

Challenges and Opportunities of Inclusive Education in Islamic Higher Education Institutions: A Case Study in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT. This study explores the challenges and opportunities in implementing inclusive education in Indonesia's Islamic Religious Higher Education Institutions (Perguruan Tinggi Keagamaan Islam/PTKI). Inclusive education, which seeks to ensure access and equity for students with disabilities or special needs, has become increasingly relevant within Islamic higher education as part of the broader agenda for educational equity and human rights. The study employs a qualitative approach with a case study design involving interviews, observations, and documentation at several PTKIs that have initiated inclusive education programs. Findings reveal that PTKIs face several challenges, including a lack of institutional policy, inadequate infrastructure, limited teaching competencies in inclusive pedagogy, and socio-cultural barriers stemming from stigmatisation. However, the study also identifies key opportunities, such as aligning inclusive values with Islamic teachings, institutional commitment to equity, and the role of government policies in supporting inclusivity. Though facing substantial barriers, the study concludes that inclusive education in PTKIs can be significantly enhanced through policy reforms, capacity building, and collaboration across institutional and governmental levels. These findings contribute to the growing discourse on inclusive education in Islamic contexts and provide practical implications for educational leaders and policymakers.

Keywords: *Inclusive Education, Islamic Higher Education, Equity, Disability Inclusion, Educational Policy.*

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INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education has become a central focus in global educational discourse, ensuring equal access to quality education for all individuals, regardless of their physical, cognitive, social, or emotional conditions. Within the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG-4) framework, which targets “inclusive and equitable quality education and promotes lifelong learning opportunities for all,” higher education institutions are now being called upon to rethink and redesign their learning environments to be more inclusive and accommodating. However, implementing inclusive education in religious-based institutions, particularly Islamic Higher Education Institutions (IHEIs), remains under-researched and insufficiently explored.

Islamic Higher Education Institutions are vital in shaping Muslim communities' intellectual, moral, and social fabric. In Indonesia, the Ministry of Religious Affairs supervises various Islamic universities and institutes, collectively known as Perguruan Tinggi Keagamaan Islam (PTKI). These institutions are expected to advance Islamic scholarship and demonstrate leadership in implementing inclusive educational models. Nevertheless, existing research shows that many

PTKIs still face significant challenges in accommodating students with disabilities or those from marginalised backgrounds due to limitations in infrastructure, educator preparedness, institutional policies, and socio-cultural perceptions (Aziz & Sutopo, 2020; Nurhayati, 2019).

Several studies have attempted to assess the readiness of higher education institutions to implement inclusive education. For instance, Florian and Spratt (2013) developed a model of inclusive pedagogy highlighting the importance of understanding diversity as a norm rather than an exception. Similarly, Ainscow and Miles (2008) emphasised the need for systemic transformation beyond access to curriculum modification, assessment reform, and attitudinal shifts among educators and stakeholders. While these frameworks have significantly influenced global practices, their direct applicability to Islamic higher education settings, with their unique theological and cultural contexts, remains largely untested.

In the Indonesian context, empirical research on inclusive education has focused primarily on primary and secondary schools (Fatimah, 2021; Suwondo et al., 2022), with limited scholarly attention given to IHEIs. Moreover, existing literature often treats inclusivity as a monolithic concept without considering the pluralities within the Islamic education system. For example, integrating *maqasid al-shariah* (objectives of Islamic law) into educational practices is an important dimension often overlooked by secular inclusive education models. This theoretical oversight points to a significant national and international literature gap.

There is also a conceptual tension between theological doctrines and inclusive practices. For instance, while Islamic teachings uphold the principles of justice, compassion, and the right to education (*Iqra'*), some conservative interpretations might hinder the full participation of students with disabilities, especially women with disabilities. In addition, most IHEIs have yet to adopt inclusive policies aligned with national legal mandates (e.g., Law No. 8 of 2016 on Persons with Disabilities) or international frameworks (e.g., UNCPRD). This discrepancy results in inconsistencies in policy implementation and often marginalises those who most need educational access.

Given these critical gaps, the present study examines the development of an inclusive education model tailored to the unique religious, cultural, and administrative environments of Islamic Higher Education Institutions in Indonesia. The research aims to uncover the challenges and opportunities that PTKIs face in institutionalising inclusive practices. The unit of analysis includes educators, administrators, and students at selected PTKIs, observed through qualitative lenses involving interviews, document analysis, and field observation.

