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Indonesian EFL Undergraduate Students' Perceptions of English Critical Reading

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A B S T R A C T

Critical reading (CR) is a crucial academic literacy skill for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students to evaluate and engage with academic texts. This study aims to investigate Indonesian EFL students' perceptions of critical reading, including their self-assessed CR skills, perceived institutional support, gender differences, and frequently read English reading materials. A mixed-method design was employed, in which quantitative data were collected from 100 students through questionnaires, followed by interviews with 10 participants. Results showed that students had positive perceptions of critical reading and recognized the importance of this skill in an academic context. However, advanced skills such as identifying bias and evaluating arguments remain challenging. The study found that gender was not a significant factor. Qualitative findings revealed linguistic difficulties and limited institutional support, even though students frequently interact with academic texts. Practical implications for teachers and educational institutions in the Indonesian context are put forward.

Keywords: *Critical Reading, EFL Students, Academic Literacy, Student Perceptions, Mixed-Methods Research*

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INTRODUCTION

Critical reading (CR) has become a crucial component of academic literacy in the digital age, where students are increasingly required to critically evaluate information and interpret texts from multiple perspectives (Dewi et al., 2025). This skill involves examining author claims, identifying assumptions, and interpreting linguistic choices beyond surface comprehension (Safitri & Melati, 2023). For EFL learners, CR presents additional challenges, as it requires not only linguistic proficiency but also higher-order thinking skills to analyze arguments and evaluate evidence (Mardiah et al., 2025).

CR is widely recognized as a fundamental academic skill that integrates comprehension with analytical reasoning, enabling learners to assess the credibility of information, develop independent perspectives, and construct well-supported arguments (Abd El-Hallim, 2025; Wale & Bishaw, 2020). At the university level, CR has long been considered a crucial component of English language instruction for fostering academic literacy and higher-order thinking skills (Wallace, 2003; Grabe & Stoller, 2011). However, empirical studies report that many EFL university students continue to experience difficulties in identifying author perspectives, evaluating arguments, and interpreting implicit meanings in English academic texts (Kadir et al., 2014; Chou, 2016).

Several studies further reveal that while students generally have positive attitudes toward CR, they often struggle to effectively apply CR strategies when dealing with linguistically complex texts and unfamiliar academic discourse conventions (Elder & Paul, 2004; Liu, 2018). In this context, as conceptualized in Bloom's taxonomy, these difficulties suggest that while students may operate at low cognitive levels, such as remembering and comprehending, critical CR requires higher-order cognitive processes, including analyzing, evaluating, and creating, which are more demanding in academic reading contexts (Bloom, 1956; Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). These findings suggest that students' conceptual

understanding of CR does not always translate into effective reading practices, particularly in academic contexts that demand critical interpretation, argument evaluation, and information synthesis. Similarly, Paul and Elder (2006) explain that effective CR is a disciplined reasoning process that involves examining assumptions, evaluating evidence, identifying biases, and applying intellectual standards such as clarity, accuracy, and logic.

Although many studies have explored CR instruction, critical thinking, and reading comprehension in EFL contexts, relatively few have examined how students themselves perceive CR as part of their academic development (Khathayut & Walker-Gleaves, 2025; Olifant et al., 2020). Understanding students' perceptions is crucial, as they influence motivation, engagement, and learning behavior (Ajzen, 2005; Dörnyei, 2019). As Hidayat et al. (2024) note, perception-based research provides valuable insights into how learners internalize instructional practices and respond to the learning environment.

Even though there is growing international research on CR, studies specifically focusing on students' perceptions of CR, particularly those using mixed-methods approaches, are still limited in higher education contexts where English is learned as a foreign language. This gap shows the need for research that not only captures general trends in students' perceptions through quantitative data but also explores their experiences and challenges in depth through qualitative inquiry.

To fill this gap, this study contributes to the literature by providing empirical evidence regarding the perceptions of undergraduate EFL students toward CR through a sequential mixed-methods research design that combines quantitative findings with in-depth qualitative insights.

