



THE FUTURE OF FAITH-BASED HIGHER EDUCATION: TREND ANALYSIS AND TRANSFORMATIVE SOLUTIONS IN PESANTREN UNIVERSITY MANAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the future of faith-based higher education, focusing on trend analysis and transformative solutions in pesantren university management. Using a case study approach at Universitas Islam KH. Achmad Muzakki Syah (UNIKHAMS) in Jember, Indonesia, the research examines the tension between maintaining traditional Islamic values and adopting modern educational practices. Data was collected through interviews, observations, and document analysis, with participants including university administrators, lecturers, students, and santri. The findings reveal that while there is a strong commitment to preserving religious identity, challenges arise in integrating contemporary educational technologies and methodologies. The study highlights the need for a strategic approach that balances these two aspects, ensuring that pesantren universities can thrive in a rapidly changing academic environment while staying true to their spiritual mission. This research contributes to the literature on faith-based education by offering insights into the organizational dynamics of pesantren institutions and providing a framework for managing change in a way that respects both tradition and innovation. The study calls for further research to examine broader samples and use mixed-methods approaches to gain a deeper understanding of the issues at play.

KEYWORDS

Faith-Based Education, Pesantren University, Higher Education Management.

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Introduction

In the rapidly changing landscape of global higher education, faith-based institutions face complex challenges in preserving their identity while adapting to modern governance structures. In Indonesia, pesantren-based universities rooted in traditional Islamic boarding schools—are undergoing a significant transformation as they transition into formal higher education institutions. This shift brings crucial questions regarding management, curriculum, and institutional identity. The urgency of this research lies in the need to understand how these universities navigate the intersection of tradition and



modernity. As Indonesia hosts over 30,000 pesantren (Ministry of Religious Affairs, 2020), many of which are transitioning into or partnering with universities, the future of faith-based higher education depends on how well these institutions manage change. Understanding these dynamics is essential not only for internal institutional reform but also for the broader discussion on the role of religion-based education in a rapidly secularizing and digitalizing world (Azra, 2018).

Existing studies have explored pesantren education primarily from sociological, pedagogical, and religious perspectives, emphasizing character formation, traditional knowledge transmission, and community engagement (Hefner, 2009; Zuhdi, 2015). Meanwhile, research on higher education management has addressed issues such as governance, internationalization, and quality assurance (Altbach et al., 2010). However, there is a notable gap in studies that merge these domains by examining the management of pesantren-based universities in the context of contemporary educational trends. Few scholars have addressed how these institutions respond to globalization, market demands, and technological disruption while remaining anchored in religious values. This research, therefore, fills a critical void by investigating how pesantren-based higher education institutions adapt to global trends and emergencies while preserving their unique cultural and spiritual foundations.

This study seeks to analyze how pesantren-based universities manage institutional transformation in response to global educational trends and internal controversies. The core questions addressed include: (1) In what ways are global trends reshaping the governance of pesantren-based universities? (2) What controversies arise from the tension between traditional Islamic values and modern higher education management practices? (3) What transformative and context-sensitive management solutions can be developed to ensure the sustainability and relevance of pesantren universities? These questions are framed to explore the potential for harmonizing sacred traditions with the demands of innovation, accountability, and competitiveness in the global academic environment.

Preliminary findings and literature suggest that a hybrid management approach one that integrates modern strategic management with traditional pesantren values offers a viable path forward. Such an approach respects the institutional culture of pesantren while enabling innovation and accountability required in modern higher education. This research argues that pesantren universities must adopt adaptive management strategies



that balance change with continuity. By testing models of contextualized governance, the study aims to contribute practical solutions for managing religious-based institutions in an age of uncertainty and transformation. These insights are not only valuable for Indonesian policymakers and educators but also for global discussions on faith-based education's resilience and adaptability in the face of crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic and digital disruption (Sahlberg, 2020; Noor, 2021).

