



Transformational Management of Islamic Higher Education: A Case Study of A Nahdlatul Ulama Affiliated University in Enhancing Academic Quality and Global Competitiveness

Mispani^{1✉}, Agus Setiawan², Choirudin³, Aprezo Pardodi Maba⁴, Rani Darmayanti⁵, Samuel Karim⁶, Subandi⁷

^{1, 2, 3}, Universitas Ma'arif Lampung, Indonesia;

⁴ The University of Queensland, Australia;

⁵ Universitas Nahdlatul Ulama Pasuruan, Indonesia;

⁶ Ernest Bai Koroma University of Science and Technology, Sierra Leone, West Africa

⁷ Universitas Islam Negeri Raden Intan Lampung, Indonesia

Correspondence Email: ^{1*} mispaniramli3@gmail.com,

Received: 04-07-2025

Revised: 20-01-2026

Accepted: 22-03-2026

Abstract

The transformation of Islamic higher education institutions in Indonesia has become increasingly urgent as newly established universities face growing pressures to achieve academic excellence, strengthen governance, and enhance global competitiveness while maintaining their religious and cultural identity. Despite this urgency, empirical studies examining how value-based transformational management operates in emerging Islamic universities remain limited, particularly within Nahdlatul Ulama (NU)-affiliated institutions, such as Universitas Ma'arif Lampung (UMALA). This study investigates transformational management practices at UMALA, a newly established Islamic university, by examining how strategic leadership, internal quality assurance, cultural integration, and international collaboration function as interrelated pillars of institutional transformation. Employing a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews with university leaders and academic staff, document analysis of strategic plans, quality assurance reports, and cooperation agreements, as well as participant observation of institutional activities. The findings reveal that UMALA's strategic leadership is deeply grounded in NU values of *tawassuth* (moderation), *tasamuh* (tolerance), and *tawazun* (balance), which shape participatory governance and ethical decision-making. The implementation of a digitally supported Internal Quality Assurance System (SPMI) has strengthened academic accountability, improved accreditation outcomes, and fostered a research-oriented culture. Cultural integration is systematically embedded in the curriculum and campus life, reinforcing institutional identity while supporting modernization. Furthermore, sustained national and international collaborations have expanded UMALA's academic visibility and contributed to its regional and global engagement. This study highlights the need for developing context-sensitive, value-based management models in Islamic higher education. It contributes to the discussion on how faith-based universities can achieve sustainable academic excellence and global relevance without compromising cultural authenticity.

Keywords: Academic Competitiveness; Higher Education Internationalization; Islamic Organizational Culture; Value-Based Leadership.

Abstrak

Transformasi pendidikan tinggi Islam di Indonesia menjadi semakin mendesak seiring dengan meningkatnya tuntutan mutu akademik, tata kelola institusi, dan daya saing global, khususnya pada perguruan tinggi Islam yang baru berdiri dan berafiliasi dengan Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), seperti Universitas Ma'arif Lampung (UMALA). Meskipun demikian, kajian empiris yang mengkaji bagaimana manajemen transformasional berbasis nilai dioperasionalkan secara terpadu dalam konteks universitas Islam baru masih relatif terbatas. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji praktik manajemen transformasional di UMALA dengan menelaah bagaimana kepemimpinan strategis, sistem penjaminan mutu internal, integrasi budaya, dan kolaborasi internasional berfungsi sebagai pilar yang saling terkait dalam mendorong keunggulan akademik dan daya saing global. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan studi kasus kualitatif dengan teknik pengumpulan data berupa wawancara mendalam dengan pimpinan dan sivitas akademika, analisis dokumen institusional (rencana strategis, laporan penjaminan mutu, dan dokumen kerja sama), serta observasi partisipatif terhadap aktivitas kelembagaan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kepemimpinan UMALA berlandaskan nilai-nilai NU, yaitu tawassuth (moderasi), tasamuh (toleransi), dan tawazun (keseimbangan), yang terintegrasi dalam tata kelola partisipatif dan pengambilan keputusan yang etis. Penerapan Sistem Penjaminan Mutu Internal (SPMI) berbasis digital memperkuat akuntabilitas akademik, meningkatkan capaian akreditasi, serta menumbuhkan budaya riset. Integrasi nilai-nilai NU dalam kurikulum dan budaya kampus memperkuat identitas institusional sekaligus mendukung proses modernisasi. Selain itu, kolaborasi nasional dan internasional yang berkelanjutan berkontribusi terhadap peningkatan visibilitas akademik dan keterlibatan global UMALA. Penelitian ini menegaskan urgensi pengembangan model manajemen pendidikan tinggi Islam yang peka konteks, berbasis nilai, dan berorientasi pada keberlanjutan keunggulan akademik tanpa mengabaikan autentisitas budaya dan religius.

Kata Kunci: Budaya Organisasi Islam; Daya Saing Akademik; Kepemimpinan Berbasis Nilai; Tata Kelola Perguruan Tinggi.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Islamic higher education institutions in Indonesia have faced increasing pressure to enhance academic quality, improve institutional governance, and increase international engagement in response to national accreditation reforms and global higher education competition (Arizona et al., 2025; Bakar et al., 2023; Hasan et al., 2025; M Said et al., 2014). Data from accreditation reports and institutional evaluations suggest that many newly established Islamic universities continue to struggle with internal quality assurance systems, limited research productivity, and a lack of international visibility. This condition is particularly evident among Nahdlatul Ulama (NU)-affiliated universities that are transitioning from teaching-oriented institutions into research-driven universities while simultaneously maintaining their religious and cultural identity. Universitas Ma'arif Lampung (UMALA), established as part of this transformation agenda, represents a critical case in understanding how emerging Islamic universities affiliated with NU navigate the complex demands of academic excellence, organizational reform, and global competitiveness.

