TRANSFORMING ISLAMIC HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS THROUGH VISIONARY LEADERSHIP

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Abstract	This study explores how strategic leadership can drive institutional transformation towards excellence in Islamic higher education. A qualitative research approach with an ethnographic orientation was adopted, conducted at UIN Sulthan Thaha Saifuddin Jambi, Indonesia, over the course of one year, particularly during the university's national accreditation preparation. Data were collected through three primary methods: participant observation in leadership meetings and quality assurance activities, in-depth interviews with 14 key informants (including university leaders, lecturers, and accreditation staff), and document analysis of institutional strategic plans and accreditation reports. Data analysis employed an inductive thematic procedure, in which interview transcripts, field notes, and institutional documents were analysed to identify emerging themes. The findings reveal that strategic leadership was realised through three key pillars: clear visionary direction, participatory management, and the integration of Islamic humanistic values into institutional governance. Despite facing challenges such as structural fragmentation, limited financial resources, and cultural resistance to change, leadership succeeded in mobilising collective commitment and aligning organisational efforts with accreditation goals. As a result, the university achieved the highest national accreditation rating (A). This study contributes theoretically by contextualising strategic leadership within faith-based educational settings in the Global South and highlighting the importance of moral authority, inclusive communication, and organisational synergy. Practically, the findings offer valuable insights for Islamic university leaders seeking to foster excellence under constrained conditions.
Keywords	Accreditation, Institutional Excellence, Islamic Higher Education, Organizational Transformation, Strategic Leadership.

INTRODUCTION

The pursuit of institutional excellence has become a defining priority for higher education institutions worldwide, particularly within the context of global rankings, accreditation frameworks, and increasingly competitive academic environments. For Islamic higher education institutions, this pursuit is further shaped by the need to balance global academic standards with religious, cultural, and moral missions (Al-Attas, 2010; Hashim, 2017). Achieving institutional excellence is not merely a technical endeavor; it requires visionary and adaptive leadership capable of integrating diverse values, navigating organizational complexity, and cultivating a culture of continuous improvement (Fullan, 2007; Leithwood et al., 2006).

The pursuit of institutional excellence is a central goal for higher education institutions worldwide, and this is especially pronounced in the context of Islamic higher education. At UIN Sulthan Thaha Saifuddin Jambi, Indonesia, this ambition is closely tied to the strategic implementation of visionary leadership. Visionary leadership, defined as the ability to envision the future, align stakeholders with a clear institutional vision, and inspire collective efforts towards long-term goals, plays a crucial role in shaping the university's transformation. This study aims to investigate the form and characteristics of visionary leadership applied at UIN Sulthan Thaha Saifuddin Jambi and its impact on the institutional transformation process.

The implementation of visionary leadership at UIN Sulthan Thaha Saifuddin Jambi can be seen through a combination of leadership models and styles that reflect the institution's values, mission, and aspirations. Leadership at the university incorporates elements of participative governance, where leaders actively engage faculty and staff in decision-making processes, as well as transformational leadership, which ensures that the vision and mission are translated into actionable goals. The study seeks to identify and analyse the leadership models and styles utilised at the institution, exploring how these approaches contribute to its transformation.

Strategic leadership has emerged as a crucial approach in guiding institutions toward these goals. Defined as the ability to anticipate, envision, and maintain organisational flexibility while empowering others to create strategic change, strategic leadership enables long-term institutional transformation (Ireland & Hitt, 2005). In higher education, it involves the articulation of clear direction, alignment of resources, mobilisation of internal stakeholders, and responsiveness to external quality demands (Rowley & Sherman, 2003; Gumus et al., 2018). Within Islamic universities, these challenges are compounded by structural limitations, cultural resistance, and the tension between modern management practices and traditional academic hierarchies (Alsuood & Youde,

2018).

