

Leadership and Innovation in Islamic Higher Education: A Systematic Literature Review for Sustainable Development

Shalima S. Sappayani

Universitas Islam Negeri Sultan Maulana Hasanuddin Banten, Indonesia
shadah2526@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Islamic higher education stands to be transformed by the leadership and innovation that is based on the Islamic ethical principles to bring about long term sustainability of the institution. The proposed study is a synthesizing research on the topic of leadership practices, innovation strategies, and sustainability initiatives in Islamic higher education published in 2021-2025 in the form of a Systematic Literature Review (SLR). With the guidance of PRISMA 2020, 19 peer-reviewed articles were chosen in the form of ScienceDirect, ERIC, Sage journals, SpringerLink, and Wiley online library. The thematic synthesis was employed in analysing data. There are three significant and related themes in the findings. To begin with, Islamic higher education leadership has value-based, managerial, and capacity building orientations. The leaders do not only maintain institutional mission and Islamic identity but also catalyze digital transformation, governance reform and human capital development. Second, pedagogical and digital practices, such as course design with LMS support, problem-based learning, and technology-enhanced instruction, are the most prominent in the sphere of innovation and which have been shown to both increase student engagement and student learning outcomes. Other innovations are in the field of curriculum reform, branding, and financial management, which are some of the institutional attempts to adapt to changing demands. Third, institutional resilience, culture of quality, human development, and general societal contributions are linked to sustainability, which is a less discussed concept. The concept of sustainability is commonly presented as the desired consequence of leadership-based reforms and innovation-based modernization yet operational indicators have not been developed yet. In general, the review indicates that the intervention of alignment between leadership and innovation is the core of the quality improvement and sustainable development of the Islamic higher education. Digital adoption and reforms can be facilitated by leadership commitment and long-term institutional strength is achieved through innovations introduced at both instructional and organisational levels.

Keywords: *Leadership; Innovation; Islamic higher-education; Sustainable development.*

INTRODUCTION

The fast development of education in the twenty first century leaves higher education institutions such as Islamic universities to realign their structures and philosophies to make them stay relevant and competitive. Transformation in Islamic higher education is not merely administrative or technical—it is value-oriented and mission-driven, rooted in Islamic epistemology and the pursuit of *rahmatan lil alamin* (mercy for all creation) (Al-Attas, 1979). In order to serve this purpose, Islamic higher education has to be able to incorporate leadership, innovation, and sustainability (Bush & Glover, 2014). The leadership in

management of Islamic education dictates the orientation, quality, and sensitivity of institutions to the local and global challenges. Transformational and ethical leadership leaders are able to develop new systems that foster research, quality in the curriculum system, and institutional development (Bass, 1995). Pedagogical, technological, and institutional governance innovation, in its turn, helps universities meet new needs of society and the environment in compliance with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)- namely, SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions).

Nevertheless, the current literature on the topic of Islamic higher education leadership and innovation is disjointed and in most cases does not provide a holistic view linking the areas with sustainability. In the area where Muslims are in the minority (like Mindanao, Philippines), the notions of transformational leadership and institutional innovation are under-researched (Boransing, 1980).

Therefore, this paper aims to systematically review and synthesize research conducted over the 5 years to map current developments. Identify leadership practices in Islamic higher education institutions, examine innovation strategies implemented in the institutions, explore how leadership and innovation contribute to sustainable development. To identify gaps, and propose directions for sustainable Islamic higher education transformation.

Guided by the PICo framework—where the Population refers to Islamic Higher Education Institutions (IHEIs), the Interest focuses on leadership and innovation practices, and the Context centers on the pursuit of sustainable development within Islamic higher education management—this systematic review seeks to explore how these dimensions interact to support institutional advancement. In particular, the three fundamental questions that influence the analysis scope and direction for the review: (1) Which leadership models are the most common practiced and documented within Islamic higher education institutions?, (2) What types of innovative strategies or practices underpin sustainable management in these institutions?, and (3) How do sustainable management in these institutions rely on what kinds of innovative strategies or practices?. All these questions are meant to bring the nexus between leadership, innovation, and sustainability so as to have an overall picture of their roles in enhancing the Islamic higher education systems.

