

Reframing Islamic Higher Education as a Driver of Global Governance and Sustainable Business Ethics

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ABSTRACT

In an era of global interdependence, higher education institutions increasingly shape the moral and intellectual foundations of governance and business. This paper argues that Islamic higher education can serve as a transformative driver for global governance and sustainable business ethics by integrating Islamic epistemology, Maqasid al-Shariah (the higher objectives of Islamic law), and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Using a conceptual and qualitative literature approach, this study explores how Islamic universities can cultivate globally competent leaders who embody ethical accountability, justice, and sustainability. Through analyses of selected literature and models from Southeast Asia, particularly Indonesia and Malaysia, the paper highlights curriculum innovation, ethical entrepreneurship, and cross-border collaboration as mechanisms to embed sustainability within Islamic education. Findings suggest that reframing Islamic higher education as a catalyst for global governance bridges the ethical gap in modern capitalism and fosters a value-driven model for sustainable development. The paper concludes with strategic recommendations for integrating SDGs, global partnerships, and Islamic ethics into higher education governance.

Keywords: *Islamic higher-education; Global governance; Sustainable business-ethics; Maqasid al-Shariah; Sustainable Development-Goals; SDGs.*

INTRODUCTION

In the face of mounting global challenges such as corporate misconduct, environmental degradation, and widening socio-economic inequalities, the adequacy of conventional governance and business ethics models is increasingly questioned. Contemporary scholarship on global governance emphasises that traditional regulatory frameworks often operate within technocratic limitations, lacking moral depth and inclusivity in decision-making (Weiss & Wilkinson, 2018; Scholte, 2020).

At the same time, the field of sustainable business ethics has evolved beyond mere regulatory compliance to emphasise the alignment of economic activity with social and environmental imperatives (Crane et al., 2019). Despite these developments, an ethical deficit persists, as many governance mechanisms and business practices continue to prioritise short-term economic gains over systemic moral responsibility.

Higher education institutions are increasingly recognised as critical actors in shaping global ethical consciousness, scientific innovation, and policy transformation (Gilson & Goldberg, 2015). Within this broader landscape, Islamic

higher education institutions offer a distinctive position. They do not function solely as centres of academic instruction but also as bearers of a moral epistemology that integrates faith, reason, and empirical knowledge (Abaza, 2018). The concept of Maqasid al-Shariah—the higher objectives of Islamic law—emphasises the protection of religion (din), life (nafs), intellect (‘aql), lineage (nasl), and property (mal), offering an ethical architecture highly relevant to the discourse on sustainability (Ahmad & Zulkifli, 2021).

Several recent studies have explored the correspondence between Maqasid al-Shariah and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), highlighting their potential synergy in achieving justice, environmental balance, and social welfare (Isman & Kaltsum, 2022; Shalghoum et al., 2024). However, these studies tend to focus on specific sectors such as Islamic finance or environmental policy, rather than the role of higher education as a transformative agent in the global governance system.

This study identifies three key gaps in the existing literature. First, while the alignment between Maqasid al-Shariah and the SDGs has been discussed extensively, there remains limited exploration of how these ethical principles can be operationalised within the governance structures and curricula of Islamic higher education institutions. Second, the scholarship on Islamic higher education has often focused on management, pedagogy, or internationalisation, but rarely examines how these institutions can influence global governance and ethical business practices. Third, although sustainable business ethics has become an increasingly prominent field, it seldom engages with faith-based educational institutions as active contributors to global ethical governance.

The novelty of this paper lies in proposing a conceptual framework that situates Islamic higher education not merely as a locus of religious or intellectual activity but as a potential driver of ethical transformation in global governance and sustainable business. By linking Islamic epistemology through Maqasid al-Shariah with contemporary sustainability discourse and the SDGs, this study reframes the role of Islamic universities as moral and intellectual hubs capable of influencing governance paradigms and business ethics on a global scale.

The contribution of this work is threefold. Theoretically, it advances the discussion on the role of faith-based higher education in global ethical governance. Conceptually, it integrates Maqasid al-Shariah with the sustainability framework to establish a coherent ethical foundation for governance and business. Practically, it offers pathways for Islamic higher education institutions to enhance their impact through curriculum reform, research collaboration, and partnerships that promote ethical entrepreneurship and sustainable development.

METHODS

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design that integrates conceptual inquiry with interpretive analysis. The qualitative approach is appropriate because the aim of this study is not to quantify phenomena but to explore meanings, relationships, and theoretical linkages between Islamic higher education, global governance, and sustainable business ethics. The design follows the logic of constructivist inquiry, which assumes that knowledge is contextually and socially constructed through interpretation of texts, ideas, and scholarly discourses (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It proceeds through three sequential stages:

1. **Literature Mapping:** Key publications were identified through Scopus, ScienceDirect, Google Scholar, and open-access repositories. Selection criteria included relevance to Islamic higher education, Maqasid al-Shariah, sustainable development, and governance ethics, focusing on literature published between 2018 and 2025.
2. **Conceptual Analysis:** The literature was reviewed critically to identify theoretical intersections between Islamic epistemology, ethical governance, and sustainability frameworks.
3. **Framework Development:** Insights from the literature were synthesised to formulate a conceptual model positioning Islamic higher education as a moral and intellectual driver of ethical global governance.