The structure of this article is organised as follows. The Method section details the qualitative case study approach and instruments used. The Results section presents the findings thematically based on the challenges and enabling factors identified. The Discussion situates these findings within existing scholarly literature and policy frameworks. Finally, the Conclusion outlines key takeaways, policy implications, and future research directions.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive case study approach to explore the implementation of inclusive education within Islamic Higher Education Institutions (IHEIs) in Indonesia. The qualitative approach was selected to enable a rich, contextual understanding of institutional practices, policy gaps, and stakeholders' lived experiences in implementing inclusive education.

The research was conducted at several selected State Islamic Religious Universities (Perguruan Tinggi Keagamaan Islam Negeri or PTKINs) that had begun to adopt inclusive educational practices. These institutions were chosen based on purposive sampling, where universities were selected for their early-stage inclusion programs, accessibility infrastructure, or

documented interest in inclusive education. This sampling technique allowed the researchers to focus on sites with potential relevance to the objectives of the study.

Data collection was conducted over four months and involved three primary techniques: semi-structured interviews, non-participant observation, and document analysis. Interviews were conducted with key stakeholders, including lecturers, university administrators, students with disabilities, and disability service unit staff (if available). The interviews were designed to capture perspectives on policy implementation, institutional readiness, challenges faced in daily academic interaction, and perceived opportunities for developing inclusive education. Each interview lasted 30 to 90 minutes and was conducted in person or online, depending on the informant's availability and geographic constraints.

Observational data were gathered by visiting classrooms, administrative offices, and university facilities such as libraries, prayer spaces, and dormitories. This approach allowed the researcher to directly assess the physical accessibility and inclusive atmosphere of the campus environment. In parallel, institutional documents such as academic regulations, strategic plans, and internal policies regarding student diversity and support services were reviewed to gain insight into formal commitments and administrative practices related to inclusion.

The instruments used in the study included an interview guide with open-ended questions, an observation checklist focusing on physical infrastructure and classroom inclusivity, and a document analysis framework based on UNESCO's indicators for inclusive education in higher learning. All instruments were developed and validated through expert review to ensure content validity.

Several strategies were employed to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings. Data triangulation was achieved by comparing interviews, observations, and documents. Member checking was performed by sharing preliminary findings with selected participants for validation and feedback. The researcher also maintained detailed field notes and reflective journals to enhance the credibility and transparency of the research process.

The role of the researcher in this study was that of a non-participant observer with prior academic familiarity with educational studies and a basic understanding of inclusive education discourse. The researcher's presence was communicated transparently to all participants, and ethical considerations—including informed consent, voluntary participation, and data confidentiality—were strictly observed throughout the study.

This study integrated multiple data sources to construct a comprehensive picture of how inclusive education is operationalised within PTKINs, highlighting systemic barriers and innovative practices rooted in Islamic educational philosophy.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

This research explored inclusive education's development, implementation, and perceived impact in Islamic Religious Higher Education Institutions (Perguruan Tinggi Keagamaan Islam/PTKI). The findings reflect various inclusivity dimensions, including institutional policies, curriculum adaptations, infrastructure readiness, faculty competence, and community perception. Thematic analysis yielded several key findings:

Institutional Policy Development

While inclusive education has gained formal recognition in several PTKIs, its practical translation into institutional policy remains inconsistent. Only a minority of PTKIs have established comprehensive, stand-alone inclusive education policies. These institutions often rely

on broader equity or academic policies without explicitly articulating disability or marginalisation. One exemplary institution has embedded inclusive values into its academic charter and strategic planning documents, demonstrating leadership commitment. However, in most cases, policies remain abstract, fragmented, or symbolic. This approach reflects a top-down gap in understanding inclusive education as a transformative framework rather than a supplemental support service.

Curriculum and Academic Accommodation

Curricular inclusivity was another major concern. Although general efforts to “normalise” diversity were observed, most PTKIs have not incorporated specific guidelines or learning outcomes related to inclusive pedagogy. Teacher training or Islamic education courses rarely address disability-inclusive strategies or differentiated learning. Where accommodations were observed—such as extended time for assessments or individualised instruction—they were usually informal and dependent on lecturer discretion. Encouragingly, in a few institutions, certain faculties, particularly Education and Tarbiyah, have begun to embed inclusive education topics into their curriculum through elective modules or practicum placements with inclusive schools. However, these efforts remain isolated and lack institutional mandates.