METHODS

A qualitative Systematic Literature Review (SLR) based on the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) 2020 guidelines or protocol was used in this study with the PICO framework (Population, Interest, Context) to frame this research questions. PRISMA guaranteed rigor in the

methodological approach to identification, screening, and selection of studies, and PICO assisted in narrowing down conceptual scope of leadership, innovation, and sustainability in the Islamic higher education.

Search Strategy

The systematic search was conducted across five major academic databases—ScienceDirect (by Elsevier), SpringerLink (by Elsevier), SAGE Journals, Wiley Online Library, and ERIC—selected for their extensive coverage of education, leadership, and management research. The result of these databases was wide access to interdisciplinary works of interest to Islamic higher education, innovation, and sustainable development. Reference management and deduplication were carried out using Mendeley.

The keywords and search strings employed controlled vocabulary, keywords, and Boolean operators to capture core concepts related to Islamic higher education, leadership, innovation, and sustainability. Precise phrases were put in quotation marks and related terms were put in parentheses to narrow down search. The main Boolean string used was: ("Islamic higher education" OR "Islamic university" OR "Islamic tertiary education" OR "Islamic college") AND (innovation OR "digital transformation" OR modernization OR reform) AND (leadership OR management OR governance OR administration). Additional string with the terms of sustainability was also used: "Islamic higher education" OR "Islamic university" AND "leadership" OR "innovation" AND "sustainability" OR "transformation." Islamic higher education OR Islamic university and leadership or innovations and sustainability or transformation. Only the articles published during the period 2021-2025 were used in the search because of the topicality of the studies related to the SDGs and innovations after the pandemic.

Eligibility Criteria

Inclusion Criteria

The review considered studies that explicitly focus on Islamic higher education institutions (IHEIs) or higher education units with an identifiable Islamic mission or identity. Eligible studies examined themes related to leadership, innovation, digital transformation, governance, or institutional sustainability, with priority given to works addressing the intersection of these concepts. Qualified articles analyzed the topics concerning leadership, innovation, digital transformation, governance, or institutional sustainability, giving preference to the research that will cover these concepts. The literature review covered a variety of study designs, including empirical research (qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods), and conceptual or theoretical articles that have explicit analytical frameworks. To ensure relevance to recent developments—particularly those influenced by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and post-pandemic digital shifts—only studies

published between 2021 and 2025 were included. Articles either in English or written in Indonesian and published in peer-reviewed journals.

Exclusion Criteria

Research papers were excluded in the event that they were based on primary, secondary, or madrasah education without addressing to the higher education sector. Articles related to the general higher education without an open Islamic institutional identity or relationship to the focus concepts of the review, such as leadership, innovation, or sustainability were also eliminated. Also, there were no opinion pieces, editorials, non-systematic or other essays that made no empirical or theoretical contribution. Publications in languages other than English or Indonesian that could not be reliably translated, as well as non-peer-reviewed materials, inaccessible full texts, or documents outside the 2021–2025 timeframe, were also excluded from the review.

Screening and Selection Process

The screening and selection procedure was also systematic, multi-stage, in order to provide transparency and methodological rigor. First, all retrieved records were exported into Mendeley for organization and deduplication. Following this, title and abstract screening was conducted independently with blinded assessment to minimize selection bias. The reviewer rated each record as include, exclude, or uncertain.

The second step involved the full-text review of the studies that had already passed the initial screening to assess the aspect of eligibility in accordance with the specified inclusion and exclusion criteria, which were carried out by independent reviewer. All reasons for exclusion at this stage were documented systematically. The general process of selection was documented complying with the PRISMA 2020 guidelines, and the records being retained or rejected at each step were identified identification, screening, eligibility, and final inclusion and summarized in a PRISMA flow diagram.

Data Extraction

The extraction of data was done with the help of a structured matrix that was created to achieve consistency and completeness of all the studies that were included. Each article was assigned with important bibliographic and methodological data in the form of the name of the author, publication year, and country of study. Other key research attributes that were captured in the matrix include the type of study, research purpose, and type of leadership model or type of innovation, sustainability element that is covered. Besides, the extraction process recorded each study main findings, research methodology and main findings on Islamic higher education and sustainable development. This systematic method of

comparison among studies was facilitated, and it helped to synthesize emerging themes during the review.

Data Analysis

Synthetic analysis of recurrent themes and conceptual trends was done using thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2021). Article contents were used to derive codes which were grouped into major themes which were relevant to transformational leadership, innovation and sustainability in Islamic higher education.