The landscape of Islamic higher education in Indonesia has experienced a profound transformation as institutions strive to align with global academic standards while maintaining their religious authenticity (Desmaniar et al., 2022; Suyadi et al., 2022). Increasing globalization

has accelerated the demand for quality assurance, research productivity, digital innovation, and international collaboration (Erihadiana et al., 2024; Hajar, 2024; Husnaeni & Burga, 2024; Msamba et al., 2023). Consequently, Islamic universities are expected to reposition themselves as centers of both religious scholarship and global competitiveness, capable of contributing to international discourse and national development (Zaman & Munadi, 2025). Within this context, UMALA exemplifies the transformation of Islamic higher education institutions that seek to harmonize religious identity with modern academic governance.

Despite significant progress, many Islamic universities in Indonesia continue to struggle with systemic challenges, including bureaucratic rigidity, a weak research culture, and underdeveloped internal quality assurance systems (Choiriyah et al., 2018; Hidayat et al., 2023; Sumiati et al., 2024). Previous research has shown that transformational leadership contributes positively to educational reform; however, most of these studies have been conducted in secular university contexts, leaving a limited empirical basis for understanding transformational leadership in Islamic higher education institutions (Adeoye et al., 2025; Hermawan et al., 2025; Machali & Suhendro, 2022; Rozanita et al., 2026). Moreover, existing literature often separates institutional management from religious identity, leading to fragmented insights into how faith-based universities can integrate ethical values with strategic management (Dasuki, 2025; Fatmawati et al., 2024). This gap necessitates a more in-depth examination of value-based transformational leadership that reflects the moral and cultural foundations of Islamic education.

In response to this gap, this study focuses on transformational management practices at UMALA, a newly established university affiliated with NU. UMALA's transformation from a traditional Islamic college to a modern university illustrates an intentional strategic reorientation aimed at academic modernization without losing its spiritual foundation (Hayadin et al., 2025; Huda et al., 2025; Khoiriyati et al., 2024; Marhamah & Abdullah, 2020a; Usman et al., 2024). The study examines how the university's leadership integrates the NU values of *tawassuth* (moderation), *tasamuh* (tolerance), and *tawazun* (balance) into strategic governance, quality assurance, and international partnerships. These values are not merely symbolic but operationalized into academic and administrative policies that shape institutional culture and decision-making processes.

This paper argues that transformational leadership grounded in Islamic ethics offers a culturally responsive and contextually relevant model for reforming faith-based higher education institutions (Hefniy et al., 2023; Hidayah, 2025). Leadership at UMALA emphasizes visionary governance, participative management, and transparency while remaining rooted in NU traditions. This value-driven approach supports innovation in academic systems, the establishment of quality assurance mechanisms, and the enhancement of global collaboration (Agazu et al., 2025; Greimel et al., 2023; Musslifah et al., 2025; Wakil, 2023). By linking spiritual values with institutional reform, UMALA demonstrates how tradition and innovation can coexist in building globally competitive Islamic universities.

Using a qualitative case study design (Bowen, 2009; Creswell, 2023). This research employs interviews, document analysis, and participant observation to examine the transformation process of UMALA. The findings are expected to contribute to the broader discourse on higher education transformation in Muslim-majority societies by offering an

empirical model of Islamic university governance that integrates ethical leadership, quality assurance, and internationalization (Awaludin, 2024; S et al., 2024; Sumiati et al., 2024). In doing so, this study not only fills a theoretical and empirical gap in the literature but also highlights how faith-based universities can sustain academic excellence while maintaining cultural authenticity and global relevance. Nevertheless, UMALA's transformative journey is not devoid of challenges. Financial constraints, uneven faculty capacity, and pockets of resistance to change continue to pose barriers to institutional progress (Firmansyah et al., 2024). These challenges underscore the need for ongoing leadership capacity-building, strategic resource mobilization, and inclusive change management strategies to sustain the momentum of reform.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative case study to investigate the transformational management practices implemented at UMALA. The case study approach was chosen because it allows for an in-depth and holistic exploration of complex organizational phenomena within their real-life context. As a single-case design, this research focused specifically on UMALA as a representative model of an Islamic higher education institution undergoing systemic transformation. The focus on UMALA was justified by its unique trajectory—evolving from a local Islamic college into a university with global aspirations, making it a “critical case” in understanding leadership embedded in religious-cultural values (Jamil, 2024; Marhamah & Abdullah, 2020b). A qualitative case study is particularly well-suited for investigating processes and meanings, rather than merely outcomes or statistics.

This study used multiple data sources to capture a comprehensive and nuanced understanding. Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders, including the rector, vice rectors, heads of quality assurance, deans, and senior academic staff. These interviews explored institutional vision, governance challenges, the implementation of quality assurance, and internationalization strategies. Semi-structured interviews are widely recognized in qualitative inquiry for their flexibility and depth, allowing participants to elaborate on complex institutional experiences (Creswell, 2023). The interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia, audio-recorded with informed consent, and transcribed verbatim before being translated for analysis.

Document analysis was employed as a secondary data collection method to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings. Reviewed documents included UMALA's 2022–2026 Strategic Plan (Renstra), internal quality assurance manuals (SPMI & AMI), accreditation reports (LED), faculty evaluation forms, MoUs with international partners, and academic journals published by the university. Document analysis complements interview data, allowing researchers to verify formal policy frameworks and strategic intentions through tangible evidence. Triangulating data from official documentation with interview insights ensured analytical rigor and helped reveal the alignment (or gaps) between planned strategies and actual practices (Bowen, 2009).

Complementing interviews and document reviews, participant observation was also conducted during several academic and institutional activities, including leadership meetings, quality assurance workshops, and student development programs. Observational data are particularly valuable in identifying informal practices, cultural norms, and the enactment of leadership values in daily routines. The use of non-intrusive observation enabled the researcher

to witness how transformational values such as *tawasuth* (moderation), *tawazun* (balance), and *tasamuh* (tolerance) were embedded in institutional behavior and interactions. This method also allowed the researcher to capture nuances of institutional dynamics that may not be explicitly articulated in interviews or documents. Combining these three methods—interviews, documents, and observation provided a rich, triangulated dataset for understanding transformational management at UMALA.

