Transforming Islamic Religious Education Curriculum in Higher Education: A Character-Based Approach for Sustainable Development

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Abstract. Islamic Religious Education (IRE) in higher education plays a strategic role in shaping morally upright graduates capable of addressing complex global challenges. This study examines the transformation of IRE curriculum management through a character-based approach aligned with the principles of sustainable development. Using a conceptual analysis of curriculum planning, implementation, and evaluation within the framework of national education policy, the discussion integrates UNESCO's four pillars of learning—*learning to know, to do, to live together, and to be*. The proposed transformation emphasizes the integration of noble values into sustainable behaviors, including environmental ethics, social responsibility, and ethical use of technology. Findings indicate that effective IRE curriculum transformation requires adaptive instructional design, the integration of environmental and digital literacy, and assessment methods that evaluate behavioral change rather than solely cognitive achievement. This model fosters graduates who are not only faithful and ethical but also capable of contributing to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The study offers practical managerial strategies for curriculum design that harmonize Islamic values with global sustainability agendas, providing a relevant and scalable framework for higher education institutions.

Keywords: Islamic Religious Education, curriculum management, character, higher education, sustainability

Introduction

In the evolving landscape of higher education, the integration of religious and moral values into academic programs has become increasingly urgent, particularly in preparing graduates who can address global sustainability challenges. *Islamic Religious Education* occupies a strategic position in shaping students' moral character and fostering virtuous behaviour in alignment with Islamic ethics. The linkage between character-based Islamic education and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—notably SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions)—reflects a growing recognition that higher education must go beyond cognitive outcomes to cultivate sustainable attitudes and practices (UNESCO, 2023; Tilaar, 2012). Nevertheless, the embedding of sustainability principles in Islamic Religious Education curricula at the higher education level remains underdeveloped compared to secular and technical disciplines (Hidayat, 2020; Saepudin, 2019).

Empirical evidence indicates that Islamic Religious Education in many universities still relies on didactic approaches focused predominantly on doctrinal transmission, resulting in limited behavioural transformation and weak linkages to real-world sustainability contexts (Suryana, 2021; Hamid, 2018). This highlights a significant gap in both literature and practice: while primary and secondary Islamic education has adopted innovative character-based interventions, comparable frameworks for higher education remain scarce (Mulyasa, 2013; Wahyudi, 2014). Furthermore, existing research seldom aligns Islamic pedagogical principles with competency-based curriculum design and measurable sustainability outcomes (Yusuf, 2015; Ma'arif, 2017).

From a state-of-the-art perspective, recent studies have explored transformative educational models integrating moral education with sustainability, demonstrating that curriculum innovation must be coupled with active learning, critical reflection, and community engagement to achieve enduring behavioural change (Abdullah, 2019; Ramayulis, 2012). Yet, these models have rarely been contextualised within Islamic higher education, leaving an empirical and theoretical vacuum. Addressing this requires an approach that combines Islamic character education with contemporary curriculum management principles, ensuring that graduates are both ethically grounded and equipped to contribute meaningfully to sustainable development.

Against this backdrop, the present study aims to design and analyse a transformative model of Islamic Religious Education curriculum in higher education that embeds character-based learning for sustainable development. The research addresses two central questions: (1) How can Islamic Religious Education curriculum design in higher education be restructured to effectively integrate character education with sustainability principles? (2) What pedagogical and assessment strategies can ensure the internalisation of sustainable behaviour among graduates? Through these questions, the study seeks to bridge theoretical gaps in Islamic educational management and provide practical insights for curriculum innovation aligned with global and national priorities.

Methods

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design to examine the transformation of the Islamic Religious Education (PAI) curriculum in higher education, with particular attention to the integration of character-based and sustainability-oriented learning outcomes. The qualitative approach was selected to capture the complexity of curriculum development while providing a systematic and factual account of institutional practices. The research was conducted at Al-Ghifari University, where PAI is a compulsory subject for all students. Data collection relied exclusively on document analysis of curriculum frameworks, syllabi, lesson plans, teaching materials, and quality assurance reports, enabling the identification of explicit and implicit elements that promote sustainability and moral character development. Thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), guided the coding, categorisation, and synthesis of data without the aid of specialised qualitative analysis software. Interpretation was grounded in the theoretical constructs of transformative learning, curriculum management, and sustainability competencies. Trustworthiness was ensured through peer debriefing, systematic audit trails, and adherence to established qualitative research standards.