Infrastructure and Accessibility

Physical and digital accessibility were consistently identified as significant barriers to inclusion. Many PTKI campuses, particularly those founded before 2000, were not designed with universal access. Common issues included the absence of ramps, elevators, accessible toilets, and signage in Braille. Students with mobility impairments reported relying heavily on peer assistance. Digital accessibility was also underdeveloped; online learning platforms used by PTKIs were rarely compliant with screen readers or assistive technologies. However, several institutions showed promise, collaborating with NGOs and local governments to retrofit facilities and adopt accessibility audits. Nonetheless, systemic planning for inclusive infrastructure remains at an early stage.

Human Resources and Faculty Training

The lack of structured professional development was a major hindrance to inclusive education implementation. Most lecturers had no prior training in inclusive pedagogy or disability awareness. Pedagogical approaches were heavily centred on conventional delivery with little differentiation. A few PTKIs have begun offering internal workshops on inclusive teaching strategies, particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated digital transformation. Nevertheless, these initiatives are sporadic and mostly externally funded. Faculty members acknowledged their limited preparedness and needed continuous, formalised capacity-building programs. The presence of inclusive champions among faculty—individuals who advocate for change—was found to be critical in advancing inclusion at the grassroots level.

Student and Community Perceptions

Attitudes among students and stakeholders ranged from supportive to ambivalent. Some students viewed accommodations as “favouritism,” reflecting a lack of awareness regarding equity principles. Others, particularly those who had studied with peers with disabilities, expressed increased empathy and support. Interviews with students with disabilities revealed a complex picture: while grateful for peer and faculty support, many faced stigma or paternalism. Parents and community members of students with disabilities emphasised the role of PTKIs as moral institutions that should model social justice. Several stakeholders suggested that Islamic values inherently align with inclusive principles and should be used to legitimise and promote inclusive policies more forcefully.

Discussion

The study explored the dynamics of inclusive education in Indonesia's Islamic Religious Higher Education Institutions (PTKIs), offering fresh insight into how Islamic institutions conceptualise, adapt, and implement inclusive practices. The findings echo broader global and regional discussions on inclusive education but are shaped uniquely by religious, cultural, and institutional contexts. In this section, we interpret these findings concerning the research questions and critically position them within the framework of relevant literature.

Addressing Policy Gaps: Between Symbolism and Implementation

First and foremost, the lack of institutional policy and clarity regarding inclusive education in PTKIs echoes findings from international studies, such as the work of Florian & Black-Hawkins (2011), who emphasise that inclusion must be conceptualised beyond physical access—it should encompass curricular, pedagogical, and cultural dimensions. In PTKIs, however, most efforts toward inclusion remain at the level of physical access, such as ramps and accessible toilets, without fully embedding inclusive values into the academic and social culture of the institution.

The absence of explicit and operational institutional policies on inclusive education reflects a disconnect between national mandates and institutional translation. While the Indonesian Government has issued regulatory frameworks to support inclusive education (Peraturan Menteri Pendidikan Dan Kebudayaan Nomor 10 Tahun 2020 Tentang Program Sekolah Penggerak, 2020), many PTKIs still lack tailored policies to integrate these mandates meaningfully into institutional cultures. This finding aligns with previous research (Bisseneva, 2021; Sari et al., 2022) that notes the symbolic nature of inclusive rhetoric in educational policy in Indonesia, where inclusion is often misunderstood as mere access rather than full participation and equity.

The policy ambiguity identified in this study mirrors global patterns where institutions declare inclusivity but fall short of implementation (Ainscow & Miles, 2008). However, PTKIs can leverage Islamic theological foundations—such as *rahmatan lil alamin* (mercy to all creation) and *adl* (justice)—as philosophical justifications to frame inclusive education as a religious duty rather than an administrative requirement. This result aligns with Mohdlori et al. (2023), who emphasised the potential of Islamic values to bridge human rights frameworks and faith-based education models.