Reporting Framework

To make the methodology transparent and rigorous, the systematic review has been conducted in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines. The search strategy was predefined to access the selected databases and retrieve every record using the search strategy. As a result, 447 records were obtained during the identification stage. During the screening phase, redundant or duplicate entries and studies that were not related to the main topic were removed leaving 205 articles to be further assessed. The eligibility phase consisted of full-text screening of the studies where 34 articles were reviewed in accordance with the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Finally, in the inclusion stage, 19 studies met all the requirements and were retained for the final synthesis. To support this process of selection, a PRISMA flow diagram will be shown in Figure 1 below to provide a visual representation of every stage of the review.

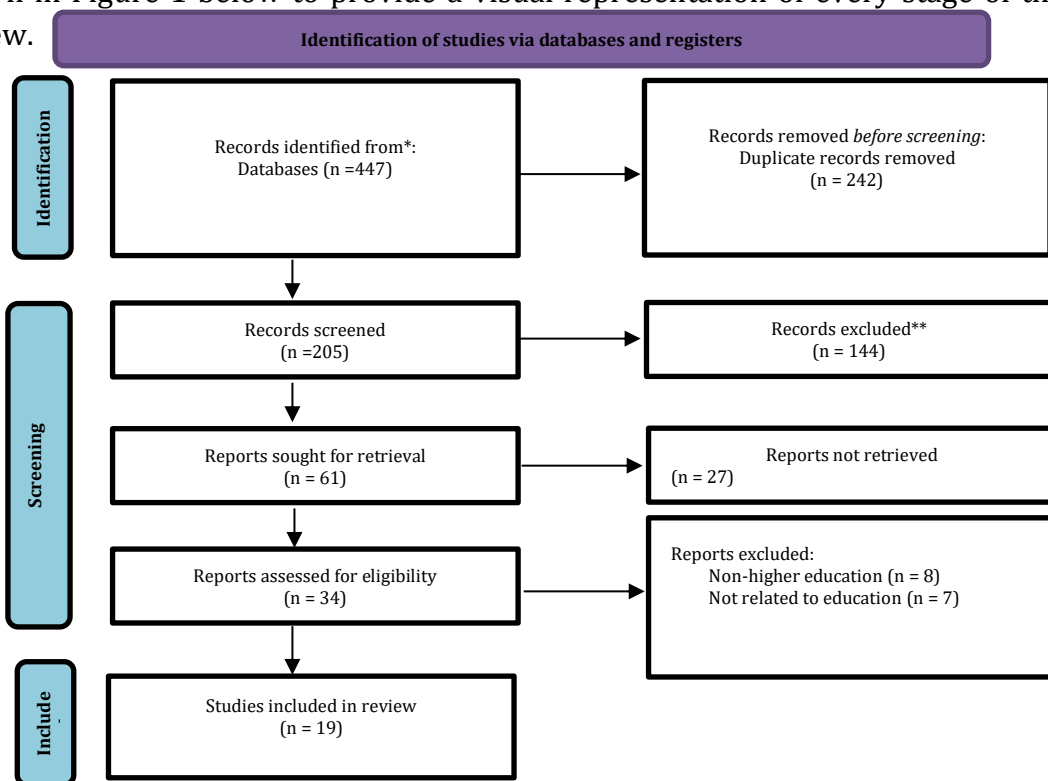


Figure 1. PRISMA Flow Diagram

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The 19 studies that were reviewed were done in Southeast Asia, South Asia and Middle East. The majority of them were based in Indonesia and Malaysia, which reflect of their dominant positions in Islamic higher education management studies. There were four prevailing themes in the result section. In Table 1 below show the all 19 related papers included in the review

Table 1. Studies included in the review

No.	Author(s) & Year of Publication	Title of Study	Country / Region	Research Aim / Purpose	Research Design / Methodology	Key Findings / Results
1	Al-Mahdy, F. S., & Al-Harthi, A. (2023)	<i>Transformational Leadership and Teachers' Job Satisfaction: The Mediating Role of Trust in the Principal</i>	Oman (Middle East)	To examine the relationship between transformational leadership and teachers' job satisfaction, and to test the mediating role of trust in the principal.	Quantitative correlational study using structural equation modeling (SEM).	Active and responsible brand personality significantly influence brand trust but not e-WoM. Brand self-congruity significantly influences e-WoM but not brand trust. Brand love significantly affects both brand trust and e-WoM. Brand trust does not significantly affect e-WoM and does not mediate relationships among variables. “Active” brand personality has stronger influence on brand trust than “responsible.” (Al-Mahdy, F. S., & Al-Harthi, 2023)