Methods

This study focuses on the management dynamics of Universitas Islam KH. Achmad Muzakki Syah (UNIKHAMS) located in Jember, East Java, which operates within the cultural and religious environment of a pesantren (Islamic boarding school). As a pesantren-based university, UNIKHAMS provides a unique integration of religious traditions with higher education practices. The institution becomes an ideal case for examining how modern management strategies are adapted within faith-based academic settings. The pesantren context significantly influences institutional governance, decision-making, curriculum development, and daily campus culture. Therefore, the unit of analysis in this study is the organizational and managerial practices of UNIKHAMS, particularly how these practices align with or diverge from the pesantren's religious-cultural identity. The research captures both formal governance structures and informal norms shaped by the pesantren environment. By situating the research in this context, the study explores the complex interplay between religious values, institutional transformation, and contemporary challenges in higher education management.

This research employs a qualitative approach with a case study design, which is appropriate for exploring complex social phenomena within their real-life context. The case study method allows the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of the organizational behavior and management strategies employed by UNIKHAMS. Since the study investigates a contemporary issue—the transformation of pesantren-based university management amid global educational trends—the case study offers a contextualized perspective rather than generalizable claims. The qualitative method enables rich, descriptive accounts of individual and institutional experiences, which are essential for analyzing values-based education systems. The interpretive paradigm guiding this research assumes that reality is socially constructed and embedded within cultural and institutional practices. The goal is not only to describe managerial



processes but also to interpret how actors make sense of their roles, challenges, and institutional transformations. This design also accommodates flexibility, allowing emerging themes to be explored during the data collection process.

The primary sources of information in this research are selected informants representing various levels of the university's ecosystem. Informants include the Rector, Vice Rectors, faculty members (lecturers), university students, and santri (Islamic boarding school students) who reside in or engage with the pesantren environment. This diverse group allows for multiple perspectives on institutional management and transformation processes. Purposive sampling was used to select informants based on their knowledge, roles, and involvement in both the formal university structure and pesantren life. The inclusion of santri is particularly important, as they provide insights into how educational reforms are experienced at the grassroots level. The faculty and leadership offer institutional narratives, while students and santri present experiential insights into how policies and practices are interpreted. This multi-actor perspective enriches the analysis and enables triangulation, ensuring that the findings reflect a comprehensive and balanced understanding of the case.

Data collection in this study was conducted using three qualitative methods: observation, interviews, and document analysis. Observation was carried out both formally and informally to understand the campus environment, daily interactions, leadership practices, and the influence of pesantren culture on academic life. Observations focused on management meetings, campus rituals, and integration between pesantren and university activities. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with key informants to gain insights into decision-making processes, leadership perspectives, and stakeholder experiences. These interviews allowed for open-ended responses and the exploration of emerging themes. Additionally, relevant documents such as institutional statutes, strategic plans, meeting minutes, and academic guidelines were reviewed to support and contextualize the data. This triangulated approach enhances the credibility and depth of the research findings by integrating visual, verbal, and textual sources of data from the field.

Data analysis followed a systematic process involving data reduction, data display, and data verification (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In the reduction stage, raw data from interviews, observations, and documents were coded and categorized according to emerging themes such as leadership dynamics, policy adaptation, and cultural tensions.



The display stage involved organizing this information in matrices and thematic charts to visualize patterns and relationships. Finally, verification was carried out through member checking and peer debriefing to ensure the accuracy and validity of interpretations. Three main analysis techniques were used: content analysis, to interpret institutional documents and policy texts; discourse analysis, to understand the language used by stakeholders in shaping narratives of transformation; and interpretative analysis, to uncover deeper meanings behind actions and statements. This multi-method approach allows the researcher to grasp both surface-level structures and underlying cultural logics that shape the management of pesantren-based higher education institutions.

Result and Discussion

Table 1 below presents the summary of interview results with stakeholders at UNIKHAMS Jember. The interviews were conducted with the rector, vice rectors, lecturers, students, and santri to explore their perspectives on the management and transformation of the university within the pesantren setting.

Informant	Key Themes	Summary Statements
Rector	Vision, Leadership, Tradition	“We aim to develop a modern Islamic university that preserves pesantren values.”
Vice Rector	Institutional Strategy, Policy	“We struggle balancing accreditation standards with our religious-cultural context.”
Lecturer	Curriculum, Academic Freedom	“Integration of Islamic values in modern curriculum is still evolving.”
Student	Learning Experience, Digitalization	“Online learning is helpful, but we miss the spiritual atmosphere of the pesantren.”
Santri	Identity, Institutional Culture	“The university gives us more opportunities, but we don’t want to lose our roots.”