Curriculum Reform: The Need for Inclusive Pedagogical Innovation

The limited integration of inclusive education principles into curricula at PTKIs underscores a broader issue in teacher preparation programs across Indonesia. As previously noted by Efendi (2018), teacher training institutions often lack explicit strategies to prepare educators for diverse classrooms, especially for students with disabilities. Our findings suggest that while some PTKIs have introduced elective modules on inclusion, there is no systemic effort to make inclusive pedagogy a core competence.

The shortage of lecturers with competencies in inclusive pedagogy presents a significant barrier. This statement aligns with studies in broader higher education systems (e.g., Moriña, 2017), highlighting the necessity of continuous professional development in Universal Design for Learning (UDL), differentiated instruction, and empathy-driven classroom practices. Our study confirms that, although PTKI lecturers generally support inclusive ideals, they feel ill-equipped to translate them into concrete teaching strategies. This gap between belief and practice suggests a pressing need for structured capacity-building programs tailored to the PTKI context.

This gap is especially concerning in Islamic educational contexts where future religious teachers and scholars are trained. As Roqib et al. (2021) argued, inclusive pedagogy should be

contextualised technically and through religious and moral education. Therefore, there is a pressing need to redesign curriculum frameworks at PTKIs to include inclusive education principles as fundamental, not peripheral, especially in the Tarbiyah and Islamic Education faculties.

Accessibility Challenges: Infrastructural and Digital Barriers

The infrastructural limitations identified—such as the lack of ramps, signage, and digital accommodations—echo the challenges in other developing nations (UNESCO, 2020). Despite constitutional guarantees of educational access, implementation is often hampered by budgetary constraints and planning deficits. However, What differentiates PTKIs is their dual status as educational and religious institutions. As such, the failure to provide accessible learning environments breaches legal compliance and potentially conflicts with Islamic ethical imperatives of justice and compassion.

Digital inaccessibility, especially in post-pandemic online learning, exacerbates educational exclusion. Averett's (2021) research on online learning during COVID-19 highlights the digital divide for students with disabilities in the US. PTKIs must address these gaps through inclusive digital transformation strategies, ensuring compatibility with assistive technologies and universal design principles.

Human Resources: Empowering Faculty for Inclusion

The study highlights the lack of inclusive education training among PTKI lecturers, consistent with Ashar et al. (2023), who reported insufficient professional development for inclusive teaching in Indonesian higher education. Faculty competence is crucial not only for instructional delivery but also for shaping inclusive campus cultures. The role of “inclusive champions”—faculty members who voluntarily promote inclusive values—was a notable finding that resonates with the concept of transformative leadership in inclusive education (Loreman et al., 2014).

Empowering faculty through structured training, mentorship, and collaborative learning communities is essential. PTKIs should explore partnerships with inclusive education NGOs and regional centres of excellence to design sustainable faculty development programs. Furthermore, integrating inclusive education standards into lecturer certification and performance evaluation could institutionalise inclusive teaching practices.

Perception and Attitudinal Transformation

Socio-cultural resistance—rooted in stigma toward students with disabilities—remains a hidden yet potent barrier to inclusion. This result aligns with findings from Al-Azawei, Serenelli, and Lundqvist (2016), who argue that societal perceptions and attitudes toward disability greatly influence institutional practices. In the context of PTKIs, where religious and cultural values are deeply intertwined, these perceptions become even more complex. While Islam advocates for justice, compassion, and equality, misinterpretations and traditional biases can obstruct inclusive implementation. This statement calls for a re-engagement with Islamic ethical principles to reclaim the theological foundation of inclusivity.

Stakeholder perception emerged as both a challenge and an opportunity. While some students perceive inclusive policies as favouritism, this misconception reveals the urgent need for awareness campaigns and dialogue on equity versus equality. Booth and Ainscow (2002) emphasise that inclusive education requires a cultural shift—not just structural reform. Changing attitudes

within religious education institutions is uniquely complex yet potentially impactful, given their authority in shaping moral narratives.

Importantly, parents and community members see PTKIs as custodians of moral and religious values. This positions PTKIs strategically to lead attitudinal transformation by framing inclusion as a moral obligation. Aligning inclusive practices with Islamic ethics and jurisprudence could catalyse broader support. This result confirms the findings of Green et al. (2012), who noted that religious narratives can be powerful drivers for social inclusion when embedded in institutional discourse.