In Indonesia, Islamic higher education institutions—represented by state Islamic universities (UIN)—have experienced rapid expansion, yet continue to face challenges in achieving accreditation excellence and global competitiveness (Khoir et al., 2025; Zuhdi, 2015). Despite numerous policies promoting quality assurance and organisational restructuring, many institutions struggle to translate policy into practice due to leadership gaps, fragmented organisational cultures, and resource constraints (Rosser, 2023). As a result, leadership becomes a determining factor in driving meaningful institutional change, particularly during periods of assessment and accreditation. Recent research has emphasised the role of leadership in improving academic quality and institutional performance (Gerashchenko, 2022; Khan et al., 2024). However, there is limited empirical investigation into how strategic leadership operates in faith-based or Islamic educational contexts, especially within resource-constrained environments. Most leadership studies tend to focus on secular models or Western institutions, leaving a critical gap in understanding how Islamic universities adapt and innovate leadership practices to meet external quality benchmarks while preserving core values.

Several previous studies have explored the role of leadership in institutional development. For instance, Alsuood & Youde (2018) found that leadership in Islamic universities often faces resistance due to a clash between modern management practices and traditional values. Similarly, (Khoir et al., 2025) highlighted the challenges Islamic universities face in achieving accreditation excellence despite rapid expansion. (Rosser, 2023) further emphasised the gap between policy and practice in quality assurance, attributing it to fragmented organisational cultures and leadership gaps. (Gerashchenko, 2022) underscored the importance of leadership in improving institutional performance, but the study was focused on secular institutions. Finally, Khan et al. (2024) explored leadership's role in enhancing academic quality, but without considering the unique challenges of faith-based institutions. Theoretically, it adds to the growing body of research on strategic leadership by offering insights from a Global South, faith-based context that remains underrepresented in leadership literature (Lumby & Coleman, 2007).

From these studies, it is evident that while much has been written on leadership in higher education, there is a clear gap in the literature regarding how strategic leadership specifically functions in Islamic higher education contexts, especially in resource-constrained environments like those in Indonesia. The existing research largely focuses on secular and Western models of leadership, neglecting the unique integration of Islamic values and the cultural complexities within

Islamic universities. Therefore, the novelty of this research lies in its focus on how visionary leadership in Islamic higher education institutions, such as UIN Sulthan Thaha Saifuddin Jambi, navigates both the external pressure of accreditation and the internal challenge of integrating Islamic values into modern management practices. This study will contribute to filling the gap by providing an empirical analysis of visionary leadership in an Indonesian Islamic university, highlighting the practical application of strategic leadership in overcoming specific barriers while preserving core values.

METHOD

This study used a qualitative research approach with an ethnographic orientation to explore the practice of strategic leadership in an Islamic higher education institution. Ethnography was chosen because it enables researchers to understand complex cultural processes and social interactions from within the organizational setting. This approach is suitable for capturing how leadership is practiced, perceived, and experienced by various stakeholders in their everyday academic and administrative routines (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Fetterman, 2010).

The research was conducted at UIN Sulthan Thaha Saifuddin Jambi, a state Islamic university in Indonesia undergoing national accreditation reform. The site was selected using purposive sampling based on its recent strategic leadership efforts and organizational transformation. Data were collected over the course of twelve months through three main techniques: participant observation of leadership meetings and quality assurance activities, semi-structured interviews with 14 key informants (university leaders, lecturers, accreditation staff), and document analysis of institutional strategic plans, accreditation reports, and leadership communications (Yin, 2018). Field notes and reflective memos were also used to enrich the contextual understanding of the site.

The data analysis followed an inductive thematic procedure, in which field data were transcribed, coded, and categorized to identify emerging patterns and themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Constant comparison and triangulation were employed to enhance the credibility of the findings, combining information from interviews, observations, and documents (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Ethical considerations included informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation of all informants, ensuring the research met qualitative ethical standards (Mertens, 2020).
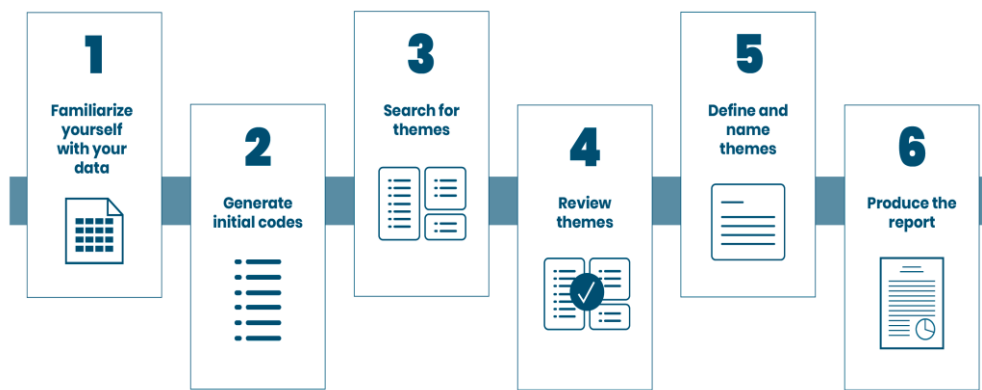
Figure 1. Thematic Analysis