RESULTS

This discussion explicitly integrates the four core components of the research focus—strategic leadership, internal quality assurance, cultural integration, and international collaboration—as interrelated drivers of institutional transformation at UMALA. Strategic leadership emerges as the primary catalyst that articulates institutional vision, aligns academic policies with national accreditation standards, and mobilizes organizational change during UMALA’s formative phase. This leadership orientation is operationalized through the strengthening of internal quality assurance systems, which provide a structural foundation for enhancing academic governance, standardizing the curriculum, and monitoring performance, thereby contributing directly to improved accreditation outcomes. Simultaneously, cultural integration grounded in Nahdlatul Ulama values functions as a unifying mechanism that legitimizes managerial reform by harmonizing modern governance practices with Islamic organizational identity, fostering institutional cohesion and staff commitment. Within this internally strengthened context, international collaboration although still at a developmental stage—serves as both an outcome and an enabler of transformation by expanding academic networks, enhancing research visibility, and supporting UMALA’s long-term global competitiveness agenda. Collectively, these four components operate as a coherent transformational management framework rather than isolated initiatives.

The empirical basis for this integrative discussion is derived from a qualitative case study conducted at UMALA between February and April 2025. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, document analysis, and participatory observation involving twelve key informants, including the Rector, three Vice-Rectors, two Deans, two Heads of the Internal Quality Assurance Board (LPMI), two senior lecturers, and two students. To ensure analytical depth and contextual validity, the study examined institutional documents such as the UMALA Strategic Plan 2022–2026, the Internal Quality Audit Report (AMI 2023), the Lecturer Performance Report (E-LKD 2024), the Rector’s Performance Report 2024, and multiple Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) with national and international partners. Observational data were gathered during Senate meetings, SPMI workshops, monthly *istighotsab* activities, and the Southeast Asia Forum on Islamic Higher Education Leadership hosted by UMALA in 2024, enabling triangulation between leadership practices, quality assurance processes, cultural dynamics, and international engagement.

Transformational Leadership Based on Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) Values

The first finding reveals that leadership at UMALA is deeply rooted in the values of NU, specifically *tawasuth* (moderation), *tasamuh* (tolerance), and *tawazun* (balance). These values

serve as guiding principles for all strategic decisions at the university. The Rector (I1) stated:

“We strive to make NU values not merely symbolic but a working principle. A balance between tradition and innovation must guide every major decision.”

The Vice-Rector for Academic Affairs (I2) reinforced this idea:

“In making academic decisions, everyone is involved. There is no top-down decision from the rectorate. This is how we maintain fairness and inclusiveness.”

Field observation during the Senate Meeting in March 2025 revealed a deliberative process in which each faculty was given space to present arguments before a final decision was made. The *UMALA Strategic Plan 2022–2026* clearly states the institutional vision: “*To become an excellent university rooted in Ahlussunnah wal Jama’ah values with global competitiveness by 2030.*”

UMALA’s leadership model is participatory and transparent. This is evident in the implementation of the Electronic Lecturer Performance Report (E-LKD), enabling online evaluation of academic performance. The 2024 internal report shows that lecturer compliance reached 92%, a sharp increase from 68% in 2021, indicating improved accountability and openness in university governance.

Internal Quality Assurance System (SPMI) and Digital Transformation

The second finding reveals that UMALA has established an Internal Quality Assurance System (SPMI) that is structured and digitally integrated. According to the *AMI Report 2023*, faculty compliance with the six BAN-PT accreditation standards increased by 40% compared to 2021. The Head of LPMI (I5) explained: “*We developed the Quality Monitoring Information System (SIMMutu) to monitor academic quality in real time. Each faculty must upload course evaluations, lecturer performance reports, and student survey data.*”

Observation at the LPMI office showed that *SIMMutu* has been adopted by all eight faculties and automatically generates semester-based reports. Internal audits are conducted twice annually to assess academic and administrative performance. Accreditation documents show that three programs—Islamic Guidance and Counseling, Mathematics Education, and Islamic Economics—improved from “Good” to “Very Good” in 2024.

Another indicator of improved quality is UMALA’s progress in managing online academic journals. According to the *Rector’s Performance Report 2024*, UMALA currently publishes eight active journals, two of which have been indexed in Scopus. Detailed information is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Online Journals of UMALA

No	Journal Title	Indexation	Focus Area
1	Islamic Guidance and Counseling Journal (IGCJ)	Scopus (International Reputable Index), Directory of Open Access Journal (DOAJ), Crossref	Islamic counseling, educational psychology, Islamic therapy, character education

Transformational Management of Islamic Higher Education: A Case Study of A Nahdlatul Ulama Affiliated University in Enhancing Academic Quality and Global Competitiveness

