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## Islamic Religious Education in Public Universities: Responding to Contemporary Challenges

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**Abstract:** This research aims to explore the management of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) in public universities, particularly at Advanced Indonesia University (UIMA), and to identify efforts to enhance its effectiveness in instilling moral and religious values relevant to current developments. The research adopts a qualitative approach with a descriptive method to provide a systematic overview of the factors influencing the success of PAI, including both teaching aspects and supporting infrastructure. The study identified several challenges, including variations in religious education models, the need to integrate the inclusive spirit of Islamic teachings, educator professionalism, and the limitations in religious infrastructure. Proposed solutions include strengthening the curriculum based on the fundamental values of the Qur'an and Sunnah, alongside a holistic approach that not only focuses on academics but also on character and ethics formation. Additionally, the development of facilities, such as mosques, is expected to support increased religious activities. The conclusion of this research is that the management of PAI at public universities, like UIMA, requires an integrated approach that blends academic knowledge with support from various stakeholders to foster a competitive and character-building Islamic education.

*Keywords:*

Challenges; Education; Higher Education

**Abstrak:** Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi tantangan dalam pengelolaan Pendidikan Agama Islam (PAI) di perguruan tinggi umum, khususnya di Universitas Indonesia Maju (UIMA), serta upaya untuk meningkatkan efektivitasnya dalam menanamkan nilai-nilai moral dan agama yang relevan dengan perkembangan zaman. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif dengan pendekatan deskriptif untuk menyusun gambaran sistematis mengenai faktor-faktor yang memengaruhi keberhasilan PAI, baik dari aspek pengajaran maupun infrastruktur pendukung. Hasil penelitian mengidentifikasi berbagai tantangan, termasuk model pengembangan pendidikan agama yang berbeda, pentingnya integrasi semangat inklusivitas ajaran Islam, profesionalisme pendidik, dan keterbatasan sarana prasarana keagamaan. Solusi yang diusulkan mencakup penguatan kurikulum dengan dasar nilai-nilai fundamental Al-Qur'an dan as-Sunnah, serta adopsi pendekatan holistik yang tidak hanya mencakup aspek akademis tetapi juga pembentukan karakter dan etika mahasiswa. Selain itu, pengembangan sarana seperti masjid diharapkan dapat mendukung peningkatan aktivitas keagamaan. Kesimpulan dari penelitian ini adalah bahwa pengelolaan PAI di perguruan tinggi umum, seperti UIMA, tidak hanya membutuhkan pendekatan yang terintegrasi dengan ilmu pengetahuan umum, tetapi juga dukungan dari berbagai pihak untuk mencapai pendidikan Islam yang berdaya saing dan berorientasi pada pembentukan karakter Islami.

*Kata Kunci:*

Pendidikan, Perguruan Tinggi, Tantangan

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Islamic Religious Education (PAI) as part of the school curriculum plays a vital role in shaping students' character, both in terms of morality and aspects of science and Technology (Kurniati & El-Yunusi, 2023). Nevertheless, PAI education in schools is currently attracting attention from education experts, as it is perceived as less effective in instilling moral and religious values in students. This phenomenon is reflected in the rise of social issues among youth, such as drug abuse, street crimes, promiscuity, brawls, and various other social problems (Lenggogeni & Mudjiran, 2024).

Religious education, including Islamic Religious Education (PAI), plays a crucial role in shaping the character and morals of students from elementary school to higher education levels. In the context of universities, PAI is a mandatory course that Muslim students must take as part of their personal development and to cultivate a religious attitude within academic and social life (Zulkifli & Setiawan, 2020). PAI falls under the category of General Basic Courses (MKDU) or Compulsory Courses (MKW) offered in nearly all academic programs, aiming to provide a deep understanding of Islamic values and their application in daily life.

On the other hand, the importance of integrating PAI with other courses to develop a more holistic curriculum has also become a topic requiring greater attention (Nasir et al., 2021). A more interdisciplinary approach between PAI and general sciences is expected to create a synergy that not only enhances students' academic competencies but also enriches their understanding of religion and morality within a broader context (Nuryana & Fauzi, 2020). In this regard, PAI in universities is not merely seen as a standalone course but as an integral part of shaping individuals with a profound religious understanding who are capable of applying it across various aspects of life (Ilham, 2020).

Therefore, developing a more innovative PAI (Islamic Religious Education) teaching model that uses interactive methods relevant to contemporary challenges is essential. Incorporating technology into teaching, creating more applicable learning materials, and supporting students' character development are crucial factors to consider in managing PAI in higher education institutions (Djazilan & Hariani, 2022).

Additionally, the current approach to PAI education is often seen as insufficiently responsive to the demands of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, a challenge that holds particular significance in general universities. The implementation of Islamic Religious Education in general universities has experienced fluctuations (Ucan & Wright, 2019). In the early 1960s, religious education was considered a non-mandatory general course (Enstedt, 2022). However, during the New Order era, religious education's status was strengthened, becoming a mandatory course for all students and managed alongside other core courses, such as Pancasila Education, Entrepreneurship Education, Citizenship Education, and Indonesian Language Education, by a dedicated bureau (Astomo, 2021; Sukmayadi & Yahya, 2020).

Previous research relevant to the topic of the importance of Islamic religious education (PAI) as a moral foundation for students in public and Islamic

universities has highlighted various aspects related to the role of religion as a social institution, its influence on character formation, and the significance of PAI in the higher education curriculum.