The research was guided by a conceptual framework that connects four core dimensions of strategic leadership—visionary direction, participatory governance, Islamic humanistic values, and collaborative organizational culture—to three key institutional outcomes: accreditation success, organizational integration, and sustainable excellence. This framework supported the development of research instruments and served as a guide during analysis.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

Before presenting the research results, it is important to understand the context in which these findings were obtained. This research aims to explore the implementation of visionary leadership at UIN Sulthan Thaha Saifuddin Jambi, Indonesia, and its impact on the institutional transformation taking place. In the data collection process, a variety of techniques have been used, including participatory observation, in-depth interviews with key leaders and staff, and analysis of strategic documents relevant to the research objectives.

The data obtained from these various sources reflects the complexity of the challenges and achievements faced by the institution in achieving excellence, as well as how visionary leadership plays an important role in shaping the direction and goals of the organisation. The following findings will be presented in thematic form to provide a clear picture of the impact of strategic leadership on organisational change at UIN Sulthan Thaha Saifuddin Jambi.

Table 1. Summary of Strategic Leadership Practices and Evidentiary Sources

No	Theme	Key Practices Observed	Evidentiary Source
1.	Visionary Direction	Translating vision into strategy; consistent communication	Strategic Plans; Interview transcripts
2.	Participatory Governance	Stakeholder forums; bottom-up feedback mechanisms	Meeting observations; Faculty interviews
3.	Islamic Humanistic Integration	Ethical framing of policies; faith-based deliberation	Policy documents; Rector statements

Source: Field observations, institutional documents, and interviews (2022–2023)

The first theme identified in the data was the pivotal role of Visionary Direction. At UIN Sulthan Thaha Saifuddin Jambi, the vision of the institution, encapsulated in its strategic plan, served as a clear guide for all stakeholders. This vision was not merely an abstract statement but was translated into actionable steps. The university's vision, framed as "a smart and green campus with Islamic values at its core," was consistently communicated through leadership meetings and strategic planning documents. Interviewees confirmed that the vision was a unifying force, and its integration into university policies and actions was a common thread in all strategic initiatives. For example, a senior leader noted, "Every action, whether in academics or administration, returns to this vision," underscoring the centrality of the vision in guiding decision-making.

The second theme, Participatory Governance, was evident through the inclusive decision-making processes observed across the university. The leadership at UIN Sulthan Thaha Saifuddin Jambi engaged faculty, staff, and even students in shaping the university's direction. This was facilitated through regular forums, such as faculty senate meetings and strategic planning sessions, where a variety of stakeholders were invited to provide input. One faculty member shared, "Before any major decision, we have discussions across all units. This makes everyone feel included and invested in the university's future." These participatory practices align with the university's effort to build a culture of shared governance and mutual responsibility. The data suggest that this approach contributed to stronger institutional commitment and transparency in decision-making.

The third theme, Islamic Humanistic Integration, was demonstrated in how the university leadership incorporated Islamic values into the institution's strategic practices. Ethical considerations were central to leadership decisions, especially in policy-making and governance. For instance, the rector frequently referenced Islamic teachings in strategic meetings, emphasizing the importance of fairness, justice, and collective benefit in decision-making. One key document, the 2021 Rector's Decree on Academic Conduct, stated: "All decisions must consider justice and the moral integrity expected of a Muslim intellectual," illustrating the integration of Islamic humanistic

principles into the university's framework. This focus on ethical leadership not only shaped internal governance but also reinforced the university's commitment to producing morally grounded graduates.