2	Al-Sartawi, A. M. M., & Hamed, M. M. (2025)	<i>Does transformational leadership boost innovation in higher education institutions? Evidence from an emerging economy</i>	Bahrain (Middle East)	To examine how transformational leadership influences innovation capability in higher education institutions in an emerging economy context.	Quantitative (correlational survey design) using statistical modeling to test the relationship between leadership and innovation.	Digital transformation and human capital have significant positive effects on competitive advantage, mediated by organizational agility. Technology adoption strengthens the relationship between human capital and competitive advantage. The findings highlight the need for leadership commitment to digital culture in Islamic HEIs.
3	Abdulrohim E-sor1, Md. Ishaque (2025)	<i>Islamic Educational Leadership: Trends Interlinking Leadership, Human Development and Sustainability</i>	Thailand, Bnagladesh	To conceptualize Islamic educational leadership through the lens of human development and sustainability, and to explore its implications	quantitative approach through bibliometric analysis and network analysis	collaborative and cross-disciplinary research environment, with three main thematic clusters: (1) curriculum design and innovation, (2) leadership and human development, and (3) sustainability in higher education.

				for contemporary education systems.		
4	Berger, Maurits S. (2021)	<i>Shifting Paradigms in Islamic Higher Education in Europe: The Case Study of Leiden University</i>	The Netherlands / Europe	To explore and reflect on paradigm shifts, challenges, and innovations in Islamic higher education in Europe through the case study of Leiden University’s Islamic Theology and Leiden Islam Academie programs (2006–2019).	Qualitative auto-ethnographic self-study using documentary review, personal experiences, and institutional records (evaluation reports, surveys, interviews).	It argues that thinking about Islamic higher education is not a process of finding solutions to problems but is a process of educational opportunities and innovation.

5	David, A., Yigitcanlar, T., Desouza, K., Li, R. Y. M., Cheong, P. H., Mehmood, R., & Corchado, J. (2024)	<i>Understanding Local Government Responsible AI Strategy: An International Municipal Policy Document Analysis</i>	Global (26 local governments across Europe, Asia, North America, and Australia)	To examine how local governments worldwide integrate Responsible Innovation and Technology (RIT) characteristics into their AI policy documents and assess the extent of responsible AI implementation.	Qualitative directed content analysis using NVivo software; based on the PRISMA protocol for systematic document selection.	The study identified multiple paradigm shifts: (1) from philological to anthropological Islamic studies; (2) from teaching “about” to teaching “into” religion; (3) growing inclusivity with Muslim students; (4) challenges to lecturer credibility and authority; (5) influence of security policies on Islamic programs; (6) expansion toward lifelong learning and extra-university education through the Leiden Islam Academie. These shifts demonstrate ongoing negotiation between academic, political, and societal forces shaping Islamic higher education in Europe.
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6	Hidayati, D., Widiati, U., Zen, E. L., & Ivone, F. M. (2025)	<i>Developing an LMS-based ESP Course for Islamic Undergraduate Students</i>	Indonesia	To develop and evaluate a Learning Management System (LMS)-based English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course tailored for Islamic undergraduate students majoring in Syariah Economics, addressing linguistic, cultural, and technological gaps in ESP instruction.	Research and Development (R&D) design using the ADDIE model (Analysis, Design, Development, Implementation, Evaluation).	The LMS-based ESP course significantly enhanced student engagement, language proficiency, and contextual understanding of Syariah Economics. Validation scores were high for Content Design Relevance (80.33), Elements/Features/Media (83.67), and Practical Application in ESP (81). Students reported strong engagement (95% agreement) and perceived real-world relevance of course content. Challenges identified included fostering collaborative learning and managing digital accessibility.
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7	Hilman Latief (2022)	<i>The Masyumi Networks and the Proliferation of Islamic Higher Education in Indonesia (1945–1965)</i>	Indonesia	To examine the role of Masyumi political networks in the establishment and spread of Islamic higher education institutions in Indonesia from 1945 to 1965.	Qualitative historical research using social network analysis and documentary review (historical literature, biographies, news archives, party documents, and interviews).	Innovation in Islamic higher education must align with <i>Society 5.0</i> by integrating technology, critical thinking, and adaptive learning models. Competitive advantage in Islamic HEIs arises from leadership quality, human resources, teamwork, service quality, financial innovation, and a strong religious-quality culture. Foundations include <i>aqidah sohihah</i> , rationality, character, intuition, and authority as sources of knowledge.
8	Juhaidi, A., Syaifuddin, Salamah, Ma’ruf, H., Yuseran, M., Shapiah, R., Janah, R., Mudhiah, R., Saputri, R. A.,	<i>The Effect of Brand Personality, Brand-Self Congruity, and Brand Love on E-WOM in Islamic Higher Education in Indonesia: A</i>	Indonesia	To analyze how brand personality (active and responsible), brand-self congruity, and brand love influence electronic	Quantitative (Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling — PLS-SEM) using SmartPLS 4.0.9.9.	Most local governments incorporated RIT features inconsistently — with strong emphasis on deliberation and participation , but weaker focus on accountability, adaptability, and sustainability . Collaboration between local authorities, private sectors,