Based on these considerations, this study aimed to explore the perceptions of undergraduate EFL students at an Islamic institute in Jambi province, Indonesia, regarding critical reading skills in English. This study specifically looked at students' perceptions of CR, their views on the institutional role in supporting CR development, the challenges they face in interacting with academic texts, and identified the types of English reading materials most frequently read by students. Furthermore, this study–examined whether there are gender-based differences in students' perceptions. Thus, this study addressed the following research questions: 1. What are students' perceptions of critical reading in English? 2. How do students perceive institutional roles in supporting critical reading? 3. What types of English reading materials are most frequently read by Indonesian EFL undergraduate students? 4. Are there differences in students' perceptions based on gender?

Literature Review

Critical Reading (CR) in EFL Instruction

CR plays a central role in the academic success of EFL students because it helps them develop the skills needed to understand and evaluate complex texts (Alshehri, 2024). Through CR, students learn to analyze claims, interpret arguments, and determine the credibility of various sources. These skills are not only important for academic tasks but also for dealing with information in digital and social environments.

Students with strong CR skills tend to participate more actively in learning, engage more deeply with ideas, and demonstrate greater independence in evaluating information (Julianti et al., 2024). Furthermore, CR increases students' awareness of how texts are shaped by social, cultural, and ideological contexts, helping them recognize biases and develop more informed and reflective perspectives (Liu, 2017).

Moreover, CR contributes to students' metacognitive awareness by encouraging them to monitor their understanding and evaluate how language shapes meaning (Arifin et al., 2023). In the context of teaching EFL, these benefits shape students' perceptions of the importance of CR, as they experience how it supports academic literacy, analytical reasoning, and informed decision-making.

Definition of Critical Reading (CR)

CR is an active and reflective process in which readers analyze, evaluate, and interpret the deeper meaning of a text. In the context of EFL, CR involves examining the author's claims, identifying assumptions, distinguishing facts from opinions, and assessing the validity and

relevance of supporting evidence (Zhang, 2020). This process goes beyond literal understanding by encouraging readers to connect the information in the text with their prior knowledge, experiences, and sociocultural context (Yulian, 2021).

CR also enables learners to recognize biases, analyze ideological perspectives, and evaluate how language shapes certain views and positions, making it an essential component of critical literacy in academic settings (Diyah & Betty, 2024). As a strategic reading practice, it supports deeper understanding by guiding learners to evaluate arguments, interpret hidden meanings, and synthesize information across texts (Rosdiana, 2018).

METHOD

This research investigated students' perspectives on CR in EFL using a mixed approach with a Sequential Explanatory Design, which involves quantitative data collection followed by a qualitative phase. This design was chosen because it allows researchers to integrate numerical findings with in-depth explanations, resulting in a more comprehensive understanding (Creswell, 2022). Sequential Explanatory Design is characterized by a two-phase structure: quantitative data is collected first, followed by qualitative data used to explain or elaborate on the initial numerical results. This approach facilitates meaningful integration of quantitative and qualitative data, enabling richer interpretation of the findings. As a result, this design provides a deeper understanding of the mindsets, approaches, and difficulties faced by students (Wasti et al., 2022).

Participant

Table 1. Participants

No	Participants	Genders		Amount
		Female	Male	
1.	Semester 1	28	17	45
2.	Semester 3	17	10	27
3.	Semester 5	16	4	20
4.	Semester 7	7	1	8
				100

As shown in Table 1, the participants of this research were 100 undergraduate students studying in the English language Education Program at an Islamic Institute in Jambi Province, Indonesia. The participants consisted of the 1st, 3rd, 5th, and 7th semesters. Their ages ranged from 18 to 23 years, with 59% being female and 41% being male. The participants of this research were selected using a convenience sampling technique, which involves selecting based on their availability and willingness to participate in the study. In the qualitative phase, 10 students were selected with a convenience sampling technique for semi-structured interviews to provide deeper insights into students' perceptions of CR.

Instruments

Questionnaire

The main instrument used in this research was a questionnaire adapted from Khathayut and Walker-Gleaves (2025). The questionnaire was translated into Bahasa Indonesia and consisted of three main sections, with a total of 38 questions. The first section contained 7 items covering basic data such as name, age, gender, semester, type of reading material, reading frequency, and reading duration. The second section comprises 32 items, divided into three subsections: students' views on CR (6 items), self-assessment of reading skills (21 items), and–institutional support (5 items). Items 1 to 27 use a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree), while items 28 to 32 use Yes/No options.