Visionary Strategic Direction

One of the most prominent themes emerging from the data was the pivotal role of a clear and aspirational vision in steering institutional transformation. The vision of UIN Sulthan Thaha Saifuddin Jambi—outlined in its Strategic Plan 2020–2024 as "a smart and green campus with Islamic values at its core"—served not only as a branding statement but as a consistent point of reference in leadership communication and institutional documents. This vision was frequently mentioned in interviews and consistently observed in strategic planning meetings, demonstrating its operational relevance. Field notes from a rectorate meeting in April 2023 recorded: "The rector opened by reminding all deans that 'every step must return to the university's core vision—green, smart, and spiritual.'"

Leadership at various levels translated this vision into concrete institutional priorities. These included the digitalization of academic services, increased environmental awareness, and the integration of Islamic ethics in curriculum design. Several interviewees cited the vision as an orienting force. A senior lecturer stated, "In this university, our strategic goals are not arbitrary—they all reflect the main vision. For example, when launching the green campus program, we asked how it ties back to the long-term roadmap." This internal consistency reveals that the vision functioned not merely as rhetoric, but as a practical tool for organizational alignment.

Triangulation of data confirmed this theme across sources. In addition to interviews and meetings, analysis of internal reports and accreditation documents revealed explicit linkages between institutional activities and the vision statement. For example, the 2022 accreditation self-evaluation document stated: "The institution implements green campus initiatives, digital transformation, and spiritual education programs in alignment with its strategic vision." These statements affirm that the vision was embedded in strategic thinking at both macro and micro levels of governance.

Leaders and staff reported that the shared vision fostered unity and purpose across the institution. One accreditation task force member commented, "When every faculty member understands the vision, collaboration becomes easier. We're not just complying with accreditation—we're building something together." While expressions of this sentiment varied, the underlying pattern was clear: the university's long-term vision served as a unifying and mobilizing force during

its pursuit of institutional excellence.

However, a few informants noted challenges in translating the vision into day-to-day operational practices. A program coordinator admitted, "Sometimes the big vision feels too abstract for lower-level staff. It's our job to bridge that gap with clear targets." This suggests that while the vision was widely accepted and endorsed, ongoing efforts were required to ensure it was interpreted consistently and translated effectively into faculty-level initiatives.

Participatory and Inclusive Governance

A second major theme concerned the implementation of participatory governance across university operations. Decision-making at UIN Sulthan Thaha Saifuddin Jambi was characterized by regular consultation with stakeholders, structured forums for discussion, and open lines of communication between leadership and staff. Observations revealed that faculty senate meetings, curriculum workshops, and strategic planning forums were held regularly and included a wide range of university stakeholders. During one observed senate session, the rector emphasized: "We are here to listen—not just to decide. Every voice matters in shaping our academic future."

Faculty and staff confirmed that leadership created spaces for inclusive dialogue. A department chair explained, "Before the strategic plan was finalized, we held unit-level discussions. Lecturers, admin staff—even janitors—were asked to give input. It felt inclusive." Such testimonies highlight a deliberate effort by university leadership to move beyond top-down management and foster a sense of ownership and collective responsibility. Internal memos from the rectorate also revealed that strategic initiatives, such as quality assurance improvements and academic program restructuring, were subjected to consultation rounds before finalization.

The participatory culture extended beyond academic affairs. Student representatives were included in several university-wide working groups. One student senate leader reported, "I was invited to speak in a meeting with the vice rector. We talked about online class effectiveness. I felt heard." This example illustrates the university's willingness to include students in conversations that directly affect their academic experience, further reinforcing a culture of democratic governance.

Data triangulation supports this theme robustly. Document analysis of meeting records revealed detailed minutes listing speakers and contributors across academic ranks and units. Interviews with senior and mid-level staff corroborated the presence of multi-stakeholder consultation practices. Even in areas where final decisions rested with senior management, staff emphasized that "we were part of the discussion, and that matters." This sense of procedural

inclusion was widely viewed as enhancing trust and accountability.

