepotism and favoritism are against the spirits of the Quran as stated in Surah Al-Ma'idah verse 8: "*O believers, be you secure of justice, witnesses for God. Let not detestation for a people move you not to be equitable – that is nearer to the God-fearing.*" (cited in Syed and Ali, 2010).

In Islam, the process of choosing the right people for employment are highly recommended to follow these four principles – justice, competency, honesty and person-job fit (Hashim, 2009; Razimi et al., 2017). In addition, the recruiters must be transparent with the job advertisement content that reveals the correct and accurate job requirements. In similar vein, when a company offers a job to an individual, the terms and conditions of employment must be clearly laid out. If the offer has been accepted, then the job becomes *amanah* (trust) as mentioned in Quran Surah Al-Anfal verse 27: "*O you who believe! Do not betray God and the Messenger, nor betray your trusts, while you know*"

### **Research Design**

The data collection for the study was organized in three phases. The first phase was using the secondary data produced by the Management Service Division (MSD) – that is the Human Resource department of IIUM. MSD had conducted a focused group discussion (FGD) with seven faculty deans from various kulliyahs (i.e. faculties) in IIUM that are located in various campuses located in Gombak, Kuantan and Pagoh. All these campuses are in Malaysia. The FGD with the deans was conducted to gain their views about the HRM practices at IIUM.

Nevertheless, since the focus of this research is only on recruitment and selection, only the deans' responses that are related to the research topic were extracted for further analysis.

In the second phase, an interview with a newly hired academic staff was conducted in order to gain insights based on his first-hand experience going through the job selection process. The newly hired staff had successfully gone through all selection processes that started with the submission of the online job application form and then followed by a series of interviews at the department, faculty and finally the university level. The third phase was to conduct a follow-up interview with two MSD personnel. At this phase, the questions asked were based on the data collected from the prior phases with the purpose of seeking more feedback and clarification from the MSD personnel themselves.

### **Analysis and Discussion**

Data collected from three different sources – faculty deans, a newly hired academic staff and MSD personnel has been analyzed and categorized into two different aspects – recruitment and selection. For ease of reporting, the two MSD personnel were labelled as R1 and R2 and the newly hired academic staff was labelled as R3.

#### *Internal and External Sources of Recruitment*

The FGD report indicated the deans' concerns about less effective ways of attracting qualified candidates to apply for employment in IIUM. The deans claimed that the method used to advertise the job vacancies at IIUM as ineffective and thus yielded a small number of applicants. They stated a number of factors such as poorly designed recruitment processes and financial constraints. Based on these remarks, R1 explained that previously, IIUM used to go overseas and recruit staff from foreign countries. But given the financial constraints, the practice has been discontinued. R1 further noted that at present, the university had to depend on its reputation that is based on 41 years of establishment as the factor to attract new staff. R2 revealed that today the university used an online platform to advertise vacancies that include LinkedIn and the HR official website. However, R3 asserted:

“There was no advertisement in the university website even though I was told the Kulliyah was looking for new staff”.

R3 further added:

“I tried searching on the University website many times but to my surprise there was no vacancy available. There were a few vacancies advertised but only from other kulliyahs. As far as I can remember, I have checked a couple of times that there was no advertisement from KENMS (i.e the kulliyah R3 was applying).”

The participants' remarks implied inconsistencies in the methods used by IIUM in promoting the job vacancies. Some vacancies were advertised online, and others are kept to the kulliyah members. R3 presumed that some job vacancies were not officially advertised due to the use of personal recommendations at IIUM such as employee referrals, in-house job postings and word-of-mouth that were less time consuming and abled to shorten the hiring process.

