

International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research
Vol. 25, No. 3, pp. 1011-1032 March 2026
<https://doi.org/10.26803/ijlter.25.3.45>
Received Jan 10, 2026; Revised Mar 10, 2026; Accepted Mar 13, 2026

Quality Governance and Institutional Negotiation in Indonesian Islamic Higher Education under Globalised Policy Regimes

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Abstract. This study investigated how Indonesian Islamic higher education institutions interpret and enact quality management in a globalised policy environment. Drawing on qualitative interviews with institutional leaders, quality assurance personnel and academic staff of state and private Islamic universities, the study conceptualised quality management as a socially constructed and value-laden practice rather than a purely technical process. Guided by a value-negotiated quality management framework, the analysis examined how global policy instruments such as accreditation systems, outcome-based education and audit mechanisms were translated and negotiated in institutions grounded in Islamic education values. The findings revealed a persistent tension: while audit-centred quality systems provided institutional legitimacy, accountability and access to resources, they also narrowed pedagogical practices and marginalised the ethical, spiritual and holistic dimensions that were central to Islamic education philosophy. Islamic values were strongly articulated in institutional missions but were weakly embedded in formal quality indicators, and they often functioned more symbolically than operationally. Leadership practices played a mediating role by partially reinterpreting audit requirements through value-oriented perspectives. The study contributes to global quality management debates by highlighting the need for more context-sensitive and pluralistic approaches that recognise the moral purposes of higher education.

Keywords: Quality management; Islamic higher education; globalisation; audit culture; accreditation; education values; Indonesia

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1. Introduction

Globalisation has fundamentally reshaped the governance and management of higher education systems worldwide. Beyond facilitating cross-border academic mobility and international collaboration, globalisation has introduced powerful policy instruments that standardise the way universities conceptualise, measure and manage quality. Transnational quality assurance regimes, global rankings and audit-based accountability systems increasingly shape national higher education reforms and promote efficiency, competitiveness and performance-based governance (Shatila et al., 2025; Shore & Wright, 2015; Thompson et al., 2022). Within this globalised policy environment, quality management has shifted from collegial and internally defined academic concerns to policy-driven managerial mechanisms tied to institutional legitimacy, funding allocation and international visibility (Pereira & Saltelli, 2017). As a result, universities are increasingly compelled to align their internal quality assurance systems with global norms that often privilege measurable outcomes over contextual and value-based education purposes.

Indonesia represents a particularly significant context for examining these global dynamics of quality management. As the world's largest Muslim-majority country, Indonesia hosts a diverse and rapidly expanding system of Islamic higher education institutions (IHEIs), including state Islamic universities, institutes, colleges and numerous private Islamic institutions. These institutions operate under national regulatory frameworks while simultaneously responding to international quality assurance expectations embedded in accreditation systems and performance indicators (Akalu, 2014; Camilleri, 2021). Indonesian higher education reforms have increasingly adopted global quality assurance discourses through national accreditation mechanisms, outcome-based education (OBE) and institutional performance measurement, which reflects broader trends of policy convergence and organisational isomorphism (Asbari & Nurhayati, 2024; Hakim et al., 2025; Smeplass, 2026). Consequently, Indonesian IHEIs function at the intersection of national regulation, global policy influence and Islamic education traditions.

Within this policy environment, IHEIs in Indonesia face complex and often contradictory demands to manage education quality. On the one hand, they are expected to demonstrate compliance with standardised quality management frameworks that emphasise graduate employability, learning outcomes, service quality and institutional efficiency (Abelha et al., 2020; Camilleri, 2021; Herbert et al., 2020); on the other hand, Islamic higher education is normatively grounded in broader educational aims, including moral cultivation, epistemological integration and social responsibility, which are not easily reducible to performance metrics or audit indicators (Ahzan et al., 2024; Audebrand & Pepin, 2022; Biesta, 2015). This tension reflects a deeper philosophical conflict between instrumental conceptions of quality driven by global policy regimes and holistic conceptions of education rooted in Islamic thought and values.

These tensions materialise in several persistent problems for the practice of quality management in Indonesian Islamic higher education. First, quality assurance processes often become compliance-oriented and documentation-heavy, by focusing on accreditation checklists rather than meaningful education transformation (Handayani et al., 2024; Krooi et al., 2024). Second, dominant global and national quality indicators tend to privilege quantifiable outcomes such as publication output, graduate employability and institutional rankings, and marginalising ethical, spiritual and community-oriented dimensions of education (Molesworth et al., 2009; Shore & Wright, 2015). Third, audit culture and performance-based governance intensify academic work and reduce institutional autonomy, thereby limiting the capacity of Islamic universities to articulate alternative, value-driven definitions of quality that are aligned with their religious mission (Shatila et al., 2025; Thompson et al., 2022).

Although higher education quality assurance and reform in Indonesia have attracted growing scholarly attention, significant gaps remain in the literature. Studies tend to focus on technical implementation issues, accreditation outcomes or general public universities, and often neglect the specific institutional logics and value systems of Islamic higher education (Akalu, 2014; Camilleri, 2021). In recent years, research on OBE and employability in Islamic higher education has increased, yet these studies largely adopt functional or instrumental perspectives without critically interrogating the underlying policy assumptions shaping quality management (Abelha et al., 2020; Asbari & Nurhayati, 2024; Hakim et al., 2025). Moreover, few studies integrate higher education management theories with Islamic epistemological and philosophical perspectives, which leaves the relationship between global quality regimes and Islamic educational values insufficiently theorised (Ahzan et al., 2024; Nelson & Weber, 2025).