The interview data reveals a consistent pattern: all stakeholders recognize the tension between modernization and preservation of pesantren identity. While the leadership (rector and vice rector) emphasizes vision and institutional goals, they also acknowledge structural constraints posed by national education regulations. Lecturers



are concerned about the pedagogical adaptation of Islamic values into modern academic frameworks. Students, particularly those from outside the pesantren tradition, appreciate the flexibility and access provided by digital learning tools, but express concern about the diminishing communal religious atmosphere. Meanwhile, santri strongly emphasize cultural preservation and spiritual grounding, signaling potential resistance to drastic managerial reforms. This pattern suggests that transformation in pesantren-based higher education must be inclusive of all stakeholder concerns. The data indicates that although modernization is inevitable, efforts must be made to maintain spiritual coherence, institutional integrity, and respect for traditional structures.

The observed patterns reflect a classic identity negotiation process between tradition and transformation in a hybrid educational institution. The rector's emphasis on maintaining "pesantren values" while pursuing academic modernization represents a strategic attempt to align religious heritage with competitive standards. This can be interpreted as a form of value-based leadership in educational transformation. The vice rector's comment about policy constraints indicates the systemic pressure imposed by national accreditation frameworks, which may not always align with pesantren culture. Lecturers are functioning as knowledge brokers—negotiating curriculum content, pedagogical norms, and institutional values. Students and santri highlight the emotional and spiritual stakes of transformation, where innovation must not come at the cost of tradition. This interpretation suggests that a successful transformative solution requires not only structural adaptation but also cultural sensitivity and participatory governance. Institutional reform should be dialogic, not prescriptive, ensuring all voices shape the path forward.

Table 2 presents the key observational findings recorded during visits to UNIKHAMS campus and pesantren environments. Observations were conducted in classrooms, dormitories, offices, and communal religious spaces.

Observation Site	Observed Practice	Notes
Rectorate Office	Dual leadership roles	Rector often leads both university and pesantren meetings.
Lecture Hall	Curriculum Integration	Lectures include both modern subjects and Islamic discourse.
Pesantren	Spiritual Activities	Tahajjud and daily recitation are still practiced rigorously.



Dormitories		
Student Cafeteria	Peer Discourse	Students frequently discuss both academic and religious themes in informal settings.
Digital Lab	Limited Technological Access	Internet and digital facilities are underdeveloped compared to national universities.

The observed pattern shows a symbiotic coexistence between traditional pesantren practices and formal university operations. Leadership remains centralized, with figures such as the rector serving dual roles in both the pesantren and university domains. Academic spaces reflect content integration, with lectures combining scientific and religious narratives. Daily routines, especially in dormitories, retain spiritual intensity highlighting that religious discipline remains intact despite academic pressures. Social spaces like the cafeteria serve as informal zones for knowledge exchange, where both secular and spiritual discourses overlap. However, technological infrastructure is a weak point. The digital lab, though symbolic of progress, lacks sufficient resources for effective online learning. This duality indicates that while the institution embraces transformation, the physical and cultural architecture of the pesantren strongly influences daily operations and may resist sudden disruptions or externally imposed models of change.

The interplay observed at UNIKHAMS reflects what can be interpreted as a layered institutional identity. The coexistence of modern academic functions with pesantren traditions illustrates an ongoing negotiation of values and resources. The continued practice of tahajjud and Qur'anic recitation despite academic demands underscores the institution's commitment to spiritual sustainability, which can serve as a competitive advantage rather than a liability. However, the digital gap signals a lack of technological adaptation, which may hinder long-term competitiveness. The duality of leadership may ensure coherence in vision but could also blur boundaries between administrative functions and religious authority. From a management perspective, this setting calls for a contextualized model of governance—one that respects pesantren norms while gradually enhancing professional and technological capacities. Rather than a binary transition, the institution is undergoing a gradual hybrid transformation, guided more by cultural continuity than by structural disruption.



Table 3 displays the analysis of institutional documents collected from UNIKHAMS. These include strategic plans, academic calendars, internal policies, and curriculum guides.