Using external sources of recruitment such as advertisements and agencies have their own costs and benefits (Alwi et al., 2022). When job vacancies are advertised openly, there will be

a high number of applicants and thus require more resources on the recruiters to conduct the selection process. Large number of applicants resulted in multiple rounds of interviews and complicated background checks which are time consuming. There is also a possibility of using unethical practices such as asking sensitive questions to the applicants and checking with former employers about the applicants past behavior (Breaugh, 2012). This could be the reason why there were job vacancies at IIUM that were not advertised. Studies found that using internal sources such as employee referrals has significant influence in lowering the turnover rate as compared to using the external sources (Alwi et al., 2022; Terpstra and Rozell, 1993; Blume, Dreher and Baldwin, 2010). Employees have a high tendency to recommend people who are perceived as qualified for the job and having personal values that are compatible with the company culture and thus decreasing the chances of turnover.

Another concern raised by the deans during the FGD was that the job advertisement posted on the HR official website failed to attract high number of applicants. This was due to low awareness about the vacancies. What is the possibility of people checking out IIUM websites for job vacancies if they had not known about anything at all? Even though the online advertisement in the HR website is accessible to all (no username or password required), the fact that the online advertisement that is located inside the university website rendered most vacancies went unnoticed.

This scenario led to another concern – low number of qualified job candidates to choose from. Using external recruitment enables employers to tap into new and diverse kinds of talents and potential (AbdulKareem et al., 2024). However, the method is very costly and as reported by the deans during the FGD, due to financial constraints, IIUM opted to using advertisement in its official HR website that was unable to produce high number of applications.

The inconsistent recruitment methods used by IIUM led to another question during the interview with the HR staff – *“Is there any procedure that IIUM should comply with in its staff recruitment?”* R1 mentioned that IIUM started to adopt Anti-Bribery Management System (ABMS) Framework in 2024 that aims to uphold integrity and transparency in the university administration. R1 further commented:

*“ABMS covers all not just in recruitment and selection but also research grants, student selection and many more”.*

R1 clarified that under the ABMS framework, any names that were recommended by the kulliyah for recruitment, the HR office would check if the standard operating procedure for recruitment was followed. R1 added:

*“When a kulliyah sent names recommended for hiring, MSD will ascertain if there has been any advertisement made in the HR official website. Has there been any selection committee, minutes of meetings, lists of applicants’ names, details of the interview sessions as per the university procedure? If the answer is none, then the recommended names had to be declined for hiring”*

R1 pointed out that abiding by the procedures that are aligned with the ABMS is paramount due to IIUM commitment in upholding transparency and integrity in its employee recruitment and selection.

*Assessment of Job Candidates' Personality and Attitudes*

During the FGD with the deans, they implied the employee selection process is poorly designed because they claimed there is a mismatch between incumbents' specification and job description that warranted for appropriate assessment be adopted. Based on this remark, the participants were asked this question:

"The job advertisement for academic positions posted in MSD official website stated this - *The officer is also expected to advise and guide students in relation to their character, behaviour and moral conduct. In short, he is not only a teacher (Mu'allim), a scholar ('Alim) but also a moral educator (Murabbi).* How do you think IIUM ensures the right persons are selected for hiring decision?"

R2 indicated that IIUM is an Islamic university that all applicants should be aware of the job requirement as the academicians. R2 further noted:

"The application form asked for information about the applicants' religion and mazhab but during the job interviews, the applicants are sometimes asked about solat." Mazhab refers to any school of thought that are related to Islamic jurisprudence, faith and ethics. There are four mazhabs that are based on these Muslim scholars - Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i and Hambali.

When asked if mazhab was relevant for the job applications, R2 assured the information on mazhab has never been used as a basis for rejection. R2 affirmed that IIUM admits people from any mazhab but the university has always been observant about unusual behaviours among the employees and students that might lead to misunderstanding. With regard to the roles as *a teacher (Mu'allim), a scholar ('Alim) and a moral educator (Murabbi)*, R3 shared his experience during the interview. He shared:

"I was asked about how many Quranic verses I can recite and how many verses I can memorize. I was intrigued by these questions, but I understand why these questions are asked. Another question asked in the application form is about how many Islamic books that I have read"

These are some of the methods in assessing the religiosity and values of the applicants. R3 concurred that these kinds of questions are fair because they are in line with the IIUM vision and mission that are emphasizing on Islamization and good values. As educators in an Islamic university, the role is not just to teach but also to portray Islamic image as a Muslim.