This study sought to address these gaps by critically examining quality management in Indonesian Islamic higher education in a globalised policy environment. By conceptualising quality management as a socially constructed and policy-mediated practice, the study explored how global quality discourses are translated, negotiated and enacted at IHEIs. By drawing on insights from critical policy studies and organisational legitimacy theory, the research examines how institutional actors respond to external quality pressures while attempting to preserve Islamic education identity and purpose (de Groot et al., 2025; Pereira & Saltelli, 2017; Smeplass, 2026). By foregrounding the interaction between policy, management and values, this study positions IHEIs as active agents rather than passive recipients of global governance frameworks.

The significance of this study is threefold. Empirically, it contributes to international scholarship by foregrounding Indonesian Islamic higher education – a context that remains underrepresented despite its demographic and institutional importance (Nawas et al., 2025). Theoretically, it challenges the assumed universality of dominant quality management models by emphasising the role of epistemology, ethics and institutional identity in defining education quality (Audebrand & Pepin, 2022; Biesta, 2015). Practically, the study offers insights for policymakers, university leaders and quality assurance practitioners

on how quality management systems can be designed to balance global accountability requirements with the distinctive moral and educational missions of Islamic higher education. Ultimately, this research contributes to a more pluralistic and context-sensitive understanding of quality in higher education and recognises Indonesian Islamic universities as key actors in an increasingly globalised policy landscape.

2. Theoretical Framework: Value-Negotiated Quality Management

This study adopted a value-negotiated quality management framework to analyse how quality management is conceptualised and enacted in Islamic higher education in a globalised policy environment. The framework positions quality management as a contested and negotiated practice that is shaped by the interaction between global governance mechanisms and institutional value systems. In contemporary higher education policy debates, quality assurance has increasingly been associated with audit culture, performance measurement and managerial governance, which emphasise accountability, standardisation and measurable outcomes (Pereira & Saltelli, 2017; Shore & Wright, 2015).

These developments reflect a broader shift towards managerialism in higher education, according to which universities are governed through performance indicators, evaluation systems and regulatory audits that are designed to enhance efficiency and international competitiveness. While these mechanisms aim to improve transparency and accountability, critics argue that audit-driven governance can narrow the meaning of education quality by privileging measurable outputs over educational purpose, intellectual autonomy and ethical values.

In this context, the value-negotiated quality management framework conceptualises quality management, not as a neutral technical process but as a policy-mediated and value-laden practice embedded within these broader debates on audit culture and performance governance. The framework responds to critiques that contemporary quality assurance regimes often prioritise compliance with standardised indicators rather than fostering meaningful education development. By situating Islamic higher education within this policy environment, the study examined how institutions navigate tensions between global performance-based governance and locally grounded educational values.

In the framework, globalised quality governance represents the macro-level policy environment that structures institutional behaviour through accreditation systems, OBE, international ranking regimes and audit-based accountability mechanisms. These governance tools reflect the growing influence of managerial approaches to higher education, which assess institutional performance through quantifiable indicators such as publication output, graduate employability and standardised learning outcomes (Camilleri, 2021; Thompson et al., 2022). Such mechanisms exert normative pressure on higher education institutions to align with globally recognised standards of efficiency, competitiveness and accountability. In Indonesia, these global policy discourses are institutionalised

through national accreditation regimes and higher education reforms and reinforce the adoption of managerial quality management practices at IHEIs.

Institutional quality management practices constitute the mediating domain through which global policy discourses are translated into organisational routines and managerial processes. These practices include internal quality assurance systems, curriculum governance, performance evaluation and extensive documentation procedures associated with audit-based accountability. By drawing on neo-institutional perspectives, the framework recognises that IHEIs do not passively adopt global quality models but, instead, interpret, negotiate and adapt them to maintain organisational legitimacy while responding to contextual conditions (Smeplass, 2026). This process of policy translation often generates hybrid forms of quality management in which formal compliance with regulatory frameworks coexists with selective adaptation to institutional priorities (Handayani et al., 2024; Krooi et al., 2024). Such hybridity reflects the tension between managerial performance expectations and the diverse missions of higher education institutions.

The third element of the framework is Islamic educational values, which provide an axiological foundation for conceptualising education quality beyond instrumental performance outcomes. Rooted in ethical accountability, holistic human development and the integration of knowledge and moral responsibility, Islamic educational philosophy emphasises the transformative purposes of education. From this perspective, education quality extends beyond measurable outputs such as employability, publication productivity or ranking positions to include ethical formation, spiritual development and social responsibility (Ahzan et al., 2024; Audebrand & Pepin, 2022; Biesta, 2015). These value-based perspectives offer a critical counterpoint to dominant audit and performance discourses by recentring education as a moral and socially embedded practice.

The value-negotiated quality management framework, therefore, posits that quality management practices function as a negotiated arena in which global governance mechanisms associated with audit culture and managerialism intersect with Islamic educational values. The interaction between these forces shapes how quality is defined, implemented and evaluated at IHEIs. Depending on leadership orientation, institutional culture and policy flexibility, this negotiation may produce different outcomes, including alignment with global performance frameworks, hybrid integration of managerial and value-based approaches or the marginalisation of Islamic values within formal quality management systems.

By foregrounding this dynamic interaction, the framework enables a critical examination of the power relations, policy discourses and value commitments embedded in contemporary quality management regimes. Overall, the framework provides a coherent analytical lens for examining quality management in Islamic higher education as both a governance mechanism shaped by global audit culture and an ethical practice grounded in institutional values. In doing so, the study contributes to ongoing debates about the consequences of managerial

governance in higher education and highlights the need for contextually grounded and value-responsive approaches to quality management in Islamic higher education.

3. Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research approach to examine how quality management in Islamic higher education is conceptualised and enacted within a globalised policy environment. A qualitative design was particularly appropriate given the study aim to explore meanings, interpretations and institutional practices as experienced by key actors, instead of testing predefined hypotheses or quantifying relationships. Quality management in Islamic higher education was understood by this study as a socially constructed and value-laden process that is shaped by policy discourses, organisational contexts and ethical commitments. Qualitative inquiry allowed for an in-depth engagement with these complexities and aligned with interpretive and critical research paradigms that seek to uncover how policies are translated into practice (Lim, 2025; Nawas, 2025; Pandey et al., 2025).