Document Type	Content Focus	Observed Relevance
Strategic Plan (2021–25)	Vision, Modernization Agenda	Emphasizes global competitiveness while retaining Islamic foundation.
Academic Calendar	Integrated Learning Schedule	Includes both university and pesantren activities in the same cycle.
Curriculum Guide	Subject Integration	Combines Islamic theology with contemporary disciplines like management and informatics.
Internal Regulation	Code of Conduct, Leadership Roles	Reflects pesantren authority structure in administrative hierarchies.
Student Handbook	Academic and Spiritual Expectations	Outlines daily rituals alongside academic responsibilities.

A distinct pattern emerges from the institutional documents: there is a deliberate structural integration of religious tradition with modern educational governance. The strategic plan articulates a dual goal international competitiveness and the preservation of Islamic values. The academic calendar reflects this integration, scheduling formal academic activities alongside religious rituals and pesantren obligations. The curriculum guide supports this further, ensuring that each program includes Islamic theological foundations alongside modern knowledge areas. Internal regulations mirror pesantren leadership traditions, where decisions often flow from respected kyai figures. The student handbook formalizes the daily spiritual discipline expected of all students, regardless of their academic background. This documentation confirms that UNIKHAMS does not view religious tradition and academic progress as mutually exclusive. Instead, both are embedded into a single institutional logic that defines the university's identity and operational direction.

The documents reflect an institutional strategy of cultural integration rather than secular detachment. The university deliberately codifies pesantren values into its bureaucratic and academic systems, suggesting a philosophy of embedded Islamization where religious norms are not external to the university, but foundational to its operation. This strategic alignment ensures institutional coherence, as all actors operate within a shared ideological and cultural framework. However, such integration also



presents managerial challenges, particularly in achieving accreditation standards or adapting to global academic norms that prioritize flexibility, inclusivity, and market responsiveness. The university's documentation suggests an aspiration to compete globally without abandoning its identity a complex balancing act that requires continuous negotiation. From a theoretical perspective, this model can be understood as an example of glocalization a local adaptation of global practices rooted in specific cultural and religious contexts.

The interviews conducted at UNIKHAMS reveal a complex interplay between tradition and modernization in pesantren-based higher education. Stakeholders, including administrators, lecturers, students, and santri, express both appreciation for preserving Islamic values and a desire for academic advancement. This duality functions as both a strength and a challenge. On one hand, it fosters a unique educational environment that integrates spiritual development with academic pursuits. On the other, it may hinder the institution's ability to fully embrace contemporary educational practices and technologies. This tension is not unique to UNIKHAMS; faith-based institutions globally grapple with balancing religious traditions and modern educational demands. For instance, Georgetown University integrates Jesuit values with modern curricula, aiming to produce ethically grounded graduates (Almeida, 2024). Similarly, Zaytuna College in the U.S. blends Islamic teachings with liberal arts education (Korb, 2013). Thus, the findings underscore the need for strategic frameworks that harmonize faith-based values with modern educational imperatives (Heukamp, 2024).

The underlying structure influencing the dual aspirations at UNIKHAMS stems from its foundational identity as a pesantren institution. This identity prioritizes religious teachings and community values, which are deeply embedded in its organizational culture. However, the increasing demand for globally competitive education necessitates the adoption of modern pedagogical approaches and technologies. This structural dichotomy creates a scenario where efforts to modernize may be perceived as threats to traditional values. Similar challenges are observed in other faith-based institutions, where the integration of contemporary educational models must be carefully managed to maintain institutional identity (Heukamp, 2024). The tension between preserving religious heritage and embracing modernization requires deliberate strategies that respect both dimensions. The dual mission of such institutions presents both a challenge and an opportunity to innovate (Pirson, 2024).



Understanding this structural interplay is crucial for developing policies and practices that support the institution's dual mission.