Nevertheless, some limitations were acknowledged. A few staff members expressed concern that consultation processes could sometimes be symbolic. As one lecturer noted, "We are asked for input, but decisions are not always transparent. Still, it's better than having no voice at all." This remark suggests that while inclusive structures were in place, the quality of participation varied depending on context and follow-up mechanisms. Nonetheless, the overall data pattern indicated a genuine effort to embed participatory leadership across the university.

Integration of Islamic Humanistic Values

The third theme was the integration of Islamic humanistic values—such as justice (*'adl*), compassion (*rahmah*), and collective benefit (*maslahah*)—into leadership discourse and institutional policy-making. Leaders at UIN Sulthan Thaha Saifuddin Jambi frequently invoked religious principles not only in ceremonial language but in guiding decisions on governance, curriculum, and stakeholder engagement. During an accreditation preparation session, the rector remarked, "We are not only working toward a grade, but for *barakah*. Our leadership must reflect trust, fairness, and service to the ummah."

This value orientation was evident across different levels of the institution. Policy documents often referenced Islamic teachings as the basis for administrative ethics. For example, the 2021 Rector's Decree on Academic Conduct explicitly stated that "all decisions must consider justice and the moral integrity expected of a Muslim intellectual." In interviews, staff spoke of leadership as a moral duty. One vice dean shared, "We are reminded that leadership is *amanah* [a trust], so we approach our roles with humility and sincerity."

Such expressions were not merely symbolic. Observations revealed that ethical considerations were part of routine discussions. For instance, in one strategic committee meeting, a proposal for staff incentive distribution was revised after a participant raised concerns about fairness and inclusivity. "We must ensure this benefits all, not just the loudest voices," said a faculty representative. This indicates that Islamic values were not confined to mission statements but actively shaped operational choices.

Student respondents also observed the ethical climate fostered by leadership. One final-year student remarked, "Here, it feels like leadership is not just about power. It's about guidance, care, and responsibility. That makes us respect the institution more." This comment reflects how value-based leadership was perceived to create a culture of mutual respect and moral coherence. The university's ethical leadership ethos contributed to a sense of belonging and identity among students

and staff alike.

Despite these strengths, the application of values was not without complexity. One accreditation team member noted, "Sometimes values and efficiency clash. Being fair means taking more time, more dialogue." While this occasionally delayed processes, most participants agreed that the ethical framing ultimately enhanced the quality and legitimacy of decisions. Thus, Islamic values functioned not only as guiding principles but also as tools for reflective leadership and institutional integrity.

Discussion

This study aimed to explore how strategic leadership contributes to institutional transformation in an Islamic higher education context. The findings demonstrate that visionary leadership, participatory governance, and the integration of Islamic humanistic values were central to the university's successful pursuit of accreditation excellence. These themes align directly with the research question: Can strategic leadership drive excellence in Islamic higher education? The results suggest that the answer is affirmative, especially when leadership is contextually grounded, ethically anchored, and operationally inclusive.

The first key finding—visionary direction—showed that a clearly communicated institutional vision fostered coherence across diverse academic and administrative units. This aligns with Ireland and Hitt's (2005) model of strategic leadership, which emphasizes articulating future goals and aligning institutional systems. At UIN Sulthan Thaha Saifuddin Jambi, the vision of becoming a "smart and green Islamic university" was more than aspirational; it was operationalized through strategic documents, planning sessions, and leadership discourse. Such vision-driven transformation is supported in the literature by Alonderiene and Majauskaite (2016), who emphasize that vision clarity enhances institutional identity and collective performance.

Participatory governance emerged as a second major finding. Decision-making at UIN Sulthan Thaha Saifuddin Jambi was marked by inclusivity across faculty, staff, and students, reflecting Islamic principles of shura (consultation) and democratic leadership. This supports findings from Khan et al. (2024), who argue that distributed leadership models increase motivation and institutional buy-in. Similarly, studies in the Indonesian context (Khalid & Manan, 2018; Susanti & Hafid, 2021) confirm that participatory structures enhance institutional responsiveness and commitment. Such engagement ensures that strategic leadership is not merely directive but dialogic and culturally responsive.