The empirical focus of the study is Indonesian IHEIs that operate in a dense policy environment characterised by national accreditation requirements and increasing alignment with global quality assurance norms. Indonesia provides a rich context for qualitative investigation because of the diversity of its Islamic higher education sector and the institutional pressures faced by universities to demonstrate quality through audit-based and performance-oriented mechanisms. The study engaged with participants from both state and private IHEIs, thereby eliciting comparative insight into how quality management practices are shaped by institutional positioning, governance arrangements and resource conditions.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling (Achruh & Sukirman, 2024) to include individuals who had direct experience of quality management in Islamic higher education. This strategy focused on selecting information-rich participants who could provide meaningful insights into the research questions (Ahmad & Wilkins, 2025). A total of 15 participants took part in the study. They included senior university leaders, heads of quality assurance units, academic staff involved in curriculum development and OBE, and faculty members who had experience of accreditation and internal quality assurance processes.

Including participants from different roles enabled the study to capture multiple perspectives on how quality management is understood and implemented at institutions. Participants were selected according to three criteria: (1) Their formal role in quality assurance or academic governance; (2) Having at least five years of experience in higher education; and (3) Involvement in accreditation or internal quality assurance activities. Potential participants were contacted through institutional networks and invited to participate via email.

All participants received information about the study and provided informed consent before the interviews. Data were collected through semi structured interviews; each interview lasted 60–90 minutes and was conducted in Bahasa

Indonesia to allow participants to express their views comfortably. With participants' permission, all interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Data analysis followed a thematic approach. First, interview transcripts were read several times to obtain familiarity with the data. Second, initial codes were developed to capture important ideas and recurring patterns in participants' responses. Third, these codes were grouped into broader categories according to the three components of the value-negotiated quality management framework: globalised quality governance, institutional quality management practices, and Islamic educational values. Finally, these categories were refined into key themes that explain how participants understand and negotiate quality management at IHEIs.

Data were generated primarily through semistructured in-depth interviews, which offered both structure and flexibility to explore participants' perspectives while allowing new insights to emerge during the conversation. The interview protocol was explicitly informed by the value-negotiated quality management framework, which conceptualises quality management in Islamic higher education as the interaction among three core components: globalised quality governance, institutional quality management practices and Islamic educational values. These components served as guiding analytical categories throughout the research process.

Globalised quality governance refers to external regulatory and policy mechanisms such as accreditation systems, performance indicators and audit-based accountability structures that shape institutional expectations of quality. Institutional quality management practices refer to the internal managerial processes through which institutions implement and operationalise quality assurance, including curriculum governance, internal audits, documentation practices and performance monitoring. Islamic educational values refer to the ethical and philosophical principles embedded in Islamic education traditions, such as moral accountability, holistic human development and the integration of knowledge and spirituality.

These conceptual components informed the development of interview questions and guided data collection. Participants were invited to discuss their understandings of education quality, their experiences with accreditation and quality assurance procedures, and their perceptions of how Islamic values influence or interact with institutional quality management processes. Throughout the research process, reflexivity was maintained as a central methodological principle. The researcher's positionality, shaped by professional engagement with Islamic higher education, influenced both access to the field and the interpretation of participants' accounts. Rather than treating this positionality as a limitation, the study adopted a reflexive stance that acknowledges how the researcher's background, assumptions and interactions shape the process of knowledge production (Goundar, 2025). Reflexive memos were systematically maintained during both data collection and analysis, to document methodological decisions, emerging insights and potential interpretive biases, thereby enhancing transparency and analytic rigour.

Data analysis followed an iterative thematic analysis that was guided by the theoretical framework. The process started with repeated close readings of interview transcripts to identify meaningful segments related to participants' experiences with quality governance, institutional management practices, and the role of Islamic educational values. An initial round of open coding was conducted to capture significant statements and recurring patterns in the data. These preliminary codes were then organised deductively around the three core framework components, while remaining open to inductively emerging subthemes that reflected participants' lived experiences. For example, codes related to accreditation compliance, performance indicators and documentation practices were grouped under globalised quality governance and institutional quality management practices, while discussions of ethical formation, spiritual development and social responsibility were associated with Islamic educational values.

Through successive rounds of coding and comparison, these categories were refined further into broader analytical themes that capture how participants interpret, negotiate and sometimes reconcile tensions between global performance-based governance and value-based educational commitments. This abductive analytic process, which involved continuous movement between empirical data and theoretical concepts, enabled the study to connect participants' experiences with broader scholarly debates on quality management, audit culture and value-based education in higher education (Pandey et al., 2025). In this way, the theoretical framework did not merely serve as a background concept but actively structured the processes of data collection, coding and interpretation throughout the study.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, multiple strategies were employed throughout the research process. Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement with the research context and through member checking, whereby participants were invited to review and clarify key interpretations derived from their interviews. Dependability and confirmability were supported by maintaining a detailed audit trail documenting sampling decisions, interview procedures and analytic steps. Attention to trustworthiness was reinforced, furthermore, through reflexive practices that critically examined the researcher's influence on the research process (Ahmed, 2024).

Next, ethical considerations were integral to all stages of the study. Participants were fully informed about the purpose of the research, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Informed consent was obtained prior to data collection, and confidentiality was ensured through the use of pseudonyms and the removal of identifying information from transcripts and reports. Data were securely stored and accessed only by the researcher. The study adhered to established ethical principles for qualitative research, including respect for participants, integrity in data handling, and sensitivity to institutional and professional contexts (Pietilä et al., 2019).