Table 2. Questionnaire Indicators and Sample Item

No	Sample Items	Items
1	Students' Perceptions of Critical Reading	1-6
2.	Self-Perception of Reading Skills	7-27
3.	Institution Support for Critical Reading	28-32

Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore the results obtained from the questionnaire. The interview focused on three main areas, namely students' perceptions of the importance of CR, students' knowledge of the skills required for CR, and the elements that influence the teaching and learning process of CR. To elicit responses related to these areas, several guiding questions were used during the interview sessions. The sample interview questions are presented below:

Students' Perceptions of the Importance of Critical Reading
Why do you think critical reading is important?
How can critical reading be used in your studies or daily life?
Students' Knowledge of the Skills Required for Critical Reading
What are the key skills needed for effective critical reading?
How do you apply critical reading when reading English texts?
Factors Influencing the Teaching and Learning of Critical Reading
What challenges do you face when reading critically in English?
What can your lecture or institution do to help you improve?

Validity and Reliability

According to Khathayut & Walker-Gleaves (2025), the original questionnaire demonstrates satisfactory content validity and reliability, with an IOC score of 0.94, item-level IOC values exceeding 0.5, and a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.824. This means that the questionnaire is acceptable. The IOC result from the interview questions is 1.0, which means that the questions can be used for data collection.

Procedures

Quantitative Data

The questionnaire was first translated into Bahasa Indonesia. It was distributed online via Google Forms and sent to all participating class groups. Before completing the questionnaire, respondents received a written explanation of the research objectives, instructions for completing the questionnaire, and assurances of confidentiality of their identities and the information they provided. Participation was voluntary and did not affect their academic performance. Respondents then completed the questionnaire independently to share their perspectives on CR.

Qualitative Data

Ten respondents were selected to participate in interviews as part of the qualitative data collection. The interviews were semi-structured and conducted in Bahasa Indonesia, and lasted approximately 10-15 minutes. The interview aimed to gain a deeper understanding of their perceptions, experiences, and challenges related to CR. All interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis

Quantitative

The data obtained from the questionnaire were tabulated in a spreadsheet and then entered into SPSS software for analysis through a series of descriptive statistical procedures. Before analysis, the researchers first conducted a data cleaning process to ensure there were no missing data, duplicates, or invalid responses. Next, each item on the questionnaire was assigned a variable label and a value label so that SPSS could correctly recognize the measurement scale, for example, a Likert scale of 1-5 representing the respondent's level of agreement. Once all variables were correctly defined, descriptive statistical analysis was conducted by calculating the mean and standard deviation Creswell, (2022). The mean was used to identify general trends in respondents' perceptions of CR, while the standard deviation was used to assess the degree of variation or consistency of responses across students.

Qualitative

The data from the interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis as described by Braun & Clarke (2006), which consists of six sequential steps. First, familiarization was conducted by repeatedly reading the transcripts to understand their overall content. Second, coding was conducted by labeling relevant sections of the transcripts that reflect important ideas. Third, themes were developed by grouping codes with similar meanings. Fourth, a

review of the themes ensured that the themes formed were consistent and aligned with the overall data. Fifth, naming the themes provided a clear definition and name for each theme. Sixth, the report was compiled, presenting the analysis results in narrative form supported by respondent quotes.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION
Findings
Students' perceptions of critical reading

Table 3. Students' Perceptions of Critical Reading

No	Items	Mean	SD
1	Reading critically is beneficial for academic success	4.51	0.577
2	Reading critically helps me understand texts more deeply	4.54	0.576
3	Reading critically allows me to distinguish between facts and opinions	4.54	0.501
4	Reading critically can be applied in real-life situations	4.36	0.659
5	Reading critically helps me develop logical thinking skills	4.53	0.577
6	Critical reading encourages me to question the author's ideas.	4.25	0.657

As shown in Table 3, most students showed positive perceptions of CR. The average scores ranged from 4.36 to 4.54, indicating a high level of CR perception. The relatively small standard deviation (SD < 1.00) indicates low response variation, implying that students' perceptions of the importance of critical reading are relatively uniform. The highest average scores were found in the statements "Critical reading helps me understand texts more deeply" (M=4.54; SD=0.576) and "Critical reading allows me to distinguish between facts and opinions" (M=4.54; SD=0.501). Conversely, the lowest mean scores were found in the statements "Critical reading can be applied in real life" (M=4.36; SD=0.659) and "Critical reading encourages me to question the author's ideas" (M=4.25; SD=0.657).