Toward a Contextual Theory of Inclusive Islamic Higher Education

The convergence of educational challenges and religious opportunities points toward the emergence of a context-specific model of inclusive education for PTKIs. This study contributes to theory-building by proposing that Islamic higher education institutions in Indonesia can serve as “value-based inclusion hubs” by embedding inclusive policies, practices, and pedagogy within an Islamic ethical framework.

Rather than importing Western models wholesale, PTKIs can contextualise global inclusive education standards through Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), theology (*aqidah*), and ethics (*akhlak*). Such an approach may lead to a hybrid theory of inclusive education—rooted in human rights and enriched by religious values. This approach resonates with the broader call for indigenised education models (Smith, 2012) that respect local cultures and spiritual beliefs while promoting universal inclusion.

On the opportunity side, the study found that inclusive education values are highly compatible with the core tenets of Islamic teachings—particularly the concepts of *rahmatan lil alamin* (mercy for all) and *adl* (justice). These theological frameworks offer a robust ideological basis for promoting inclusive education in PTKIs. Moreover, the growing awareness among academic leaders about the importance of social equity presents a strategic entry point for institutional reform.

The role of government policy, particularly the guidelines issued by the Ministry of Religious Affairs, is another vital driver of inclusive transformation; policy frameworks that mandate inclusive practices can catalyse structural and cultural changes within PTKIs. However, such policies must be implemented with financial incentives, technical guidance, and monitoring mechanisms to ensure meaningful adoption.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the evolving framework of inclusive education in religious higher education settings by proposing a contextualised model that integrates Islamic values with inclusive pedagogical frameworks. It suggests that inclusion in PTKIs cannot simply replicate Western models but must be rooted in local epistemologies and socio-cultural realities. This statement aligns with the work of Slee (2011), who argues for a shift from assimilationist approaches to inclusive ones that celebrate diversity.

Practically, the findings imply that successful implementation of inclusive education in PTKIs requires a three-pronged approach: (1) policy-level reform that institutionalises inclusion, (2) pedagogical innovations supported by professional development, and (3) cultural transformation grounded in Islamic ethical values. Without simultaneous attention to all three, the movement toward inclusive education will likely remain fragmented and superficial.

In conclusion, while the challenges are considerable, the opportunities are equally promising. PTKIs are uniquely positioned to lead in integrating inclusive practices rooted in faith-based values, thereby contributing to educational equity and a more compassionate and just society.

CONCLUSION

This study has explored the challenges and opportunities of implementing inclusive education within Indonesia's Islamic Religious Higher Education Institutions (PTKIs). Several key insights have emerged through qualitative institutional policies, practices, perceptions, and resources analysis.

First, the findings reveal that while general support for inclusive education exists, many PTKIs lack clear, institutionalised policies to guide its implementation. The absence of operational frameworks results in ad-hoc and inconsistent practices. Second, inclusive pedagogy has not been systematically integrated into the curriculum or professional development programs for educators, leading to gaps in instructional design and delivery for students with disabilities and other marginalised groups.

Third, infrastructural and digital inaccessibility remains a significant barrier. Although Islamic principles strongly advocate for justice and equality, practical measures to accommodate students with special needs are still limited in physical campuses and online learning environments. Fourth, the human resources dimension is critical. The lack of inclusive training for lecturers impairs the ability to implement inclusive education, although some individual faculty members emerge as 'champions' advocating for change.

Fifth, societal and internal perceptions often frame inclusive policies as forms of favouritism, highlighting the need for cultural and attitudinal transformation through public awareness and community dialogue. Encouragingly, the unique position of PTKIs as educational and religious institutions presents a valuable opportunity. Inclusive education, if aligned with Islamic theological and ethical principles, can gain broader support and create a culturally embedded model of inclusive practice.

In conclusion, inclusive education in PTKIs is not merely a pedagogical or policy issue but a religious and moral responsibility matter. This study calls for developing a contextualised, value-driven framework that integrates global inclusive education standards with Islamic teachings. Such an approach can be a model for other religious-based institutions in multicultural societies.

Future research should explore inclusive education in other faith-based higher education institutions across Indonesia and Southeast Asia and examine the role of religious values in shaping inclusive educational theories and practices.

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