Collecting Data

Data were collected exclusively from secondary sources, consisting of peer-reviewed journals, books, institutional reports, and conference papers that discuss Islamic education, governance, and sustainability. The inclusion of multiple academic databases ensured a broad and balanced representation of both Western and Islamic perspectives. Each selected document was reviewed for its theoretical relevance, methodological credibility, and open-access availability to ensure transparency and scholarly accessibility.

Analytical Framework

The study employs two theoretical foundations. The Maqasid al-Shariah framework provides the ethical lens, highlighting principles of justice (*adl*), accountability (*amanah*), and public welfare (*maslahah*). These principles are used to interpret how sustainability can be approached as a moral rather than merely procedural objective. In parallel, global governance theory offers a structural perspective that contextualises the role of higher education institutions as actors within international policy and knowledge networks (Weiss & Wilkinson, 2018; Scholte, 2020). Integrating these two frameworks allows the study to bridge normative ethics with institutional practice, revealing how Islamic higher education can

function as a value-driven force in shaping global governance and sustainable business ethics.

Analysing Data

Data analysis followed a thematic analysis approach, which is widely used in qualitative inquiry to identify, organise, and interpret patterns of meaning within textual data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The process involved four iterative steps:

1. Familiarisation with the data by reading and summarising key ideas from each source.
2. Coding significant phrases or arguments related to Islamic ethics, governance, and sustainability.
3. Grouping codes into broader themes that represent conceptual relationships, such as “curriculum reform”, “ethical governance”, and “value-based sustainability”.
4. Synthesising themes to construct an integrative narrative that informs the conceptual framework.

This method ensured that the theoretical propositions were grounded in the patterns emerging from the literature, rather than imposed a priori.

Trustworthiness

To ensure trustworthiness, the study adheres to the four criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985): credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was enhanced by relying only on peer-reviewed and verifiable sources. Transferability was achieved by providing clear descriptions of context and theoretical scope, allowing readers to apply findings in other relevant settings. Dependability was ensured by maintaining a transparent analytical process that documented all steps of interpretation. Confirmability was achieved by grounding arguments in multiple sources and by reflexively acknowledging the researcher’s interpretive role. These measures establish confidence in the accuracy, coherence, and integrity of the study’s findings.

Ethical Considerations

This research does not involve human participants or primary field data. All materials were obtained from publicly available academic sources. Ethical integrity was maintained through accurate citation, acknowledgment of intellectual property, and adherence to principles of academic honesty and transparency. The study follows the ethical guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki (2013) and the publication standards of international academic research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The thematic analysis produced four major themes that explain how Islamic higher education can function as a transformative driver for global governance and

sustainable business ethics. These themes are: (1) curriculum transformation for ethical and sustainable education, (2) integration of Islamic epistemology with global governance, (3) embedding ethical values in business and entrepreneurship, and (4) developing a conceptual framework for ethical global governance. Each theme is discussed in relation to existing theories and empirical evidence.

Curriculum Transformation for Ethical and Sustainable Education

The first theme highlights the evolving curriculum within Islamic higher education institutions, which increasingly incorporates sustainability, ethics, and governance studies. Universities such as the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) and Universitas Islam Negeri (UIN) Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta have integrated sustainability-focused learning outcomes into their programs. These curricula combine Islamic principles of stewardship (*khalifah*) and justice (*adl*) with modern theories of sustainable development (Suharto, 2023).

This shift represents a departure from a traditional knowledge-transmission model toward a transformative education paradigm, where learners are encouraged to critically engage with global ethical challenges. The curriculum is not merely infused with religious values but reframed to produce graduates capable of addressing environmental, social, and economic issues through ethical reasoning. The inclusion of *Maqasid al-Shariah* as a pedagogical foundation strengthens students’ ability to link spiritual and moral obligations to contemporary sustainability practices. This integration aligns with UNESCO’s Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) agenda, which calls for education that fosters responsibility, empathy, and systemic thinking (UNESCO, 2021).

Integration of Islamic Epistemology with Global Governance

The second theme concerns the epistemological alignment between Islamic ethics and the principles of global governance. Islamic higher education institutions hold a unique position in bridging value-based worldviews with the procedural mechanisms of governance. The concept of *Maqasid al-Shariah* provides a moral compass that complements secular frameworks by introducing ethical intentionality and accountability (Darus et al., 2024).

Through research collaborations and policy engagement, Islamic universities have begun to influence regional and global governance discourses. Initiatives supported by the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the Islamic Development Bank (IsDB) encourage universities to engage in projects aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). However, the analysis reveals that many of these initiatives remain fragmented and under-theorised, lacking a coherent ethical foundation that links Islamic principles with institutional governance structures.