These findings are reinforced by the interview results, in which students view critical reading as a process of caution, verification, and critical assessment, rather than simply passive reading. Several respondents emphasized that CR requires them not to immediately believe the information they read.

> *"I think critical reading is important so that we don't immediately believe what we read"* (R3).
> *"Critical reading is important so that we do not easily believe the information we read... to determine which information is strong, which is biased, and which needs to be questioned"* (R10).
> *"We can assess whether the information is correct and reliable"* (R4).

In addition, other respondents associated critical reading with the skills to understand texts deeply and find the main ideas.

> *"Because by reading critically, I can understand the important points in the reading"* (R1).
> *"We don't just read superficially, but really understand the author's intentions and assess whether the information makes sense or not"* (R9).

Self-Assessment of Reading Skills

Table 4. Self-Assessment of Reading Skills

No	Items	Mean	SD
7	I can identify the author's main idea in a text	3.90	0.870
8	I can recognize supporting details in a text	4.14	0.697
9	I can understand the author's purpose	4.22	0.579
10	I can find connections between parts of a text	4.11	0.751
11	I can summarize the main points of what I read	4.40	0.603
12	I can interpret the meaning of difficult or unfamiliar words from context.	4.13	0.691
13	I can infer information that is not directly stated in the text.	4.03	0.881
14	I can analyze how the author organizes the text.	4.15	0.539
15	I can identify the author's feelings or attitude.	4.18	0.730
16	I can identify bias or assumptions in a text.	4.10	0.772
17	I can evaluate the evidence or arguments presented in a text.	4.12	0.640
18	I can compare ideas from different sources when reading.	4.06	0.722
19	I can apply what I learn from reading to other subjects or real-life situations.	4.23	0.709
20	I can express my opinions about what I have read logically.	4.12	0.742

No	Item	Mean	SD
21	I can make judgments about what is right or wrong in a text.	4.11	0.665
22	I can question the reliability of the information presented.	4.01	0.659
23	I can provide reasons to support my interpretation of a text.	4.00	0.711
24	I can integrate my prior knowledge when interpreting a reading.	4.06	0.789
25	I can read between the lines to understand the author's hidden messages.	4.04	0.710
26	I can distinguish between strong and weak arguments in a text.	4.22	0.690
27	I can decide whether to accept or reject the author's ideas based on evidence.	4.15	0.657

Based on Table 4, students generally rated their reading skills positively, with mean scores ranging from 3.90 to 4.40. These results indicate a good perception of students' skills in understanding, interpreting, and analyzing texts. The relatively small standard deviation (SD < 1.00) indicates low variation in responses between students. The highest score was found for the statement "I can summarize the main points of the reading" (M=4.40; SD=0.603), while the lowest score was for the skill to identify main ideas (M=3.90; SD=0.870).

This is explained by interview data showing that students actively use various reading strategies to understand texts more deeply. Students reported using strategies such as reading slowly, highlighting important information, taking notes, asking reflective questions, and comparing information from various sources. As R3 stated, *"When I study, I usually read slowly and then highlight the important parts."* R8 also stated, *"I highlight the important parts, then ask questions such as, 'Why did the author say this?'"* Meanwhile, R10 explained that he takes notes and asks questions to ensure his understanding of the text. *"I usually take notes while reading… and ask myself questions to make sure I understand."* (R10)

In addition to these strategies, some students also described using reflective strategies that focused on monitoring their own understanding. Respondent 6 stated, "I read slowly and ask myself, 'What does this mean?' for each paragraph."