	Muharramah, N., Fuady, M. N., Ramadan, W., & Lisdariani, R. (2024)	<i>Mediating Effect of Brand Trust</i>		word-of-mouth (e-WoM) among students in Islamic higher education, and to examine whether brand trust mediates these relationships.		and academia emerged as a core success factor. The study revealed major governance and literacy gaps at the municipal level.(Juhaidi et al., 2024)
9	Millie, J., Syarif, D., & Fakhruroji, M. (2023)	<i>The Discipline of Dakwah in Indonesia’s State Education System</i>	Indonesia	To examine how the discipline of <i>dakwah</i> (Islamic preaching) has been bureaucratically integrated into Indonesia’s state education system and transformed into an	Qualitative historical and document analysis through critical review of institutional archives, scholarly texts, and academic discourse from 1945–present.	Transformational leadership and knowledge management both positively influence lecturers’ performance, with organizational learning serving as a significant mediator. The findings suggest that leaders in Islamic HEIs should foster knowledge-sharing cultures and continuous learning environments to enhance academic staff performance (Millie et al., 2023)

				academic field influenced by social sciences and media studies.		
10	Muh. Hambali & Idris (2020)	<i>Transformational Leadership, Organizational Culture, Quality Assurance, and Organizational Performance: Case Study in Islamic Higher Education Institutions (IHEIs)</i>	Indonesia	To examine the direct and indirect relationships among transformational leadership, organizational culture, quality assurance, and organizational performance in Islamic Higher Education Institutions.	Quantitative explanatory research using Partial Least Squares – Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM).	Transformational leadership has a significant positive effect on innovation capability. The strongest predictors were <i>intellectual stimulation</i> and <i>inspirational motivation</i> . Organizational culture partially mediates the relationship, enhancing innovation performance within HEIs.(Hambali & Idris, 2020)

11	Mulyaningsih, I., Rahmat, W., Maknun, D., & Firdaus, W. (2022)	<i>How Competence of Production, Attention, Retention, Motivation, and Innovation Can Improve Students' Scientific Writing Skills</i>	Indonesia	To determine how the competencies of production, attention, retention, motivation, and innovation (PARMI model) affect students' scientific writing skills at Islamic higher education institutions.	Quantitative quasi-experimental design (nonequivalent control group design).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transformational leadership did not significantly influence organizational performance or quality assurance. • Organizational culture positively and significantly influenced both organizational performance and quality assurance. • Quality assurance significantly influenced organizational performance. • Quality assurance mediated the relationship between organizational culture and organizational performance. • Quality assurance did not mediate the relationship between transformational leadership and performance. (Mulyaningsih et al., 2022)
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12	Najamuddin , F., Nur, S., Suriansyah, A., & Arifin, M. (2025)	<i>Investigating the Influence of Transformational Leadership and Knowledge Management on Lecturers’ Performance at Islamic Universities in Indonesia: The Mediating Role of Organizational Learning</i>	Indonesia	To examine how transformational leadership and knowledge management affect lecturers’ performance at Islamic universities in Indonesia, with organizational learning as a mediating variable.	Quantitative research using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM-PLS).	
13	Nasir, M., Rijal, M. K., Kahar, S. K., Rahman, F., & Komariah, A. (2024)	<i>University Leaders’ Views on Independent Campus Curriculum as Educational Reforms in Indonesian</i>	Indonesia	To investigate the challenges and opportunities faced by Islamic universities in Indonesia in implementing	Qualitative research using a case study approach with purposive sampling and thematic analysis .	Indonesian Islamic universities must establish grant money, encourage cooperation and partnerships with relevant institutions, and generate a wide range of activities following a publicly accessible independent