According to R1, normally the candidates for academic posts are not asked about the five-time daily prayer (that is solat) because they are categorised as professionals. However, R1 indicated that the question is pertinent to be asked to applicants for administrative positions. R1 said:

“There was a time when a candidate was asked about solat and he admitted that he never performed solat. So, he was then asked to recite surah al Fatihah and he also could not do so”.

Thus, according to R1, in most cases, such candidates had to be rejected but there were some who were offered jobs. R1 further noted that admitting such job candidates into IIUM is a way to attract people to Islam as a religion that promotes peace.

Based on the content from the online job advertisements, it was found that the administrative positions had slightly different job requirements. Unlike the academic position requirements that clearly state the functions as *alim*, *mualim* and *murabbi*, the job advertisement for the administrative posts on the other hand only stated personal characters such as integrity, pleasant personality, highly motivated, disciplined and able to work under pressure.

To many, asking job candidates about their personal obligation as Muslims such as performing five times prayer (solat) and Quranic recitation is perceived as invasion of privacy. Some candidates might feel offended and embarrassed. But here comes the dilemma that IIUM is facing that is balancing between hiring only the right people with the right attributes and choosing the right questions that do not invade privacy. Indeed, job candidates should not be asked sensitive questions which could lead to discomfort.

Measuring and assessing job candidates during the selection process are arduous and challenging. Managers have the tendency to ask sensitive questions during job interviews. Numerous studies (such as Ismael and Othman, 2023; Jablin, 1982; Bennington, 2001; McShulskis, 1997) indicated negative reactions among the job seekers who reported they could sense the elements of prejudices when asked such “personal questions”. Job application forms sometimes asking for information about religion, age, marital status, ethnicity and race which could be perceived as “invading the privacy” of the applicants. These kinds of questions could lead to applicants falsifying their answers to avoid prejudice (Olaru et al., 2019; Klassen & Kim, 2017; Johnson & Saboe, 2011).

In order to gain clearer insight into the IIUM way of assessing the candidates’ personal characteristics, this question was asked to R1 and R2:

“What are the methods used to assess these traits and competency of the candidates?”

R1 revealed that during the job interview, the interviewers are guided with a set of questions. R1 reported:

“The interviewer will be guided with a set of questions in the form of a drop-down menu that listed the knowledge, personality, traits and motivation required for the job. This list is to ensure each candidate interviewed possesses the required values that are in line with the IIUM values and philosophy. Other than that, the candidates are also required to pass English proficiency test.”

A further question was asked about the smoking policy of IIUM. This question was asked:



“The previous online job advertisement stated this clause - Smokers are not encouraged to apply - and the existing online advertisement stated slightly different clause - In support of Maqasid Shariah, IIUM is a smoke free campus – what is your comment on that?”

R1 and R2 both asserted that IIUM has a strong policy on smoking on campus. The clause was changed so that it sounds more ethical and inclusive. IIUM upholds integrity and ethics and thus IIUM has always made the effort to use terminologies that are respectful and courteous. R3 concurred that all universities prohibit smoking in campus areas but R3 thought the previous clause in the job advertisement sounded a bit discriminatory. The previous clause implied the applicants stop smoking if they wanted to work at IIUM.

R3 further added:

“Today most organizations are moving towards inclusivity that promotes diversity and thus IIUM is also moving into the same direction.”

On that note, the respondents were asked this question: “IIUM has a strong spirit to serve the community that aims to create a sustainable campus that accommodates the expectations of people with special needs. Do you think this spirit is able to attract job applicants who have unique abilities and talents?”