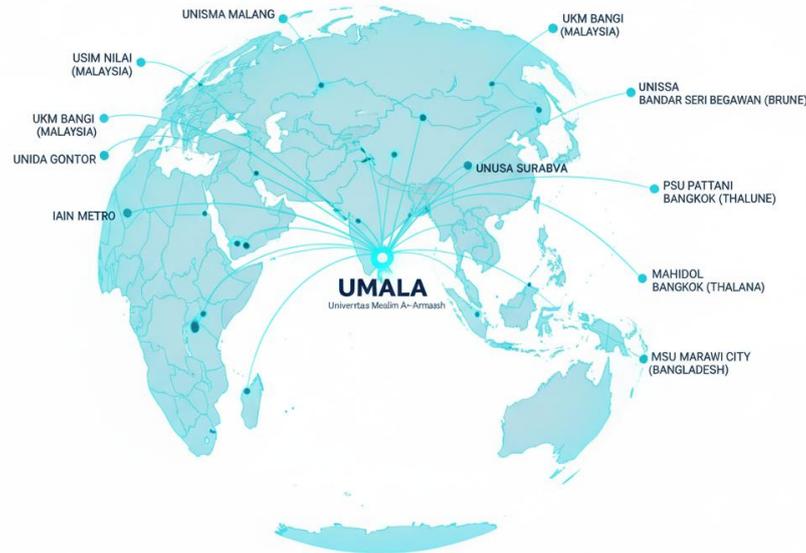
No	Journal Title	Indexation	Focus Area
2	Journal of Multidisciplinary Applied Natural Science (JMANS)	Scopus, DOAJ, Crossref	Applied natural sciences: biology, physics, chemistry, technology, education
3	Fikri : Jurnal Kajian Agama, Sosial dan Budaya	Science Citation Index (SINTA) 2	Islamic religious studies, cultural studies, Islamic sociology, local traditions
4	Jurnal Iqra' : Kajian Ilmu Pendidikan	SINTA 2	Islamic education, curriculum development, Iqra' method, learning innovation
5	Mantiqu Tayr: Journal of Arabic Language	SINTA 3	Teaching and learning of Arabic as a Foreign Language
6	Jurnal Mahkamah : Kajian Ilmu Hukum dan Hukum Islam	SINTA 4	Islamic and positive law: normative and empirical legal studies
7	Numerical: Jurnal Matematika dan Pendidikan Matematika	SINTA 4, DOAJ	Pure mathematics and mathematics education
8	Journal of English Development (JED)	SINTA 4	English language teaching, TESOL, applied linguistics
9	Journal of Contemporary Islamic Education (JCIE)	SINTA 5	Contemporary Islamic education, educational management, character, multiculturalism

Source: Rector's Performance Report (2024); LPMI UMALA Data (2024).

Table 1 highlights UMALA's significant progress in academic publishing. Two journals—*IGCJ* and *JMANS*—were accepted into Scopus indexing, which included as international reputable journals, in late 2023 after a mentoring program by Indonesia's Ministry of Religious Affairs. This achievement demonstrates how UMALA's digital quality assurance system (SPMI) effectively enhances its research culture and international visibility.

National and International Collaboration

The third finding shows UMALA's proactive efforts to expand national and international academic networks. According to the *Rector's Performance Report 2024*, the university has established twenty-one national MoUs and nine international MoUs, particularly with institutions in Malaysia, Thailand, and Brunei Darussalam.



21 NATIONAL MoUs - Collaborative Research
Curriculum Development, Academic Mobility, Journal Publication Mentoring
9 INTERNATIONAL MoUs - Malaysia, Thailand, Brunei, Philippines, Bangladesh

The Head of the Cooperation Office (I8) noted:

“Our *visiting lecturer* programs with Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia and student exchanges with Prince of Songkla University have greatly improved lecturers’ and students’ academic confidence.”

The UMALA–USIM MoU (2023) confirmed collaboration on research about Islamic moderation in Southeast Asia. Observation at the Southeast Asia Forum on Islamic Higher Education Leadership in Lampung (2024) revealed that UMALA hosted 80 participants from four countries. These partnerships have strengthened UMALA’s academic reputation and contributed to cultivating interreligious tolerance in the education sector. A student exchange participant (I12) remarked:

“Joining the ASEAN Exchange program allowed us to see firsthand how Islam is practiced in Malaysia and Thailand moderately and inclusively.”

Integration of NU Values in Curriculum and Academic Culture

NU values are deeply embedded in UMALA’s curriculum and campus life. All study programs require courses on *Ablussunnah wal Jama’ah* (Aswaja), *Ke-NU-an* (NU Identity), and *Islam Nusantara*.

A lecturer (I10) stated:

“We revised the Aswaja curriculum to include interfaith dialogue and conflict resolution so that students understand tolerance in real-world contexts.”

Documentary evidence from the *UMALA Student Character Survey 2024* indicates that **81% of respondents** believe NU-based activities such as *halaqah kitab kuning* and monthly *istighotsab* positively influence moral awareness and social responsibility. Observation during the *Aswaja Goes Digital* program—organized by the *Aswaja Research and Development Institute (LKPA)*—showed high student engagement with a digital *turats* application, which was downloaded over 1,500 times within three months (LKPA Annual Report, 2023).

The integration of spirituality and academic development reinforces UMALA's identity as a modern Islamic university rooted in NU tradition.

Challenges in the Transformation Process

Despite significant progress, UMALA still faces several internal challenges. The Vice-Rector for Finance (I9) admitted: “*Budget constraints remain our biggest challenge, especially in funding research and developing digital infrastructure.*”

Additionally, some senior lecturers have shown resistance toward new digital academic systems. Observation during the *SPMI Workshop (February 2025)* revealed that several lecturers were still unfamiliar with *SIMMutu*. Nevertheless, the Rector emphasized ongoing commitment to capacity building: “*Transformation takes time. We continue to hold training sessions so that all staff understand the direction of change.*”

These findings suggest that organizational culture change necessitates participatory leadership and ongoing professional development to ensure the sustainability of institutional reform.

DISCUSSION

The transformation of Universitas Ma'arif Lampung (UMALA) represents a contextual and ethical response to the contemporary challenges of Islamic higher education in Indonesia. The findings reveal that transformational leadership rooted in Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) values provides both moral and strategic direction for institutional reform (Hefniy et al., 2023). This pattern of leadership aligns with the argument of Hayadin et al. (2025), who asserts that Islamic universities must serve as centers for cultural renewal and the production of ethical knowledge, rather than merely as bureaucratic educational institutions. The Rector's leadership approach grounded in *tawassuth* (moderation), *tasamuh* (tolerance), and *tawazun* (balance)—illustrates NU's ethical governance model, balancing spiritual integrity and managerial innovation (Hariyani et al., 2025; Ma'arif et al., 2025; Wakit, 2023).