		<i>Islamic Universities</i>		the Independent Campus Curriculum (Merdeka Belajar–Kampus Merdeka) as part of educational policy reform.		campus curriculum policy.(Nasir et al., 2024)
14	Salsabilah, Wanada Siti; Maisah; & Roudoh (2025)	<i>Bibliometric and Systematic Review of Islamic Education Learning Quality: Trends, Gaps, and Future Directions</i>	Indonesia (Global scope via Scopus data)	To identify trends, developments, and key factors affecting the quality of Islamic Religious Education (IRE) learning from 2015–2025 through bibliometric and systematic	Mixed-method study combining bibliometric analysis and systematic literature review using data from Scopus (2015–2025). Bibliometric mapping via VOSviewer and qualitative synthesis of selected articles.	(Salsabilah et al., 2025)

				review approaches.		
15	Syihabudin, T., Ma'mur, I., & Firdaos, R. (2023)	<i>Merdeka Belajar Innovation Through Strengthening Competition of Islamic Higher Education in Society Era 5.0</i>	Indonesia	To explore how Islamic higher education can strengthen competitiveness through innovations in the <i>Merdeka Belajar</i> (Freedom to Learn) framework within the context of Society 5.0.	Qualitative study using a library research approach ; secondary data from books, journal articles, and government reports analyzed descriptively and deductively.	erdeka Belajar innovation is carried out by developing in harmony with Merdeka Belajar curricula and multilevel learning innovations. Strengthening Islamic higher education is based on aqidah sohihah, philosophy, five senses, intuition, character, rationality, and authority as a source of knowledge, all of which must be used as an inspirational approach.

16	Suyadi, Zalik Nuryana, Sutrisno, & Baidi (2022)	<i>Academic Reform and Sustainability of Islamic Higher Education in Indonesia</i>	Indonesia	To investigate the academic reform agenda at State Islamic University (UIN) Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta and its influence on the sustainability of Islamic higher education institutions in Indonesia.	Qualitative (Phenomenological study) exploring the lived experiences of university stakeholders involved in academic reform.	Identified four major academic reform agendas that shaped Islamic higher education nationwide:1. Internationalization of Islamic Education study programs.2. Establishment of PGMI & PIAUD programs as national models.3. Integration of postgraduate management into faculties to ensure continuity and specialization.4. Initiation of teacher certification programs, influencing similar policies across Indonesia. These reforms became national references and strengthened PTKI sustainability.
17	Taufik, A., Siregar, R., Rahmah, N., & Alhabsyi, F. (2025)	<i>Digital Transformation in Islamic Higher Education: Building a</i>	Indonesia	To investigate how digital transformation and human capital development	Quantitative research using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM-PLS).	Research on IRE learning quality peaked in 2024, with Indonesia contributing the most (108 publications). Major influencing factors: teacher competence, madrasah

		<i>Competitive Advantage through Human Capital and Technology Adoption</i>		contribute to competitive advantage in Islamic higher education institutions (HEIs) in Indonesia.		leadership, quality management (TQM) , (Taufik, A., Siregar, R., Rahmah, N., & Alhabsyi, 2025),
18	Waluyo, B., Anita, Akhirudin, D. Syafaah, & M. B. A. Bahy (2025)	<i>Bridging Secular and Religious Perspectives: Gender Awareness in Language Learning in Indonesian Higher Education</i>	Indonesia	To explore and compare students' gender awareness, perceptions of equality, and inclusive practices in English language education at public and Islamic universities in Indonesia.	Mixed-methods design combining quantitative surveys and qualitative written interviews.	