R2 Responded

“There is no explicit statement in the job advertisement about encouraging people with different abilities to apply but if they are qualified for the posts, they are welcome to join us”.

R1 added that IIUM has been employing people who have physical disabilities including people who have visual and hearing impairment.

IIUM has always been supportive of admitting people (staff and students) with special needs. In IIUM, the Disability Service Unit (DSU) was established in 2013 and later IIUM Disability Inclusive Policy was approved in 2015. DSU aims to provide accessibility & support system for IIUM community that enhances quality of life by creating disabled-friendly environment & services. Every organization today strives to practice inclusive policies that serve as a factor to create meaningful workplace by providing facilities that enable all individuals to feel valued, respected, and fully engaged within their workplace (Jejenywa, Mhlongo, & Jejenywa, 2024).

## **Conclusion**

As an Islamic organization that strives to lead the Muslim ummah in all branches of knowledge, IIUM has always committed in formulating fair policies in its recruitment and selection that are free from discriminatory elements. As expounded earlier, every organization’s success in realizing its goals hinges on its workforce. Thus, organizations should plan carefully on how to identify the potential talents from outside and inside the organizations. IIUM uses both internal and external sources of recruitment. The interviews with the respondents showed IIUM used its HR official website to promote job vacancies but occasionally the locating of external talents is done using employee referrals and in-house job postings. The FGD with the deans that revealed posting job vacancies using IIUM official websites as ineffective in attracting talents is worrying. Therefore, IIUM has no choice but to

use multiple methods in external recruitment such as using employment agencies and consultants. Despite having financial constraints, as indicated by the FGD with the deans, IIUM should employ creative ways in increasing the number of high-quality applicants.

The adoption of Anti-Bribery Management System (ABMS) Framework in 2024 at IIUM is hopefully sets a clear direction in IIUM employee recruitment and selection. ABMS aims to uphold good values and integrity in its practices that could prevent unethical elements in recruitment and selection such as nepotism, cronyism and bias. According to Dhiman (2024), nepotism and cronyism in higher education might serve as a threat that undermine equity and fairness because the recruitment and selection process is based on “whom you know” instead of merit which may lead to discrimination.

The other issue that IIUM needs to take heed of is to formulate selection process that is able to identify the right individuals without asking for information that is perceived as sensitive and personal. IIUM was established based on Islamic philosophy with high level of ethics and thus, IIUM depends highly on the employees’ credibility especially the academic staff who can serve as murabbis and muallim. Instead of asking questions that make the job candidates feel uncomfortable, the recruiter can ask the candidates’ general views about Muslims’ obligation to pray and recite Quranic verses. Asking questions that are personally addressed to the candidates could create discomfort and negative reactions among candidates.

Alternatively, IIUM could use psychometric tools to gauge the job candidates’ personality, attitude and religiosity. There has been numerous research (such as Remizova, Rudnev, & Davidov, 2024; Kelly, Kramer & Shariff, 2024; Marpaung, Azizah & Siregar, 2024) conducted that used religiosity measurement instruments in predicting individual’s religiosity. Indicators used in the measurement included praying practices and importance of religion. Using psychometric tests like this could avoid discomfort among the job candidates. It is important to note that IIUM aspires to spread dakwah (preaching for fairness and peace) and thus, creating the opportunity for IIUM in changing non-compliant individuals to be better Muslims. The most important thing to note for recruiters is to make sure the information sought from the applicants and candidates is job-related only and in line with the organization philosophy. This is to avoid litigation issues that might arise from unhappy job applicants or candidates.

Given the competition in the education sector locally and globally, IIUM needs to create stronger image in its employer branding. Therefore, IIUM supports the recruitment of people with special needs. IIUM provides ample facilities for them such as special lanes, toilets, vans, ramps and accommodation for those living on campus. Celebrating diversity is hopefully able to increase the reputation of IIUM as an employer of choice.

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