4. Findings

The findings demonstrate that quality management in Indonesian Islamic higher education is a deeply complex and contested institutional practice that is shaped by the convergence of global quality governance, national regulatory frameworks and Islamic educational values. Instead of functioning as a stable or universally agreed-upon system, quality management is continuously produced through negotiation, interpretation and strategic compliance by institutional actors. Four major themes emerged from the analysis, each revealing different dimensions of how quality is understood, operationalised and contested across IHEIs. It is important that these themes should not be understood as separate phenomena but as interrelated dynamics within a broader governance environment shaped by audit-centred accountability regimes. The findings show how audit-driven governance structures institutional priorities (Theme 1), which, in turn, promote standardised practices that foster risk-averse academic behaviour (Theme 2).

Within this standardised environment, Islamic educational values tend to remain symbolically articulated but weakly operationalised in formal quality indicators (Theme 3). At the same time, the analysis identified leadership mediation as a potential mechanism through which institutions attempt to reinterpret and humanise these audit-driven systems (Theme 4), though such efforts remain constrained by broader regulatory pressures. Together, the themes illustrate how global quality governance reshapes academic practices, institutional identities and the role of Islamic educational values within contemporary higher education management.

4.1 Quality Management as an Audit-Centred Institutional Imperative

Participants across institutional levels consistently portrayed quality management as being fundamentally structured by audit and accreditation regimes that permeate everyday academic and administrative life. Quality was predominantly understood not as an internally defined educational aspiration but as an externally validated condition that must be continually demonstrated through measurable indicators, standardised documentation, and formal reporting procedures. In interviews, accreditation frameworks were repeatedly referenced as the primary lens through which institutional success, legitimacy and public credibility are judged. Several participants described how accreditation cycles effectively function as the temporal architecture of institutional life.

Planning processes, curriculum revisions, staff evaluations and research reporting were widely said to align with audit schedules rather than pedagogical rhythms. As one senior leader explained, *'our academic calendar follows the accreditation cycle; everything becomes urgent when the audit is near'* (P7). This observation was reinforced by quality assurance personnel who described intensified workloads in the months leading up to external evaluations, with one officer stating that *'activities that seemed minor suddenly become critical because they must be documented and scored'* (P2). Another participant reflected that *'quality management is always present, but it becomes overwhelming when accreditation is approaching'* (P11).

Participants in leadership and quality assurance roles emphasised that institutional legitimacy, public trust, and access to state funding are increasingly contingent on measurable performance outcomes. A vice rector remarked that *'quality is no longer something we define internally; it is something we must prove externally, in very specific ways'* (P4). Similarly, a quality assurance manager described their role as ensuring institutional survival within a highly regulated system, stating that *'we may not always agree with the standards, but compliance is non-negotiable'* (P9).

These accounts suggest that quality management is experienced as a strategic necessity rather than a pedagogical choice. Academic staff narratives illustrate further how audit logic penetrates core educational practices. Lecturers described how teaching, research, and community engagement were frequently reframed in terms of their reportability. One lecturer explained that *'before designing a course, I think about how it will be evaluated, not only how students will benefit'* (P1). Another noted that *'innovative activities are often avoided if they are difficult to translate into accreditation indicators'* (P6). In this way, quality management shapes both administrative processes and academic judgement at the classroom level.

While participants did not reject the importance of accountability, many articulated a deep sense of disillusionment with the proceduralisation of quality. Academic staff repeatedly characterised quality assurance as a *'paper exercise'*, and described long hours devoted to report writing, data entry and document revision. As one lecturer observed, *'the real work happens in the classroom, but what counts as quality is what appears in the report'* (P10). Another reflected that *'quality assurance meetings are usually about fixing documents, not discussing students' learning experiences'* (P3).

Quality assurance staff echoed this frustration, with one participant stating that *'our job often feels more like checking boxes than supporting academic improvement'* (P8). These procedural demands were also perceived as reshaping academic identities and collegial relations. Several lecturers expressed concern that professional worth was increasingly measured by compliance rather than educational contribution. A senior academic reflected that *'being a good lecturer now also means being good at administration'* (P12). At the same time, quality assurance personnel described the emotional burden of being positioned as institutional monitors, with one noting that *'sometimes colleagues see us as auditors, not partners'* (P5).

These experiences reflect broader patterns described in the literature on audit culture in higher education, according to which institutional activities become increasingly oriented towards demonstrating compliance with externally defined performance indicators rather than internally defined educational purposes. In this context, quality assurance operates not only as a mechanism of accountability but also as a form of governance that reshapes institutional priorities and academic work.

4.2 Standardisation, Risk Aversion and the Narrowing of Academic Practice

A second theme reveals how standardised quality frameworks foster risk-averse academic behaviours and progressively narrow pedagogical practice at IHEIs.

Participants consistently described the increasing dominance of standardised templates, rubrics and learning outcome formulations, particularly those associated with OBE and accreditation instruments, as central mechanisms through which quality is governed. Across interviews, lecturers and curriculum coordinators described how pedagogical decisions were increasingly shaped by anticipation of accreditation scrutiny. Course design, assessment strategies and even classroom interaction were often planned with an eye towards compliance rather than educational experimentation. One programme coordinator remarked that *'we design the syllabus not for students first, but for auditors, because that is what determines our programme's survival'* (P6). Similarly, a lecturer said that *'before trying something new in class, I always ask whether it will fit the learning outcomes and rubrics required by accreditation'* (P2). These accounts suggest that standardisation operates as a form of pre-emptive regulation that shapes academic behaviour even in the absence of direct monitoring.