Institutional Support for Critical Reading

Table 5. Institutional Support toward Critical Reading

No	Items	YES	NO
28	My institution provides training or workshops on critical reading.	51 %	49 %
29	My lecturers encourage students to read critically in class	81 %	19 %
30	I have received guidance about critical reading strategies from my lecturers	73 %	27 %
31	The reading materials used in class help me to think critically	92 %	8 %
32	My institution offers sufficient resources to help students improve critical reading skills.	77 %	23 %

Based on Table 5, students reported fairly good institutional and pedagogical support for the development of CR, with positive responses ranging from 51% to 92%. The strongest support was felt in the use of reading materials in class that encourage critical thinking (92%), followed by encouragement from lecturers in the learning process (81%) and guidance on critical reading strategies from lecturers (73%). However, support in the form of critical reading training or workshops at the institutional level received the lowest percentage (51%), indicating that structured initiatives from the institution are still limited.

This perception is reinforced by the interview results. Students emphasized that although lecturers have provided meaningful support in class, broader institutional programs are still lacking. Several respondents expressed the need for more structured guidance, examples of text analysis from lecturers, and institutional initiatives such as literacy training and critical reading workshops.

"Provide examples of text analysis and structured exercises" (R7). *"Institutions can provide more reading resources and English literacy training"* (R4). *"Hold special workshops on critical reading"* (R8). *"Provide simpler reading materials and regular exercises to get used to them"* (R5).

Types of English Reading Materials Frequently Read by Indonesian EFL Undergraduate Students
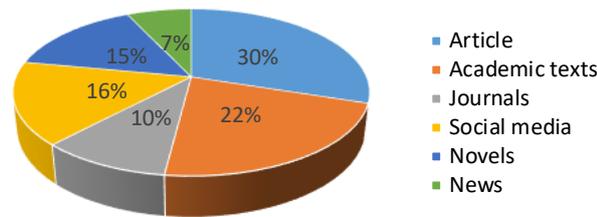
Figure 1. Types of English Reading Materials

Figure 1 shows that students interact with various types of English reading materials. Articles are considered the most frequently read reading material, followed by academic texts at 22%. Social media content ranks next at 16%, slightly higher than novels at 15%. In contrast, journals are less frequently read, representing 10%, while news is the least frequently read material, reported by 7% of the respondents. Overall, this distribution shows that the students tend to read articles and academic texts more frequently than other types of English reading materials, with relatively limited engagement in reading English news and journals.

Differences in Students' Perceptions Based on Gender

In addition to exploring students' general perceptions, critical reading skills, and institutional support, this research also investigated whether there were significant differences in students' views on critical reading when categorized by gender. Comparative analysis was conducted using the Mann–Whitney U test, as the results of the normality test (Shapiro–Wilk) indicated that the data for both groups were not normally distributed ($p < 0.05$).

Table 6. Mann-Whitney U Test result regarding students' perceptions based on gender

Test	U Statistic	p-value	Interpretation
Mann–Whitney U	1379	0.234	Not significant ($p > 0.05$)

As shown in Table 6, the Mann–Whitney U test (U=1379, p=0.234) showed that this variation was not statistically significant. These results indicate that both male and female students have similar perceptions regarding the significance of critical reading in both academic and everyday contexts. The absence of significant differences indicates that gender is not a determining factor in shaping students' awareness and attitudes toward critical reading

Discussion

This research investigated the perceptions of CR among Indonesian EFL students. Overall, the quantitative findings revealed very positive perceptions, with high average scores indicating that students believe CR enhances understanding, helps distinguish facts from opinions, and contributes to academic success. These results are in line with previous studies (Julianti et al., 2024; Khathayut & Walker-Gleaves, 2025), which also found that EFL learners consider CR essential for cognitive and academic literacy. CR is not only important for understanding texts (Luke, 2012) but also helps improve the academic and cognitive skills necessary for analyzing arguments, identifying ideological positions, and evaluating the broader social objectives contained within texts. This view reinforces the idea that CR teaches students good argumentation skills, which are essential for academic literacy.

Students also rated themselves as competent in several critical reading sub-skills, such as identifying main ideas, summarizing, and recognizing the author's intent. However, the data indicate that more advanced skills (e.g., identifying bias, evaluating arguments, assessing evidence) remain limited, a pattern also reported by Julianti et al. (2024), who found that students were confident in basic comprehension but struggled with higher-order CR skills.