Observations at UNIKHAMS highlight the coexistence of traditional religious practices and modern academic activities. This duality functions effectively in fostering a holistic educational experience, where students engage in both spiritual and intellectual growth. However, the integration of modern technologies and pedagogies appears limited, potentially impeding the institution's ability to compete in a rapidly evolving educational landscape. This functional imbalance is a common issue in faith-based institutions striving to modernize while preserving their religious ethos (Pirson, 2024). For example, Seattle Pacific University emphasizes integrating Christian values with business education but faces challenges in fully adopting innovative teaching methods (Stewart, 2024). The observations suggest that while the spiritual dimension remains robust, there is a need for intentional efforts to enhance the institution's technological and pedagogical capacities. Addressing this imbalance is critical for ensuring that students receive a comprehensive education that prepares them for contemporary challenges.

The observed limitations in technological integration at UNIKHAMS can be attributed to structural factors inherent in its pesantren-based framework. The institution's emphasis on traditional religious education has historically deprioritized the adoption of modern technologies. Additionally, resource constraints and a lack of exposure to contemporary pedagogical models contribute to the slow pace of modernization. This structural inertia is not uncommon in faith-based institutions, where the preservation of religious traditions often takes precedence over innovation (Fogarty, 2024). Furthermore, there may be apprehension about the potential impact of technology on religious values and community dynamics. Understanding these structural barriers is essential for developing targeted interventions that facilitate the integration of modern educational tools without compromising the institution's core values. By addressing these underlying issues, UNIKHAMS can create a more balanced educational environment that honors its religious heritage while embracing necessary advancements.

The analysis of institutional documents at UNIKHAMS reveals a deliberate effort to integrate Islamic values into academic policies and curricula. This functional alignment ensures that the institution's religious identity is preserved across various



aspects of its operations. However, the documentation also indicates a potential rigidity that may hinder adaptability and responsiveness to external educational standards and innovations. Such rigidity can limit the institution's ability to engage with broader academic communities and to incorporate diverse perspectives (Heukamp, 2024). For instance, the Australian Catholic University faced challenges in maintaining its religious identity while adapting to modern educational demands, leading to internal conflicts and external scrutiny (The Australian, 2024). Therefore, while the integration of faith-based values into institutional documentation is beneficial for identity preservation, it is essential to balance this with flexibility to accommodate evolving educational landscapes. This balance is crucial for the institution's long-term sustainability and relevance.

The emphasis on religious values in UNIKHAMS's institutional documentation is rooted in its foundational structure as a pesantren-based university. This structure inherently prioritizes religious teachings and community cohesion, influencing the development of policies and curricula. However, this focus can inadvertently create barriers to adopting innovative educational practices and aligning with international academic standards. The underlying structure may also limit the institution's capacity to attract diverse faculty and students, potentially affecting its academic diversity and global engagement (Pirson, 2024). Moreover, the rigid adherence to traditional frameworks may impede the institution's ability to respond to emerging challenges and opportunities in higher education. Recognizing these structural limitations is vital for initiating reforms that maintain the institution's religious identity while enhancing its adaptability and competitiveness. By addressing these foundational issues, UNIKHAMS can evolve into a dynamic institution that effectively integrates faith-based values with contemporary educational excellence.

Conclusion

This study reveals the critical balance between preserving religious values and integrating modern educational practices in pesantren-based higher education institutions. The main finding indicates that while institutions like UNIKHAMS are deeply committed to religious traditions, the greatest challenge lies in their limited capacity to adopt new technologies and educational methods. However, the research also emphasizes the importance of careful change management, where institutional



transformations can support development without compromising the spiritual identity of the pesantren. The lesson learned from this study is the need for a holistic approach that integrates both aspects effectively.

This research makes a significant contribution to the understanding of pesantren-based university management, particularly in Indonesia, by introducing a perspective that blends educational management theories, organizational change, and religious identity. Through a case study at UNIKHAMS, the study provides insights into how religious institutions can adapt to the rapidly evolving higher education landscape, offering a fresh perspective on the relationship between tradition and innovation in education. By employing a qualitative approach, this study presents a new methodology that could be applied to similar studies in other countries with religious-based educational settings.

There are several limitations to this study that should be considered. First, the research focuses solely on one institution, UNIKHAMS, so the findings may not be fully generalizable to other pesantren-based institutions. Second, the qualitative approach used, relying on interviews, observations, and documentation, may not fully capture the perspectives of all stakeholders. Therefore, future research that expands the sample size and incorporates quantitative methods will provide a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities in managing pesantren-based higher education institutions..

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