Participants, furthermore, emphasised that the perceived risks associated with deviating from standardised formats discouraged pedagogical innovation. Several lecturers described avoiding alternative assessment methods, interdisciplinary approaches or community-based learning activities because such practices were considered difficult to document or justify within accreditation frameworks. As one participant explained, *'innovation is not forbidden, but it is risky, if it cannot be clearly mapped to the indicators, it becomes a liability'* (P9). Another added that *'we are encouraged to be creative, but only within very narrow boundaries'* (P4).

This culture of risk aversion was reinforced by internal quality assurance mechanisms that closely mirrored external audit criteria. Participants described how internal monitoring systems replicated accreditation instruments, extending standardisation into routine academic work. Quality assurance processes were often experienced as continuous surveillance rather than collegial support. One lecturer observed that *'every semester feels like a mini-audit; we are constantly uploading evidence and checking compliance'* (P11). Another reflected that *'quality assurance no longer feels like guidance, it feels like inspection'* (P1).

Several participants described emotional and professional consequences arising from this environment. Lecturers spoke of heightened anxiety and self-censorship and reported that they often modified teaching practices to avoid scrutiny. One academic remarked that *'you start teaching safely, not creatively, because safe teaching is easier to justify on paper'* (P8). Quality assurance staff also acknowledged this tension, with one participant stating that *'our systems unintentionally discipline academics into conformity'* (P5). At the institutional level, leaders acknowledged that standardisation had produced increasing uniformity across IHEIs. Deans and senior administrators observed that universities with distinct historical missions and community engagements now appeared remarkably similar in official documents. As one dean stated, *'many Islamic universities now look the same on paper, even though they serve different social and religious communities'* (P10). Another leader reflected that *'institutional uniqueness is celebrated rhetorically, but standardisation makes it difficult to express in practice'* (P3).

This pattern illustrates how standardised accountability frameworks can generate what scholars describe as managerial regulation of academic practice, according to which the anticipation of evaluation shapes pedagogical decisions even in the absence of direct monitoring. As a result, standardisation functions not merely as a technical requirement but as a subtle mechanism that disciplines academic behaviour and narrows the space for pedagogical experimentation.

4.3 Islamic Values as Symbolic Commitments Rather than Operational Criteria

Although all participating institutions articulated Islamic values as foundational to their educational missions, the findings indicate that these values remain largely symbolic and only weakly operationalised under formal quality management systems. Across interviews, participants consistently emphasised that Islamic higher education aspires to cultivate graduates who embody ethical responsibility, spiritual consciousness and social commitment. Institutional policy documents such as university vision and mission statements, graduate attribute frameworks and strategic development plans frequently highlight values such as *akhlaq*, integrity, social responsibility and spiritual development as core educational goals.

Quality, from this perspective, was frequently framed as a holistic process of moral and intellectual formation rather than a narrow set of measurable outcomes. However, participants also acknowledged that such value-laden aspirations were difficult to reconcile with audit-driven quality frameworks that prioritise standardisation, quantification and performance indicators. Institutional leaders often spoke passionately about Islamic values when they discussed the philosophical foundations of their universities. Several described quality as inseparable from character education, ethical conduct and spiritual discipline. As one senior leader explained, *'in Islamic education, quality means producing graduates with adab, integrity, and responsibility to society, not only academic competence'* (P8).

Another leader similarly emphasised that *'our success should be measured by who our graduates become as human beings, not only by employment statistics'* (P3). These narratives reflect a deeply held normative understanding of quality rooted in Islamic education philosophy. In policy documents, such commitments are often expressed through statements about forming morally grounded graduates, integrating faith and knowledge and promoting socially responsible scholarship. Yet when conversations shifted towards accreditation and quality assurance processes, the same participants acknowledged that these value-based dimensions were rarely translated into operational indicators or evaluation criteria. Quality assurance officers repeatedly noted the absence of mechanisms capable of assessing Islamic values through formal audit instruments.

Instead, accreditation frameworks primarily evaluated quantifiable indicators such as research productivity, publication output, graduate employability rates, staff qualifications, curriculum documentation and compliance with OBE standards. One officer remarked that *'there is no clear place in the instrument to assess sincerity, integrity or character; these are important, but they are not auditable'* (P11).

Another explained that *'we can write about values in the narrative sections, but they do not carry much weight in scoring'* (P5). These accounts highlight the structural marginalisation of value-based dimensions within dominant quality frameworks. Lecturers echoed this concern by describing how Islamic values were often embedded through informal pedagogical practices such as classroom dialogue, mentoring relationships and role modelling, yet remained disconnected from formal quality assessment systems. One lecturer observed that *'we talk about values with students every day, but none of that is counted as quality performance'* (P2). Another reflected that *'there is no reward system for moral education; what is evaluated are documents and outputs'* (P9). This disconnect contributed to a perception that Islamic values, while rhetorically central, were practically peripheral to quality management practices.

Participants frequently characterised this situation as a form of symbolic integration, with Islamic values being visible at the level of institutional discourse but weakly embedded in managerial routines. Islamic values were described as highly visible in institutional vision statements, strategic plans and public branding, yet largely absent from operational decision-making related to curriculum evaluation, staff appraisal and programme accreditation. One academic captured this tension by stating that *'Islamic values legitimise who we are, but they do not strongly shape how quality is measured'* (P6). Another participant suggested that values functioned more as institutional identity markers than as actionable quality criteria, by reporting that *'values are displayed on banners and websites, but they rarely guide quality improvement discussions'* (P1).

Several participants expressed discomfort with what they perceived as the instrumentalization of Islamic values for symbolic purposes. Leaders and academics alike reported that values were often mobilised to differentiate Islamic universities in competitive higher education markets, without being meaningfully integrated into quality systems. As one participant critically observed, *'sometimes Islamic values become part of branding rather than part of evaluation'* (P10). This perception underscores the tension between maintaining religious identity and conforming to global quality assurance regimes that privilege secular, market-oriented metrics. This finding resonates with broader critiques of performance-based governance in higher education, which suggest that values and educational purposes that resist quantification are often marginalised under audit-driven evaluation systems. In this case, Islamic values remain highly visible in institutional discourse yet weakly embedded in the measurable indicators that define formal quality performance.