By embedding Maqasid al-Shariah within governance research and institutional policy, Islamic higher education can model an alternative framework that integrates moral responsibility with global citizenship. This integration not only enhances the credibility of Islamic universities in international networks but also positions them as contributors to ethical global governance rather than passive recipients of external norms.

Embedding Ethical Values in Business and Entrepreneurship

The third theme emphasises the operational dimension of sustainability through ethical business practices and entrepreneurship education. Islamic universities are increasingly involved in promoting ethical entrepreneurship as part of their contribution to social and economic development. Initiatives such as “Green Waqf” and “Islamic Social Finance for Sustainability” demonstrate how education, research, and community engagement can converge to produce real-world ethical impact (Ali & Al-Owaihan, 2020).

This development reflects a broader paradigm shift in Islamic economics and business education. Instead of viewing profit as an end in itself, Islamic business ethics reframes economic success as a means of achieving social welfare (maslahah). This approach is consistent with the SDGs, particularly SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) and SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production). Embedding these values in entrepreneurship programs cultivates graduates who are not only economically competent but also ethically conscious.

Empirical evidence from Southeast Asia indicates that firms led by individuals with exposure to Islamic business ethics demonstrate higher stakeholder trust and resilience in crisis conditions (Mergaliyev et al., 2019). This suggests that Islamic higher education, by integrating ethical entrepreneurship into its pedagogy, can have a tangible influence on global business practices.

A Conceptual Framework for Ethical Global Governance

The fourth theme synthesises the previous findings into a conceptual framework that positions Islamic higher education as a moral and institutional driver within the architecture of global governance. The framework identifies four interrelated components:

Table 1. Conceptual Framework for Ethical Global Governance

Component	Function	Link to SDGs
<i>Maqasid al-Shariah</i> Ethics	Provides moral foundation through justice, accountability, and social welfare	SDG 16
Curriculum and Research Innovation	Embeds ethics and sustainability across teaching and scholarship	SDG 4
Global Partnerships and Policy Engagement	Promotes collaboration between universities, governments, and international organisations	SDG 17

Ethical Entrepreneurship and Social Finance	Encourages value-based business models and community empowerment	SDG 8
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This framework reframes Islamic higher education from a traditional academic institution into an ethical governance actor capable of influencing transnational policy, research, and business environments. It advances what may be termed Maqasid-based Global Governance, where decision-making processes are informed by universal ethical values derived from Islamic epistemology.

Such a framework also contributes to theoretical innovation. It extends the discourse of sustainability from its predominantly secular orientation to a holistic worldview that integrates spiritual, moral, and intellectual dimensions. By positioning ethics as the core of governance and business, Islamic higher education challenges the reductionist tendencies of neoliberal development models and promotes a value-driven alternative grounded in moral accountability.

The findings underscore that Islamic higher education can play a pivotal role in fostering ethical global governance when three conditions are met. First, universities must institutionalise ethical literacy through curriculum reform and faculty training. Second, research must move beyond normative discussions toward applied models of governance and business ethics. Third, cross-sector partnerships should be developed to operationalise Islamic ethical principles within international and corporate contexts.

These findings are consistent with recent scholarly calls for the decolonisation of global knowledge systems and the inclusion of non-Western epistemologies in sustainability discourse (Abaza, 2018; Scholte, 2020). Islamic higher education thus holds the potential to contribute not only to the Muslim world but also to global debates on ethical governance and sustainable development.

Ultimately, the results affirm that integrating Maqasid al-Shariah within higher education governance, research, and business training can create a systemic shift toward ethical global governance. This shift redefines universities as agents of moral transformation capable of shaping both thought and practice in an interconnected world.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Islamic higher education can play a strategic role in advancing ethical global governance and sustainable business ethics. By embedding Maqasid al-Shariah into education, research, and entrepreneurship, universities can bridge moral and institutional dimensions of governance. The study contributes theoretically by integrating Islamic epistemology with governance theory, conceptually by developing a Maqasid-based framework, and practically by outlining strategies for curriculum reform and ethical leadership.

Recommendations include: (1) embedding Maqasid al-Shariah into institutional policies, (2) reforming curricula to merge ethics and sustainability, (3) promoting applied research in ethical governance, (4) strengthening partnerships with global organisations, (5) encouraging ethical entrepreneurship, and (6) developing leadership programs grounded in moral accountability. Future research should empirically test this framework across different Islamic universities and governance contexts. Comparative and longitudinal studies could further clarify the influence of Islamic higher education on ethical behaviour and institutional performance in global settings. Islamic higher education thus holds the potential to become both a producer of knowledge and a guardian of universal moral values. By aligning its intellectual mission with the pursuit of justice, sustainability, and human dignity, it can transform global governance from a system of control into a framework of ethical cooperation.

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