Although students generally report high self-assessment scores, these results should be interpreted with caution due to the potential for bias in their reporting. Crowne and Marlowe (1960) explain that self-assessment tools are prone to social conformity bias, which is the tendency for respondents to present themselves positively to meet academic expectations. Since CR is considered an important academic skill, especially in higher education, students in this study have likely overestimated their CR skills. Therefore, future research should supplement self-report data with performance-based assessments, such as reading

assignments or text analysis exercises. This will reduce social conformity bias and provide a more accurate picture of students' CR skills.

Qualitative findings support the patterns observed in the quantitative data. Students viewed CR not only as an academic requirement but also as a valuable practical skill for evaluating digital information, which reflects the transfer of literacy skills to real-world contexts. However, the data showed that limited vocabulary, unfamiliar grammar, and complex sentence structures were major obstacles faced by the students. This aligns with Liu (2017), who emphasizes linguistic competence as the foundation for critical literacy. Hackemann et al. (2022) Support this explanation by indicating that complex linguistic features increase cognitive demands, which can reduce the mental resources available for CR processes.

Regarding institutional factors, the results showed an imbalance: although lecturers strongly encourage CR, institutional support, such as formal training and workshops, was minimal. The development of CR, therefore, relies more on individual classroom practices than on structured institutional programs. These results contradict the findings of Khathayut and Walker-Gleaves (2025), who state that universities in Thailand that teach EFL have begun to improve students' CR skills through stronger institutional programs, such as workshops and academic support. Vygotsky (1978) stated that guided interaction and guidance provided by others with broader knowledge can improve higher-level literacy skills. Teachers play an important role in helping students progress from surface-level understanding to deeper analytical engagement with texts within this framework.

The findings of this study also show no significant difference in students' perceptions of CR based on gender, as indicated by the Mann-Whitney U test (p = 0.234). This suggests that male and female students have comparable levels of awareness, confidence, and attitude toward CR. These results are consistent with previous studies conducted in EFL contexts, which reported that gender was not a significant factor influencing students' reading outcomes(Islamiah et al., 2017; Rianto, 2021). Their study emphasized that student engagement with academic texts and the quality of instructional support were more influential than gender in shaping critical literacy skills. Similarly, this study suggests that reading experience, exposure to analytical materials, and institutional encouragement play a more central role in developing CR awareness than demographic factors such as gender.

English reading material findings show that students tend to use various types of materials, such as articles, academic texts, journals, social media, novels, and news. The data shows that students interact more frequently with English texts related to academic activities. The high frequency of reading articles and academic texts indicates that these materials are more dominant in students' English reading practices. This pattern reflects greater student engagement with academically oriented English reading materials compared to other types of texts.

CONCLUSIONS

This research concludes that undergraduate students of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Indonesia have a very positive perception of critical reading (CR), believing that it enhances deep understanding, logical reasoning, and informed decision-making. Although students demonstrate confidence in several CR skills, advanced analytical abilities—such as detecting bias, questioning the reliability of sources, and drawing well-founded conclusions—remain challenging, particularly due to linguistic barriers including limited vocabulary and complex grammatical structures that hinder critical analysis of English texts. The findings also reveal limited institutional support; while instructors encourage CR practices, students report a lack of formal workshops and structured training programs, indicating that CR development largely depends on classroom-level initiatives. Students engage with various English reading materials, ranging from academic sources such as journals and scholarly articles to non-academic texts including social media, novels, and news, reflecting diverse reading preferences and exposure. Gender did not emerge as a significant influencing factor,

suggesting that engagement with English texts is more closely related to reading habits and accumulated academic experience. Overall, while students show strong conceptual awareness and positive attitudes toward CR, linguistic limitations and insufficient institutional support continue to constrain the practical application of CR skills in academic contexts. Addressing a gap in previous EFL research, this study provides empirical evidence on Indonesian EFL undergraduates' perceptions of CR through a sequential mixed-methods approach, integrating quantitative and qualitative findings to offer a comprehensive understanding of students' awareness, challenges, and institutional conditions. However, the findings should be interpreted cautiously due to limitations, including the single-institution context, reliance on self-reported data that may be subject to social desirability bias, and a relatively small sample size that may limit generalizability. Therefore, future research is recommended to involve multiple institutions across Indonesia, incorporate performance-based assessments alongside perception data, employ longitudinal or intervention-based designs, and explore faculty perspectives to gain deeper insight into the pedagogical and institutional factors influencing CR development.

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