4.4 Leadership Mediation and the Possibility of Value-Oriented Quality Practices

Despite the pervasive influence of audit-based governance, the findings reveal moments of institutional agency, particularly when leadership actively sought to mediate and reinterpret quality management practices. These leadership efforts can be understood as attempts to respond to the tensions identified in the previous themes, specifically, the dominance of audit-centred governance, the narrowing effects of standardisation, and the symbolic marginalisation of Islamic values.

Participants at institutions with strong and value-conscious leadership described deliberate efforts to reposition quality assurance as a reflective, developmental and ethically grounded process, rather than a narrowly technical or compliance-driven exercise. In these contexts, leadership was perceived not as opposing external quality regimes, but as strategically translating them into locally meaningful practices aligned with Islamic educational values. Leaders in these institutions articulated quality as a shared moral responsibility rather than an administrative burden.

Participants also highlighted leadership practices that emphasised internal dialogue, peer learning and self-evaluation as central elements of quality management. In contrast to compliance-oriented monitoring, leaders in these institutions promoted reflective spaces in which academics could collectively examine teaching practices, curriculum coherence and student development. One lecturer described internal quality workshops as *'safe spaces for honest discussion, not fault-finding'* (P12), while another said that *'peer review sessions feel more like learning together than being inspected'* (P5).

Such practices were perceived as fostering trust and collegiality and reducing resistance to quality assurance processes. Quality assurance staff similarly observed shifts in institutional culture when leadership emphasised developmental approaches. A quality assurance officer reflected that *'our role becomes more supportive when leaders position quality as improvement, not punishment'* (P1). Another participant noted that leadership encouragement enabled quality assurance units to act as facilitators of academic reflection rather than as enforcers of compliance (P8). These accounts indicate that leadership mediation can partially transform the function and perception of quality assurance at institutions.

Participants also highlighted several concrete leadership practices that enabled institutions to partially reinterpret audit-driven quality systems while remaining compliant with external accreditation requirements. One frequently mentioned strategy involved reframing the discourse of quality assurance in institutional meetings and policy discussions. Rather than presenting accreditation purely as a bureaucratic obligation, some leaders explicitly connected quality processes to Islamic ethics concepts such as *amanah* (trust) and *ihsan* (excellence). This reframing helped reposition quality assurance as a moral responsibility rather than an administrative burden. As one academic staff member explained, *'our rector often reminds us that quality is not only about accreditation scores; it is about amanah in educating students responsibly'* (P9).

Another participant observed that *'when leaders link quality to Islamic values, it changes the atmosphere of meetings; people feel they are contributing to a mission, not just completing reports'* (P3). Another leadership strategy involved creating institutional spaces for reflective dialogue around teaching and curriculum development. Participants described internal workshops, peer-review sessions and faculty discussions organised by leaders to encourage reflection on student learning and curriculum coherence beyond accreditation documentation. These forums were perceived as opportunities to reclaim pedagogical conversations that

are often overshadowed by compliance requirements. One lecturer described these initiatives as follows: *'Our faculty meetings now include sessions where we talk about teaching experiences, not only about accreditation forms'* (P12). Another participant explained that *'leaders encourage us to share classroom practices and discuss student development, which makes quality discussions more meaningful'* (P5).

Leaders were also described as strategically mediating external audit expectations in order to reduce bureaucratic pressure on academic staff. Rather than introducing additional administrative layers, some leaders encouraged departments to align existing teaching and community engagement activities with accreditation indicators. As one participant explained, *'our dean tells us not to create activities just for the report; instead, we document what we already do in teaching and community work'* (P8). Another academic observed that *'good leaders try to translate the accreditation language so that it fits our academic practices, not the other way around'* (P6).

Despite these efforts, participants emphasised that such leadership practices operate within structural constraints. While leaders may reinterpret quality discourse internally, external evaluation systems continue to prioritise measurable indicators and standardised documentation. As one quality assurance officer remarked, *'internally we can make quality more meaningful, but when the auditors come, the numbers still matter most'* (P10). These accounts suggest that leadership mediation can soften the managerial effects of audit-driven governance partially, even though the broader regulatory framework remains largely unchanged.

However, participants also consistently emphasised the fragility and contingency of these value-oriented quality practices. Leadership-driven initiatives were widely perceived as dependent on individual leaders' commitment rather than being embedded within institutional structures. Several participants noted that, when leadership changed, quality management practices often reverted to compliance-focused approaches. As one academic observed, *'everything depends on who is in charge; when leadership changes, the spirit of quality changes too'* (P6). A quality assurance officer remarked that *'we can humanise quality internally, but externally we are still judged by numbers and rankings'* (P10).

Moreover, leaders themselves acknowledged the limits of institutional agency under dominant policy regimes. Participants described how external accreditation requirements, funding mechanisms, and ranking systems continued to exert strong pressure, constraining the extent to which value-oriented practices could be institutionalised. A senior leader explained that *'we can reinterpret quality internally, but we cannot ignore the indicators that determine our accreditation status'* (P4). Another reflected that *'there is always a boundary, we can soften quality, but we cannot redefine it entirely'* (P7).