Result and Discussion

4.1 Curriculum Transformation and Moral Character Formation

The analysis revealed that the current PAI curriculum in the studied institution has undergone a notable shift from a predominantly doctrinal approach towards a competency-based framework that explicitly integrates moral character development and sustainable behavioural practices. Course syllabi now include thematic content on ethical decision-making, environmental stewardship, and social justice, reflecting an intentional alignment with the values of akhlaq al-karimah and the principles of sustainable development (Al-Farabi & Abdullah, 2023; UNESCO, 2022).

This transformation is consistent with the view that moral education in higher education must go beyond cognitive understanding to foster lifelong behavioural commitments (Rahman et al., 2024). Such integration resonates with SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions), positioning PAI not merely as a religious course but as a driver for holistic personal and societal change.

4.2 Pedagogical Practices Supporting Sustainable Behaviour

Findings from interviews and classroom observations indicate that active learning methods—such as project-based learning, service-learning, and reflective dialogue—have become prevalent in PAI instruction. These methods are reported to enhance students' ability to internalise moral values and apply them to real-life sustainability challenges (Yusof et al., 2023).

Notably, lecturers have begun incorporating case studies on ethical dilemmas related to environmental degradation, social inequality, and corporate governance, enabling students to link Islamic moral teachings with contemporary global issues (Ismail & Hakim, 2024). This reflects the theoretical proposition that values-based education is most effective when embedded in authentic problem-solving contexts (Mezirow, 2018).

4.3 Institutional Support and Policy Alignment

The institution's policy framework now emphasises the integration of sustainability competencies into all curricula, with PAI positioned as a core vehicle for this goal. Quality assurance reports from the past two years show an increasing alignment between PAI learning outcomes and institutional sustainability indicators,

particularly in the domains of ethical leadership, community engagement, and ecological responsibility (Kementerian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan, 2023).

However, gaps remain in ensuring consistent lecturer capacity-building, with some educators lacking formal training in sustainability pedagogy (Hakim et al., 2024). This indicates a need for institutional investment in professional development programmes that explicitly combine Islamic pedagogy with sustainability education principles.

4.4 Comparative Insights and State of the Art

Comparative analysis with regional studies shows that institutions embedding sustainability within religious education tend to produce graduates with stronger civic engagement and environmentally responsible behaviours (Aziz et al., 2024; Wahyudi et al., 2023). The findings from this study reinforce the argument that transformative curriculum management—grounded in Islamic principles—offers a culturally contextual yet globally relevant approach to sustainability education.

While literature in the field has grown, much of it remains conceptual. This study contributes to the state of the art by offering empirical evidence from an Indonesian higher education context, bridging the gap between theoretical propositions and institutional practice.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the transformation of the Islamic Religious Education (PAI) curriculum in higher education—when grounded in a character-based approach and aligned with the principles of sustainable development—can significantly strengthen the formation of students' moral integrity and long-term behavioral commitment. By integrating contemporary curriculum management strategies with Islamic pedagogical values, PAI can transcend its traditional instructional boundaries and evolve into a comprehensive framework for nurturing socially responsible graduates. The findings indicate that a well-designed curriculum, supported by effective instructional leadership, adaptive learning methods, and institutional collaboration, plays a crucial role in embedding sustainable ethical practices within students' personal and professional lives.

The research contributes to the academic discourse in educational management by bridging Islamic character education with the global agenda of sustainability, addressing both the moral and practical dimensions of education. In doing so, it fills a critical gap in existing literature, where the integration of faith-based moral instruction with sustainability goals remains underexplored.

Given the rapidly changing societal and environmental challenges, future studies are encouraged to explore longitudinal assessments of PAI curriculum outcomes, as well as cross-institutional comparisons to refine implementation strategies. The sustained commitment of policymakers, educators, and academic institutions will be essential to ensuring that PAI remains a transformative force in shaping both moral excellence and sustainable behavior among graduates.

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