19	Amirudin, Iqbal Amar Muzaki Amirudin, Sri Nurhayati (2025)	<i>Problem-Based Learning as a Pedagogical Innovation for Transforming Higher Education Students' Islamic Religious Comprehension</i>	Indonesia	explores the transformative potential of Problem-Based Learning (PBL) as a pedagogical innovation to enhance students' comprehension and application of Islamic religious concepts.	Sequential Explanatory Mixed Methods	BL's effectiveness in enhancing conceptual understanding. Qualitative insights identified four major themes: increased conceptual clarity, improved critical thinking, enhanced classroom engagement. (Amirudin et al., 2025)
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Thematic Findings

The 19 studies in the dataset were synthesised through thematic analysis to provide findings. The synthesis recurred patterns that were repeated throughout the aims, methods, areas of focus, key findings, and declared themes/categories of the studies. The synthesis aimed at major themes and subthemes that were grouped around (1) leadership models; (2) types of innovation and pedagogical/technical practices; (3) elements of sustainability. Counts and study citations given below reflect only the records present in the uploaded file (19 studies; 14 of these are Indonesia-based).

Theme 1 — Leadership models in Islamic higher education

Name of the theme: Leadership models and leadership roles

Creation of patterns (major subthemes):

1. Digital change / digital culture leadership. Some of the researches reveal leadership commitment or leadership as a catalyst to digital transformation and institutional agility (Hidayati et al., 2025). The aspect of leadership is positioned as required to implement digital platforms and the advancement of the digital culture in Islamic HEIs (Al-Sartawi, 2025).
2. Leadership based on values / religiously based. Other articles focus on leadership based on Islamic principles, moral/ethical power, or religious/cultural sources that influence institutional purposes (Latief, 2022). The network of leaders in the past was characterized as shaping the growth and nature of Islamic higher education (Latief, 2022).
3. Managerial and distributed aspects of governance. Some of the studies involve leadership as a concern related to governance, quality assurance, and institutional management (Suyadi et al., 2022;). Governance reforms, quality culture and administrative practices are associated with leadership (Suyadi et al., 2022; Najamuddin, F., Nur, S., Suriansyah, A., & Arifin, 2025).
4. Human capital and capacity building leadership. The leadership becomes the answer to building human capital and the ability of staff/faculty to be innovative. Examples: al-Sartawi (2025); Latief (2022) (2022); Suyadi et al., (2022);

Theme 2 — Innovation types (pedagogical, curricular, financial, branding, and digital)

Name of the theme: Innovation and digital transformation practices

Creation of patterns (major subthemes):

1. Pedagogical (course design and active learning). Several studies compare pedagogical interventions (e.g., LMS-based ESP courses design, Problem-

- Based Learning) and record increased levels of engagement, theoretical knowledge or course outcomes (Hidayati et al., 2025; Waluyo et al., 2025).
2. The use of digital and instructional technology. The use of LMS, e-learning, and the general trend of digital transformation are notable types of innovations; research associates it with student engagement, instructional design (ADDIE), and the needs of leadership commitment (Hidayati et al., 2025).
 3. Academic reform and curriculum. Some of these contributions deal with the topic of curriculum innovation, the agenda of academic reform, and institutional innovation as an aspect of modernization (Abdulrohim, 2025; Suyadi et al., 2022; David et al., 2024).
 4. Institutional and financial innovation. According to some studies, one of the areas of innovation related to the resilience of institutions is financial innovation and managerial practices (Syihabudin et al., 2023).
 5. Branding and market/brand innovation. Institutional innovations explored include marketing and brand personality/trust features, which influence the perception of students and brand performance and outcomes (Al-Mahdy, F. S., & Al-Harhi, 2023).

Theme 3 — Sustainability elements and links to institutional resilience

Name of the theme: Sustainability and SDG-aligned initiatives (as represented in the dataset)

Creation of patterns (major subthemes):

1. Reform and quality culture of institutional sustainability. Research directly associates policy reform and academic reform with institutional sustainability and long-term sustainability (Suyadi et al., 2022).
2. Sustainability as part of curriculum/human development. The concept of curriculum design and innovation is occasionally presented together with the focus on human development and sustainability (Abdulrohim, 2025).
3. Broader societal connections and lifelong learning. The rare few studies identify institutional sustainability in more general societal functions (knowledge co-production, lifelong learning) (David et al., 2024).