These leadership practices illustrate how institutional actors attempt to reinterpret externally imposed governance frameworks in ways that align with local educational values. Such efforts reflect the broader institutional dynamic described in neo-institutional scholarship, according to which organisations

strategically adapt global policy models while seeking to preserve distinctive institutional missions.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study reinforce and extend critical scholarship that conceptualises quality management in higher education as a form of governance rather than a purely technical mechanism for improvement. Consistent with analyses of audit culture and market-oriented reforms, quality assurance in Indonesian Islamic higher education emerges as a dominant organising logic that structures institutional life, academic labour and educational meaning (Shore & Wright, 2015; Thompson et al., 2022). Participants' accounts reveal that accreditation cycles, standardised indicators and performance audits function as regulatory instruments through which institutions secure legitimacy, funding and public recognition.

This aligns with research that found that quality management systems increasingly operate as mechanisms of institutional control and normalisation, particularly in contexts where universities must demonstrate compliance with globally recognisable standards to sustain credibility (Shatila et al., 2025; Smeplass, 2026). However, this study advances the literature by demonstrating how these dynamics are intensified in IHEIs, which must simultaneously navigate religious missions and secularised policy expectations.

The findings concerning audit-centred quality management resonate strongly with critiques that frame quality assurance as a manifestation of managerial governance and new public management in higher education. Similar to findings by Akalu (2014) on Islamic higher education in Ethiopia, this research found that external quality assurance regimes significantly constrain institutional autonomy, thereby compelling universities to prioritise measurable performance over locally defined educational goals.

Participants' descriptions of quality as something that must be 'proven externally' rather than cultivated internally reflect what Pereira and Saltelli (2017) describe as a post-normal institutional condition, in which reflexivity and care are displaced by compliance and calculability. While accountability is not rejected by institutional actors, the findings indicate a widespread perception that quality assurance has become proceduralised, which reinforces earlier concerns that audit cultures privilege visibility and documentation over substantive educational processes (Shore & Wright, 2015).

The prominence of standardisation and outcome-based frameworks in participants' narratives, furthermore, illustrates how global policy models shape academic practice through subtle yet pervasive forms of control. Research on OBE in Islamic higher education emphasises its potential to enhance learning clarity and employability (Asbari & Nurhayati, 2024; Handayani et al., 2024), and bibliometric evidence suggests its growing dominance in the field (Hakim et al., 2025). However, the present findings complicate this optimistic narrative by showing that standardisation also generates risk-averse academic cultures in

which lecturers and curriculum designers anticipate audit scrutiny and therefore avoid pedagogical experimentation. This supports broader critiques of standardisation as a driver of conformity and homogenisation in higher education systems globally (Thompson et al., 2022). Importantly, the Indonesian Islamic higher education context reveals that such standardisation not only narrows pedagogical practice but also constrains epistemological diversity and limits the capacity of institutions to respond to local social, cultural and moral contexts.

The study findings also speak directly to debates on graduate employability and competence development in Islamic higher education. While global quality frameworks often justify standardisation through employability discourses, participants expressed concern about competence development being increasingly reduced to what could be measured and scored. This echoes the findings of a systematic review by Abelha et al. (2020), which caution that employability-oriented reforms risk oversimplifying graduate attributes and neglecting holistic educational outcomes. Similarly, Herbert et al. (2020) argue that employability frameworks often obscure deeper questions about the purpose of higher education and the kind of graduates institutions seek to produce. In this study, the emphasis on standardised outcomes appeared to marginalise broader Islamic educational aims that were related to ethical responsibility, social justice and spiritual formation, and suggesting that employability-driven quality regimes may be poorly aligned with value-based education traditions.

A particularly significant contribution of this study lies in its analysis of how Islamic values are incorporated in quality management systems. While institutional leaders articulated strong commitments to Islamic moral and spiritual ideals, these values were largely absent from operational quality indicators. This finding aligns with Camilleri's (2021) review, which highlights the difficulty of integrating service quality and performance metrics with the distinctive missions of IHEIs. From an axiological perspective, Audebrand and Pepin (2022) argue that management education must explicitly engage with values if it is to avoid ethical hollowing. Yet the present study shows that values are often symbolically affirmed rather than institutionally operationalised and function as markers of identity rather than criteria of evaluation. This symbolic integration reflects what Biesta (2015) criticises as the reduction of education to measurable learning outcomes, which systematically sidelines existential and ethical dimensions.

The findings, furthermore, suggest that this marginalisation of values is not accidental but rooted in the epistemic assumptions of global quality regimes. What can be quantified, compared and audited is privileged, while qualities such as sincerity, integrity and moral character – central to Islamic pedagogy – are rendered invisible. This echoes broader critiques of global governance frameworks that privilege Western rationalist epistemologies and marginalise alternative knowledge systems (Kütting & Godek, 2026). In this sense, quality management operates not only as an administrative technology but also as an epistemic filter that defines what counts as legitimate educational value. The implications extend beyond Islamic higher education and raises questions about

the capacity of global quality assurance systems to accommodate plural education philosophies, including religious, indigenous and community-oriented traditions.

Despite these structural constraints, the study also identifies moments of institutional agency, particularly through leadership mediation. Leaders who reframed quality management as a reflective and ethical practice were able to foster more meaningful engagement among academic staff. This finding aligns with literature that emphasises the role of leadership and internal quality assurance cultures in shaping how external policies are enacted (Krooi et al., 2024). By emphasising dialogue, peer learning and collective responsibility, some leaders mitigated the alienating effects of audit culture, to echo the argument of de Groot et al. (2025) that multistakeholder engagement can humanise governance processes in Islamic higher education. However, the fragility of these initiatives underscores the limits of agency under dominant policy regimes. As Shatila et al. (2025) report, governance structures often mediate but do not dismantle audit culture, thereby leaving institutions vulnerable to reversion when leadership changes. From a methodological standpoint, the qualitative design of the study enabled a nuanced exploration of how quality management is experienced and interpreted by institutional actors.