The participatory culture of leadership at UMALA operationalizes the *Ablussunnah wal Jama'ah* ethos of consultation (*musyawarah*) in decision-making processes, ensuring inclusivity and collective ownership of change. This finding supports Hidayah (2025), who highlights the significance of visionary and collaborative leadership in enhancing educational quality within Islamic universities. It also resonates with (Subaşı et al., 2026; Yusuf et al., 2024), who argue that transformational leaders in faith-based institutions function as agents of institutional innovation by fostering emotional commitment and shared values among staff. The participatory element observed at UMALA further corroborates Fatmawati et al. (2024), who found that good university governance in Islamic universities relies on transparent leadership and inclusive policy formulation.

The establishment of the Internal Quality Assurance System (SPMI) and the digital monitoring platform *SIMMutu* demonstrates how UMALA institutionalizes technological innovation to sustain academic quality. This aligns with Khoiriyati et al. (2024), who found that technology-based SPMI implementation enhances accreditation outcomes and fosters an evidence-based quality culture. The adoption of digital systems in academic governance at UMALA also parallels the conclusions of Choiriyah et al. (2018), who developed a model of Delta Internal Quality Assurance to evaluate Islamic universities, and Rambe et al. (2025), who demonstrated that internal quality systems improve accountability and learning outcomes when effectively institutionalized. Such practices reflect the global higher education trend described by Usman et al. (2024), who emphasize that Industry 4.0 innovations are essential to improving efficiency in academic management across Islamic institutions.

Another major area of transformation is the strengthening of UMALA's research and publication ecosystem, evident in the success of the *Islamic Guidance and Counseling Journal (IGCJ)* and the *Journal of Multidisciplinary Applied Natural Science (JMANS)* in gaining Scopus indexation. This achievement affirms Machali & Suhendro (2022), who demonstrated that publication performance is a key indicator of research quality in Islamic education, and supports Awaludin, (2024), who found that research in Islamic education has evolved toward interdisciplinary and data-driven inquiry over the past five decades. By institutionalizing research-based governance, UMALA contributes to Indonesia's growing ecosystem of Islamic universities transitioning toward research excellence (Desmaniar et al., 2022).

UMALA's expansion of national and international collaborations, including partnerships with universities in Malaysia, Thailand, Brunei Darussalam, and the Philippines, further strengthens its position as a regional academic actor. This finding is consistent with Khoiriyati et al. (2024), who argue that leadership transformation is crucial for Islamic universities aspiring to world-class recognition, and with Sumiati et al. (2024), who highlight that regional cooperation fosters quality assurance and academic diplomacy in Islamic higher education. Such collaborations align with the global view of (Knight, 2007), who emphasize that internationalization must focus on mutual capacity-building and the exchange of cultural knowledge. UMALA's initiatives demonstrate that global engagement, when anchored in Islamic ethical values, contributes to building a network of moderate and globally competent scholars (Hajar, 2024).

Curricular reform at UMALA further reinforces the integration of NU's theological values into academic life. The inclusion of courses such as *Aswaja and Ke-NU-an* and *Islam Nusantara* exemplifies the embodiment of *wasathiyah* (moderation) in pedagogy, consistent with Siswanto (2019) who identifies moderation as a key curricular component in Islamic education in Indonesia. Similarly, the *Aswaja Goes Digital* program exemplifies the adaptation of Islamic learning to digital culture, echoing Erihadiana et al. (2024), who found that digital pedagogy allows Islamic institutions to maintain relevance amidst sociocultural change. This integration of spiritual and technological dimensions supports Firmansyah et al. (2024), who argue that Islamic values can be harmonized with national education objectives to create holistic learning environments.

UMALA's reform trajectory resonates with the broader modernization discourse in Indonesian Islamic education. The university's approach parallels the vision of (Huda et al., 2025) and Zaman & Munadi (2025), who interpreted Azyumardi Azra's reformist framework as a model of modernity rooted in tradition. Like the neo-modernist institutions described by Marhamah and Abdullah (2020a), UMALA embodies Azra's vision of "Islamic education for civilization" a paradigm that merges rational administration with spiritual ethics. This duality, or what Omer (2024) termed as the coexistence of "tradition and modernity," enables Islamic universities to modernize without losing their theological and cultural identity.

Nevertheless, UMALA still encounters structural challenges in sustaining reform. The constraints of financial resources and digital literacy mirror the systemic issues observed by Logli (2016) in Indonesia's higher education governance. The cultural resistance of senior academics toward technological change also reflects the institutional inertia identified by Dasuki (2025) noted that leadership flexibility and communication are vital for minimizing opposition during transformation. UMALA's consistent efforts in organizing workshops and capacity-building sessions embody the adaptive leadership characteristics proposed, emphasizing reflexivity and stakeholder engagement as crucial components of qualitative organizational change.

From an epistemological perspective, UMALA's transformation affirms the renewal of Islamic higher education's intellectual mission. The findings align with Irham (2025), who calls for transcending the dichotomy between religious and secular sciences through interdisciplinary integration. This mission is reflected in UMALA's academic orientation, which combines moral education, digital competence, and global awareness, resonating with (Auh & Kim, 2024; Waghid, 2024), who advocate cultivating critical consciousness and empathy through value-based global citizenship education. The alignment between spiritual ethics and global engagement situates UMALA within a broader Islamic civilizational project one that reconciles faith and modernity in the knowledge economy (Mokodompit et al., 2025; Sholihah et al., 2026).

UMALA's transformation provides both empirical and conceptual evidence of how Islamic higher education can achieve sustainability through ethical leadership, technological innovation, and cultural rootedness. Its experience supports (Chaman & Siddiqui, 2023; Daulay et al., 2024) and Dasuki (2025), who assert that leadership transformation guided by prophetic values ensures that modernization strengthens, rather than undermines, spiritual and cultural identity. UMALA's model thus exemplifies a practical synthesis of faith, governance, and innovation a model that can inform policy and practice for other Islamic universities seeking to harmonize excellence with authenticity in the twenty-first century (Ernawati et al., 2024).