Discussion

1. Leadership models. The dataset describes leadership as multi-dimensional: a values-based (religiously infused) source of institutional identity (Latief, 2022; Berger, 2021), a managerial/governance role, which determines the quality assurance agenda as well as the reform agenda (Suyadi et al., 2022; (Najamuddin, F., Nur, S., Suriansyah, A., & Arifin, 2025) and a practical facilitator of digital transformation and human capital development (Al-Sartawi, 2025; Syihabudin et al., 2023). Collectively, these trends suggest that leadership in the sampled studies is located ideationally (as custodian of mission/ values) and

instrumentally (as change agent and capacity building). The dual role is consistently reported in the institutional and course level interventions.

2. Innovation practices. The innovations are mainly pedagogical and digital (LMS, PBL, course redesign), as well as branding and financial/managerial innovations. Proximal outcomes are often positive (e.g., conceptual clarity, engagement) when using pedagogical innovation studies that have assessed the learning of students (Amirudin et al., n.d.; Hidayati et al., 2025). The continuity of digitalization and LMS adoption repeats as the practices to be introduced, as well as a subject of the success rate based on the ability of leaders, staff, and the readiness of the institution to embrace changes (Al-Sartawi, 2025; Hidayati et al., 2025)
3. Sustainability orientation. The concept of sustainability is expressed in two aspects: (a) in terms of institutional sustainability that is enhanced by academic reform and quality culture (Suyadi, 2022) and (b) in terms of curriculum and human development (Abdulrohman, 2025). Although sustainability is less prominent than innovation and leadership across the dataset (appearing in 5 studies), the data that do address it locate sustainability as an intended outcome of governance and reform.

The general issues that have been observed in the literature are: (1) Lack of proper leadership training based on Islamic epistemology, (2) Lack of unified systems of governance between state and religious governances, (3) Poor innovation because of lack of resources, (4) The absence of indicators of sustainability in line with the missions of Islamic universities.

The review suggests that sustainable Islamic higher education must adopt an integrated model that combines: (1) Leadership ethics (moral vision and accountability), (2) Institutional innovation (digitalization, community engagement), and (3) Research culture (knowledge creation and societal impact).

CONCLUSION

It is a systematic review that has evaluated the evidence of 19 studies to investigate the conceptualisation and implementation of leadership, innovation, and sustainability in Islamic higher education. Three themes were always present across the dataset, which were interrelated. First, leadership, which was represented in the value-based, managerial and capacity-building orientations, was shown as a major source of institutional direction. A study revealed the importance of leadership in the formation of a digital culture, facilitation of governance reforms, and development of human capital. Second, innovation emerged mostly in pedagogical and digital forms, with such interventions as LMS course design and problem-based learning showing positive short-term improvements in student engagement and

conceptual knowledge. Other areas of innovations such as the redesign of the curriculum, their financial management, and branding, provided an example of how institutions could respond strategically to changing educational needs. Third, and less commonly, sustainability was positioned in terms of institutional resilience, quality culture, human development and wider society roles. As combined, the results indicate that the leadership-innovation alignment is the main pathway through which institutions have better quality, modernisation, and sustainability. The capacity of leadership to commit to incorporating digital tools and pedagogical redesign and the ability of governance and policy reforms manage innovations into institutional changes that are more sustained are facilitated by leadership commitment. The data also illustrates that changes adopted at micro (classroom), meso (institutional), and macro (historical/policy) levels are all contributing towards the changing environment of Islamic higher education. The review provides a several contributions. In theory, it consolidates the scattered results in a cohesive knowledge of how the leadership models and innovation practices influence institutional development in the context of Islamic higher education. In practice, it has been demonstrated that institutional performance and sustainability can be strengthened by structured pedagogical innovations, digital transformation led by the leaders of the institutions, and reform-oriented governance. Simultaneously, gaps in the dataset can be seen. The majority of the studies are based in Indonesia and this restricts cross-contextual generalisability. Most of the tests are based on short-term or single-site designs, which provide limited data on long-term institutional effect. Sustainability is a phenomenon that is presented as a intended goal but is hardly ever operationalised in using quantifiable measures. These limitations form the boundaries of the existing empirical information and highlight the areas that need to be examined further. The general picture of the current body of research is that leadership, innovation, and sustainability in Islamic higher education are reinforcing but unevenly in their study. Enhancing empirical depth, extending geographical reach and establishing more precise indicators of sustainability would enrich practice and intellectual comprehension in the field of institutional practice.

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