A third contribution of the study is its documentation of value-driven leadership. Islamic ethics—justice ('adl), compassion (rahmah), and trustworthiness (amanah)—were deeply embedded in institutional decision-making. This supports Hashim (2014), who argues that Islamic leadership must integrate moral and managerial competencies. The integration of ethics into daily governance also parallels Fry's (2003) model of spiritual leadership, which highlights intrinsic motivation and values alignment as key drivers of organizational excellence.

These findings collectively suggest that strategic leadership in Islamic universities operates through a hybrid framework that blends modern managerial tools with religious and ethical foundations (Tikly, 2011; Arar & Saiti, 2019; Hamdi et al., 2024). This contradicts assumptions in some Western leadership models that compartmentalize rationality and spirituality. Instead, the evidence here supports a more integrative view, consistent with Zulkefli et al. (2024), showing that leadership rooted in faith can also be strategic, inclusive, and reform-oriented.

The role of Islamic higher education institutions (PTKIN) in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) outlined by the United Nations has become increasingly significant. As part of the global shift towards sustainability, PTKIN is urged to align its curricula, research, and community service with the SDGs. UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta has committed to integrating SDGs into its educational mission, particularly in addressing social and environmental challenges through teaching and community engagement. Similarly, UIN Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang has implemented library programmes and collaborations aimed at supporting SDG-related research. These initiatives demonstrate that PTKIN is recognising the need to contribute to global sustainability while preserving its Islamic identity. Efforts to include SDGs in PTKIN curricula, research, and policies are essential in ensuring that future generations of Muslim scholars and leaders can tackle global challenges responsibly and ethically.

Theoretically, this study contributes to a broader understanding of strategic leadership in faith-based institutions. It confirms that effective leadership is not solely dependent on technical competence but also on cultural legitimacy and moral credibility (Arkaah, 2024; Khalifa Alhitmi et al., 2016). By showing how values shape governance and policy decisions, the research enriches the discourse on contextualized leadership models, especially within non-Western, Islamic educational systems.

Practically, the findings offer valuable insights for higher education policymakers and institutional leaders. For example, they highlight the need for leadership training programmes that balance strategic planning with ethical formation. As institutional accreditation becomes

increasingly globalized, Islamic universities must innovate without compromising their religious identity. This study shows that excellence and authenticity can coexist when leadership is visionary, participative, and values-driven.

Socially, the model observed at UIN Sulthan Thaha Saifuddin Jambi demonstrates the potential of Islamic higher education to produce not only academically competent graduates but also morally grounded citizens. The integration of spiritual leadership and community responsibility positions the university as a catalyst for ethical transformation in society. This aligns with Sayed (2012), who emphasizes the developmental role of education in building social justice and equity. Despite these contributions, several limitations should be noted. First, the research was conducted in a single institution, which may limit the generalizability of findings. While ethnographic depth offers rich contextual insights, it cannot claim statistical representativeness. Second, because leadership is a dynamic and relational process, findings may shift with leadership turnover or changes in national policy. Finally, some data—such as internal documents—were subject to institutional self-presentation, which may have influenced their content.

Nonetheless, these limitations do not undermine the significance of the study. Rather, they suggest avenues for future research, including multi-site ethnographies, longitudinal studies of Islamic leadership development, and comparative analysis between Islamic and secular institutions. By situating leadership within cultural and moral frameworks, future research can build on these insights to propose more inclusive and contextually relevant leadership theories.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicate that strategic leadership practices at UIN Sulthan Thaha Saifuddin Jambi have effectively driven institutional transformation through three key pillars: a clear visionary direction, participatory governance, and the integration of Islamic humanistic values in institutional policies. Visionary leadership at the university successfully aligned all stakeholders with the university's long-term goals, ensuring cohesive progress towards its objectives. Despite facing challenges such as structural fragmentation, limited resources, and cultural resistance, the leadership's inclusive approach fostered collective commitment and collaboration across the institution. The integration of Islamic values into decision-making further enhanced the ethical foundation of governance and strengthened institutional identity. These leadership practices contributed significantly to academic quality and organisational coherence, which were crucial in achieving the highest national accreditation rating. Overall, strategic leadership at UIN Sulthan

Thaha Saifuddin Jambi played a vital role in advancing the institution and ensuring its success in a competitive academic environment.

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