The use of purposive sampling by this study ensured that participants possessed relevant knowledge of quality processes, consistent with best practices in qualitative research design (Ahmad & Wilkins, 2025; Lim, 2025). Attention to trustworthiness, reflexivity, and ethical considerations strengthens the credibility of the findings further (Ahmed, 2024; Goundar, 2025; Pietilä et al., 2019). These methodological commitments are particularly important given the politically sensitive nature of quality governance and institutional critique in higher education contexts.

Beyond the Indonesian context, the findings also offer insights relevant to other religious and non-Western higher education systems navigating global quality governance regimes. Many faith-based institutions, including Islamic, Christian, Buddhist and Hindu universities, operate within policy environments shaped by standardised accreditation frameworks and performance-based evaluation models. Similar to the Indonesian IHEIs examined in this study, these institutions often face the challenge of aligning value-oriented educational missions with audit-driven accountability systems. The symbolic positioning of Islamic values identified in this research may, therefore, reflect a broader pattern in which religious or culturally grounded education philosophies struggle to gain recognition through globally standardised quality indicators.

For institutions rooted in non-Western intellectual traditions, this tension highlights the importance of developing quality frameworks that are sensitive to diverse epistemological and ethical foundations of education. Consequently, the Indonesian case contributes to wider debates on how quality assurance systems might better accommodate institutional diversity while maintaining accountability. It suggests that future quality governance models should allow

space for mission-based evaluation approaches that recognise the distinctive educational purposes of religious and culturally embedded universities.

6. Practical Implications

Taken together, the findings offer important lessons for the global higher education community and suggest directions for developing more ethically responsive quality management frameworks. First, they underscore that quality management is inherently value-laden and political, even when framed as neutral and technical. Recognising this reality requires institutions and policymakers to move beyond purely procedural conceptions of quality assurance towards approaches that explicitly engage with educational values and institutional missions. One practical implication is the need to expand the scope of quality indicators to include qualitative and developmental dimensions of education. Rather than relying exclusively on quantifiable metrics such as publication output or employability rates, quality frameworks could incorporate reflective evaluations of ethical development, community engagement and student formation, assessed through peer review, narrative reports and evidence of mentoring and civic participation.

Second, the findings caution against the uncritical diffusion of standardised quality models that could undermine institutional diversity and pedagogical innovation. Policymakers could address this limitation by introducing greater flexibility within accreditation systems, to allow institutions to demonstrate quality through context-sensitive indicators aligned with their educational missions. For IHEIs, this may involve recognising indicators related to ethical formation, community service or the integration of faith and knowledge in curricula. Such an approach would not abandon accountability but would broaden the conception of quality to reflect the plural purposes of higher education.

Third, the study highlights the importance of internal quality cultures that prioritise dialogue and collective reflection rather than procedural compliance alone. Institutional leaders can play a critical role in cultivating such cultures by creating spaces for peer learning, curriculum reflection and participatory quality discussions that involve academic staff and students. Quality assurance units, in this sense, could function less as monitoring bodies and more as facilitators of pedagogical development, to help academic communities interpret external requirements in ways that remain consistent with their educational values.

Finally, the findings suggest that policymakers who design quality assurance systems should consider hybrid evaluation models that combine standardised indicators with qualitative assessments of institutional mission fulfilment. Such models could involve multistakeholder evaluation processes, including academic peers, community representatives and students, to ensure that quality frameworks capture the broader social and ethical contributions of universities. By incorporating these perspectives, quality assurance systems would be better positioned to support diverse educational traditions, including religious, indigenous and community-oriented institutions.

In this way, the study calls for a shift from narrowly audit-driven quality regimes towards value-responsive quality governance that balances accountability with educational purpose. Such an approach would not only enhance the legitimacy of quality assurance systems but also enable higher education institutions to pursue excellence in ways that remain aligned with their distinctive missions and societal responsibilities.

7. Conclusion

This study set out to critically examine how quality management is understood, enacted and negotiated at Indonesian IHEs operating in a globalised policy environment. Drawing on qualitative interview data and informed by critical governance and audit culture theories, the study demonstrates that quality management functions not merely as an administrative tool but as a powerful regulatory regime that reshapes institutional priorities, academic practices and educational values. The findings reveal that quality management is experienced as deeply ambivalent: it provides mechanisms of accountability and legitimacy while simultaneously constraining pedagogical autonomy, narrowing educational purpose, and marginalising values central to Islamic educational philosophy. The study also shows that audit-centred quality management has become a dominant institutional imperative, organising academic life around accreditation cycles, performance indicators, and standardised documentation.

While these mechanisms are widely accepted as necessary for institutional survival and public trust, they also reorient attention away from substantive educational processes towards procedural compliance. Standardisation and outcomes-based frameworks, although intended to enhance clarity and comparability, were found to foster risk-averse academic cultures and discourage pedagogical innovation. Academic staff often adapted their practices to anticipated audit expectations, illustrating how global quality regimes operate through internalised compliance rather than direct coercion.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study is based on a qualitative sample within the Indonesian context, and its findings are not intended to be statistically generalisable. Nevertheless, the depth of participants' accounts provides rich insights into the lived realities of quality management that are analytically transferable to similar contexts. Future research could extend this work through comparative studies across countries or institutional types, longitudinal analyses of quality reform trajectories, or mixed method approaches that examine how policy discourses align, or conflict, with everyday academic practice.

In conclusion, this study argues that quality management in Islamic higher education cannot be reduced to technical procedures or standardised indicators. It is a contested field in which global governance logics, national policy demands, institutional survival strategies, and educational values intersect. Recognising this complexity is essential if quality assurance is to support, rather than undermine, the transformative, ethical, and socially responsive purposes of higher education in an increasingly globalised world.

8. Acknowledgements

The authors wish to acknowledge the use of [name/s of AI Tool/s] in the writing of this paper. This tool was used to help improve the language and grammar in the paper. The paper remains an accurate representation of the authors' work and intellectual contributions.

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