The findings of this study are highly relevant to the current management conditions of higher education institutions in Indonesia, particularly private and religious-based universities that are in a phase of institutional development. National accreditation data from BAN-PT and discipline-based accreditation bodies indicate that the majority of private universities remain positioned within the "Good" and "Very Good" accreditation categories, with persistent challenges related to governance effectiveness, internal quality assurance systems, and research productivity. In addition, national higher education performance reports reveal uneven distribution of scientific publications, international collaborations, and integrated quality management practices across institutions. These conditions closely resemble the initial situation

faced by UMALA, which, during its early development stage, encountered limitations in aligning strategic leadership, internal quality assurance mechanisms, and international networking. The institutional improvements observed at UMALA particularly in strengthening internal quality assurance systems, enhancing academic governance, and expanding national and international partnerships—demonstrate that a value-based transformational management approach can be contextually applied and generate tangible institutional outcomes. Therefore, the findings of this study are relevant and transferable to other Indonesian higher education institutions facing similar managerial and structural challenges in improving academic quality, management effectiveness, and global competitiveness.

CONCLUSION

This study revealed that transformational leadership grounded in NU values moderation, tolerance, and balance played a crucial role in shaping the institutional transformation of UMALA. These values guided the Rector's leadership style and strengthened the university's governance, internal quality assurance, research culture, and international collaboration. The findings demonstrate that Islamic higher education institutions can successfully combine spiritual integrity with managerial innovation and global engagement, challenging the assumption that faith-based universities are resistant to modernization.

The research contributes to understanding how ethical leadership and value-based management can enhance institutional quality in Islamic higher education. It proposes a conceptual model that links spiritual ethics, transformational leadership, and digital governance as foundations for sustainable academic excellence. However, the study is limited to a single institution and a small qualitative sample, which restricts the scope of generalization. Further comparative and longitudinal research across multiple Islamic universities is needed to validate and extend these findings in broader educational contexts.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to the leadership and academic community of UMALA for their openness and cooperation throughout the research process. Special thanks to the Rector, Vice Rectors, and the Quality Assurance Board for providing access to institutional data, strategic documents, and valuable insights through interviews. Appreciation is also due to the students and faculty members participating in observations and discussions, contributing rich perspectives to the study. This research was made possible with the support of UMALA's Center for Research and Community Service (LP3M), whose facilitation was instrumental in ensuring the smooth conduct of fieldwork. Lastly, the authors acknowledge the contributions of peer reviewers and academic colleagues for their constructive feedback in refining the manuscript.

REFERENCES

- Adeoye, M. A., Baharun, H., & Munawwaroh, I. (2025). Transformational Leadership in Education: Harmonising Accountability, Innovation and Global Citizenship. *Kharisma: Jurnal Administrasi Dan Manajemen Pendidikan*, 4(1), 14–30. <https://doi.org/10.59373/kharisma.v4i1.68>
- Agazu, B. G., Kero, C. A., & Debela, K. L. (2025). Transformational leadership and firm performance: A systematic literature review. *Journal of Innovation and Entrepreneurship*, 14(1), 29. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13731-025-00476-x>
- Arizona, K., Rokhmat, J., Ramdani, A., Gunawan, G., & Sukarso, A. (2025). Integrating Islamic Values and Local Wisdom into Science Education: Enhancing Character Development in Higher Education. *Ulumuna*, 29(1), 398–428. <https://doi.org/10.20414/ujs.v29i1.1308>
- Auh, Y., & Kim, C. (2024). Global Citizenship Education: Towards a Critical Moral Pedagogy. *Social Education Research*, 450–471. <https://doi.org/10.37256/ser.5220244897>
- Awaludin, A. (2024). Documenting the Half-Century Evolution of Islamic Education Research: A Probabilistic Topic Modeling Study of the Literature from 1970 to 2023. *Studia Islamika*, 31(3), 439–475. <https://doi.org/10.36712/sdi.v31i3.41513>
- Bakar, M. A., Umroh, K. A., & Hameed, F. (2023). Improving Quality Islamic Education for Today's Generation. *At-Tadzkiir: Islamic Education Journal*, 2(2), 118–128. <https://doi.org/10.59373/attadzkiir.v2i2.42>
- Bowen, G. A. (2009). Document Analysis as a Qualitative Research Method. *Qualitative Research Journal*, 9(2), 27–40. (world). <https://doi.org/10.3316/QRJ0902027>
- Chaman, M., & Siddiqui, D. A. (2023). How Islamic Leadership Traits of Truthfulness, Advocacy, Trustworthiness, and Wisdom, Effects Employees' Life Satisfaction Performance: The Mediatory Role of Employee Engagement and Organizational Citizenship Behavior. *SSRN Electronic Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4432155>
- Choiriyah, S., Kumaidi, K., & Kartowagiran, B. (2018). Developing Delta Internal Quality Assurance to Evaluate the Quality of Indonesian Islamic Universities. *Journal of Social Studies Education Research*, 9(3), 177–197. (lecturer, students, and head of study programs).
- Creswell, J. W. (2023). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (5th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Dasuki, M. (2025). Revolutionizing Management in Islamic Universities: Addressing Controversies, Change, and Emerging Trends. *Ta'limDiniyah: Jurnal Pendidikan Agama Islam (Journal of Islamic Education Studies)*, 5(2), 146–158. <https://doi.org/10.53515/tdjpai.v5i2.194>
- Daulay, B., Haidir, & Firmansyah. (2024). The influence of managerial competence and achievement motivation on the leadership effectiveness of high school principals. *Cakrawala Pendidikan*, 43(2), 411–421. <https://doi.org/10.21831/cp.v43i2.61912>
- Desmaniar, Rusli, Fathani, A. T., Azmi, N. A., Mughni, M., Islami, I. R., & Syukri, A. (2022). Towards Sustainable Development of Islamic Higher Education: A Meta-Analysis of Challenges and Opportunities. *Millah: Journal of Religious Studies*, 741–770. <https://doi.org/10.20885/millah.vol21.iss3.art5>
- Erihadiana, M., Rustandi, F., Munawwaroh, C., & Pauzi, A. R. (2024). Islamic Education Adaptation to Sociocultural Changes in the Globalization Era. *Scaffolding: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam Dan Multikulturalisme*, 6(3), 396–408. <https://doi.org/10.37680/scaffolding.v6i3.6749>
- Fatmawati, E., Suharto, B., Amrozi, S. R., Suhma, W. K., Yudiawan, A., Ilyasin, M., & Suhma, F. M. (2024). Change management towards good university governance in Indonesia:

- Study at Islamic religious universities based on BLU mandate. *Cogent Social Sciences*, 10(1), 2333081. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2024.2333081>
- Firmansyah, Liriwati, F. Y., Zulhimma, & Shreifeen, I. A. A.-. (2024). INTEGRATION OF ISLAMIC VALUES INTO THE NATIONAL EDUCATION CURRICULUM. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning*, 2(4), 1074–1087.
- Greimel, N. S., Kanbach, D. K., & Chelaru, M. (2023). Virtual teams and transformational leadership: An integrative literature review and avenues for further research. *Journal of Innovation & Knowledge*, 8(2), 100351. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jik.2023.100351>
- Hajar, A. (2024). Navigating Globalization: Reforming Islamic Education for the 21st Century. *Sinergi International Journal of Islamic Studies*, 2(1), 53–65. <https://doi.org/10.61194/ijis.v2i1.599>
- Hariyani, D., Hariyani, P., & Mishra, S. (2025). The role of leadership in sustainable digital transformation of the organization. *Sustainable Futures*, 10. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sftr.2025.101130>
- Hasan, M. S., Azizah, M., Ainiyah, Q., Solechan, S., Sunardi, S., Budiyo, A., & Mastor, H. binti. (2025). Developing Administrative Excellence for Enhanced Educational Service Quality in Islamic Secondary Schools. *Kharisma: Jurnal Administrasi Dan Manajemen Pendidikan*, 4(2), 109–124. <https://doi.org/10.59373/kharisma.v4i2.99>
- Hayadin, Niam, K., Munawiroh, & Lukens-Bull, R. (2025). Contemporary Changes in Islamic Higher Education in Indonesia: Dynamic Encounter between Modernisation and Tradition. *Journal of Al-Tamaddun*, 20(1), 189–200. <https://doi.org/10.22452/jat.vol20no1.14>
- Hefniy, H., Mardiana, D., Enggal, D., & Baharun, H. (2023). Prophetic Leadership in Creating Superior Educational Institutions: Phenomenological Study of Private Islamic Universities. *Al-Tanzim: Jurnal Manajemen Pendidikan Islam*, 7(4), Article 4. <https://doi.org/10.33650/al-tanzim.v7i4.6251>
- Hermawan, R., Anggraeni, D., Amar, Muh. Y., Kadir, A. R., & Hamid, N. (2025). Re-engineering management: The role of visionary leadership and strategic planning in organizational education transformation. *Cakrawala Pendidikan*, 44(2), 436–444. <https://doi.org/10.21831/cp.v44i2.83457>
- Hidayah, N. (2025). Visionary Leadership and Its Impact on the Quality of Education in Islamic Educational Institutions. *Al-Hayat: Journal of Islamic Education*, 9(1), 142–158. <https://doi.org/10.35723/ajie.v9i1.48>
- Hidayat, W., Ardyanti, Y., & Wulan, E. R. (2023). The Influence of Internal Quality Assurance System on Quality Improvement of Accreditation in State Islamic Religious Universities Using The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM). *Al-Tanzim: Jurnal Manajemen Pendidikan Islam*, 7(1), 230–246. <https://doi.org/10.33650/al-tanzim.v7i1.4449>
- Huda, M. N., Supratno, H., & Hariyati, N. (2025). Strategic Institutional Reform in Islamic Higher Education: The Case of Two Pesantren-Based Universities. *Munaddhomah: Jurnal Manajemen Pendidikan Islam*, 6(3), 465–482. <https://doi.org/10.31538/munaddhomah.v6i3.1863>
- Husnaeni, & Burga, M. A. (2024). Supervisors' role quality and its effect on the students' ability in compiling reports. *Cakrawala Pendidikan*, 43(1), 127–139. <https://doi.org/10.21831/cp.v43i1.41760>
- Irham. (2025). Policies and patterns of integration of science and religion in Indonesian Islamic higher education. *Higher Education*, 90(5), 1311–1328. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-024-01378-9>

- Jamil, M. (2024). Exploring the Qur'anic Literacy Tradition: A Review of Traditional and Modern Pesantren in Tuban Indonesia. *Fikri: Jurnal Kajian Agama, Sosial Dan Budaya*, 9(1), 1–25. <https://doi.org/10.25217/jf.v9i1.4670>
- Khoiriyati, W. R., Sutrisno, S., Akmal, F., Ramadhani, M. S., & Ediz, M. H. (2024). The Concept of Transforming the Leadership of Islamic Universities in Indonesia Towards a World Class University. *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research of Higher Education (IJMURHICA)*, 7(2), 64–81. <https://doi.org/10.24036/ijmurhica.v7i2.211>
- Knight, J. (2007). *Instructional Coaching: A Partnership Approach to Improving Instruction*. SAGE Publications.
- M Said, M., Muhammad, N., & Elangkovan, K. (2014). The Continuity and Change of Indonesia's Islamic Higher Educational Institutions in the amid of Educational Policy Change. *Asian Social Science*, 10(6), p71. <https://doi.org/10.5539/ass.v10n6p71>
- Ma'arif, M. A., Rokhman, M., Fatikh, M. A., Kartiko, A., Ahmadi, A., & Hasan, M. S. (2025). Kiai's Leadership Strategies in Strengthening Religious Moderation in Islamic Boarding Schools. *Jurnal Ilmiah Peuradeun*, 13(1), 23–48. <https://doi.org/10.26811/peuradeun.v13i1.1168>
- Machali, I., & Suhendro, E. (2022). A Bibliometric Analysis of Quality Research Papers in Islamic Education: Evidence from Scopus. *Jurnal Pendidikan Islam*, 11(1), 11–25. <https://doi.org/10.14421/jpi.2022.111.11-25>
- Marhamah, & Abdullah, A. H. (2020a). Reform of The Islamic Education System in Indonesia According to Azyumardi Azra: *Islam Universalia: International Journal of Islamic Studies and Social Sciences*, 2(1), Article 1. <https://doi.org/10.56613/islam-universalia.v2i1.149>
- Marhamah, & Abdullah, A. H. (2020b). Reform of The Islamic Education System in Indonesia According to Azyumardi Azra: *Islam Universalia: International Journal of Islamic Studies and Social Sciences*, 2(1), 34–108. <https://doi.org/10.56613/islam-universalia.v2i1.149>
- Mokodompit, A., Mas'ud, A., & Bakar, M. Y. A. (2025). The Tree of Knowledge Paradigm for Integrating Islam and Science: A Historical Study of Islamic Higher Education. *Attadrib: Jurnal Pendidikan Guru Madrasah Ibtidaiyah*, 8(3), 752–767. <https://doi.org/10.54069/attadrib.v8i3.1065>
- Msamba, E. M., Msuya, E. A., & Anangisye, W. A. L. (2023). In-service training for improving the implementation of competency-based curriculum in English foreign language teaching: Is planning effective? *Quality Assurance in Education*, 31(4), 570–585. <https://doi.org/10.1108/QAE-02-2023-0036>
- Musslifah, A. R., Khusnuliawati, H., & Cahyani, R. R. (2025). Optimizing Organizational Psychology: Reconstructing the Transformational Leadership Role of School Principals as Murabbi in Building an Innovation Ecosystem in Technology. *At-Tadzkiir: Islamic Education Journal*, 4(2), 235–249. <https://doi.org/10.59373/attadzkiir.v4i2.228>
- Omer, S. (2024). *Tradition vs. Modernity in Islamic Architecture: The Case of Jeddah*.
- Rambe, N., Siahaan, A., & Nasution, I. (2025). Implementation of Internal Quality Assurance System in Improving the Quality of Education. *Electronic Journal of Education, Social Economics and Technology*, 6(2), 863. <https://doi.org/10.33122/ejeset.v6i2.863>
- Rozanita, T. P., Usman, M. U. K., & Azzukhrufi, J. R. (2026). Dialectics of Indonesian Culture and Malaysian Local Wisdom: Multicultural Learning Strategies at Sekolah Indonesia Kuala Lumpur. *Attaqwa: Jurnal Ilmu Pendidikan Islam*, 22(1), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.54069/attaqwa.v22i1.1115>
- S, Y. A., Ernawati, S., Saputra, H., & Kurniawan, M. A. (2024). Islamic Education Management Strategy in the Digital Era: Governance Transformation to Increase Effectiveness and Accessibility. *International Journal of Islamic Educational Research*, 1(4), 27–44. <https://doi.org/10.61132/ijier.v1i4.67>

- Sholihah, M., Sunanto, Afifuddin, M. A., & Salik, M. (2026). The Unity of Knowledge in the Perspective of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas: An Epistemological Analysis of Islamic Education. *At-Tadzkiir: Islamic Education Journal*, 5(1), 62–81. <https://doi.org/10.59373/attadzkiir.v5i1.252>
- Siswanto, S. (2019). The Islamic Moderation Values on the Islamic Education Curriculum in Indonesia: A Content Analysis. *Jurnal Pendidikan Islam*, 8(1), 121–152. <https://doi.org/10.14421/jpi.2019.81.121-152>
- Subaşlı, E., Karatepe, O. M., Rezapouraghdam, H., & Kim, T. T. (2026). Green transformational leadership and green recovery performance: Green adaptability and green creativity as mediators and emotional intelligence as a moderator. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 133. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhm.2025.104508>
- Sumiati, E., Sutrisno, Sibawaihi, & Tekke, M. (2024). Transformation of Islamic Higher Education: Policy Strategy, Challenges, and Opportunities. *Al-Hayat: Journal of Islamic Education*, 8(4), Article 4. <https://doi.org/10.35723/ajie.v8i4.46>
- Suyadi, Nuryana, Z., Sutrisno, & Baidi. (2022). Academic reform and sustainability of Islamic higher education in Indonesia. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 89, 102534. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2021.102534>
- Usman, H., Sahraini, S., & Yusuf, M. (2024). Towards Industry 4.0: Innovation of Digital-Based Academic Administration System in Islamic Religious Universities. *AL-ISHLAH: Jurnal Pendidikan*, 16(1), Article 1. <https://doi.org/10.35445/alishlah.v16i1.4168>
- Waghid, Z. (2024). Cultivating Critical Thinking, Social Justice Awareness and Empathy Among Pre-service Teachers Through Online Discussions on Global Citizenship Education. *Journal of Creative Communications*, 19(1), 74–93. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09732586231194438>
- Wakit, S. (2023). Implementation of transformational leadership style at nahdlatul ulama (nu) higher education. *International Journal of Social Science*, 2(5), Article 5. <https://doi.org/10.53625/ijss.v2i5.4935>
- Yusuf, M. I., Maimun, A., Basri, & As'ad, M. (2024). Transformational Leadership of KH. Yusuf Hasyim in Preserving Traditional Islamic Education at Pesantren Tebuireng. *Munaddhomah: Jurnal Manajemen Pendidikan Islam*, 5(4), 383–394. <https://doi.org/10.31538/munaddhomah.v5i4.1430>
- Zaman, M. N., & Munadi, M. (2025). Modernization of Islamic Boarding School Education Institutions According to Azyumardi Azra. *Al-Afkar, Journal For Islamic Studies*, 8(1), 317–326. <https://doi.org/10.31943/afkarjournal.v8i1.1022>