One study examines how religion plays a role in shaping the character of students at Islamic universities. This research emphasizes that religious education functions not only as a formal subject but also as a means of cultivating moral values and positive attitudes that benefit students' social lives. The study's findings indicate that students who receive religious education tend to have stronger moral values compared to those less exposed to religious principles. Additionally, the study reveals that the internalization of religious values has the potential to prevent students from engaging in actions that conflict with moral and ethical standards (Ubaidillah et al., 2023).

Another study explores the impact of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) on understanding religious values within the context of public universities. The findings reveal that PAI significantly enhances students' spiritual awareness and social responsibility. This study highlights the importance of interactive teaching methods and the relevance of PAI content to contemporary issues, enabling students to apply religious values in their real lives. The research supports the view that religious education serves as a framework influencing individual behavior and values, especially amidst dynamic social changes (Heri & Ruswandi, 2022).

Furthermore, the research findings indicate that Islamic Religious Education (PAI) for students in Public Universities (PTU) plays a significant role in implementing Islamic teachings, realized through formal learning processes as well as co-curricular and religious activities. Islamic Religious Education at PTUs presents unique challenges distinct from religious education at Islamic Higher Education Institutions, such as UIN, IAIN, and STAIN, which are grounded in a religious-based educational environment. At PTUs, the approach to PAI often needs to be more adaptive to remain relevant to students from diverse backgrounds, facilitating the integration of Islamic values within a broader academic and social context. This study emphasizes that integrating religious values with general knowledge is an effective approach to preparing students for the challenges of globalization without sacrificing their religious identity (Rahim, 2020).

Overall, previous studies support the importance of religious education as a social institution that plays a crucial role in shaping students' character (Komariah & Nihayah, 2023). Through religious education, students not only gain religious knowledge but also undergo the development of morals, character, and ethics that are sustained over Time (Khaidir & Suud, 2020). Findings from these studies suggest that Islamic Religious Education (PAI) is not just a compulsory course in the curriculum but also an instrument for character building that can shape a generation of youth with integrity and high moral standards in facing life in the modern era.

The Islamic Religious Education (PAI) course, as an integral part of the curriculum, has experienced fluctuations in content standards due to the continuous evolution of the curriculum and changes in teaching approaches. This

paradigm shift has led to changes in teaching methods in Public Universities, creating specific challenges in the learning process within these environments. PAI does not only serve as a means of enhancing religious knowledge, but also as a platform to reinforce students' ethics and morality. Given the importance of religious education in the academic context, PAI at universities is expected to support students in building strong character, ethics, and a deeper understanding of Islam. However, the implementation of Islamic Religious Education in public universities often faces challenges related to teaching methods, relevant curricula, and the diversity of student backgrounds.

Therefore, the author is interested in exploring the various challenges that arise in teaching Islamic Religious Education in Public Universities. It is important to note that these challenges may differ from those faced in Islamic higher education institutions, particularly at Universitas Indonesia Maju Cianjur.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

The research method applied in this study is a qualitative method. Qualitative research is a research procedure that produces descriptive data in the form of written or oral words derived from information provided by individuals or observable behavior (Aspers & Corte, 2019). The purpose of this descriptive research is to construct a systematic, factual, and accurate description, image, or depiction of the facts, characteristics, and relationships between phenomena being investigated (Siedlecki, 2020).

Considering the type of research conducted by the researcher, the aim is to obtain as much data as possible and in-depth during the field research Activities (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). In qualitative methods, the researcher themselves, or with the assistance of others, serves as the main data collector (Lobe et al., 2020). Therefore, the presence of the researcher in the field is deemed absolutely necessary (Blettler et al., 2018). In other words, the presence of the researcher is critical to delve deeper into the problem formulation being discussed. As the key instrument, the researcher strives to obtain data on the challenges of managing Islamic Religious Education in Public Universities.

## **RESEARCH RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **Challenges in the Management of Islamic Religious Education in Public Universities**

The management of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) in public universities has gained attention from various studies, but several gaps have yet to be explored in depth. One of the main gaps is the lack of focus on curriculum models that integrate PAI with general knowledge, which presents a significant challenge in education at public universities such as Universitas Indonesia Maju (UIMA). Previous research has primarily highlighted the management of religious education in schools or religious-based universities. In contrast, public universities like UIMA, which have a broader focus on general knowledge, have received relatively little attention in this area. This gap calls for further investigation into how PAI can be effectively integrated with general education,

fostering a holistic educational approach that caters to both academic and spiritual development in the context of public universities.

The challenges in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) in public universities are multifaceted. Specifically, Chandra's research reveals several key issues, including the reconstruction of Islamic education. This discussion highlights the differences in the models of PAI development in public universities, which stem from varying interpretations of life's aspects. These differences are largely due to diverse understandings of social, cultural, and educational contexts. A framework based on the fundamental doctrines and values embedded in the Qur'an and the Sunnah serves as an alternative solution. These divine teachings and values are viewed as wise counsel for addressing a wide range of challenges, especially in the field of education. The study emphasizes the importance of aligning educational practices with Islamic principles, ensuring that PAI in public universities is not only academically relevant but also spiritually enriching, thus contributing to the moral and ethical development of students in a holistic manner (Chandra, 2020).

The next challenge is the spirit of inclusivity of Islamic teachings must be truly integrated in the teaching materials of the Islamic Religious Education curriculum (Ucan & Wright, 2019). However, it should be noted not to be trapped in inclusivity according to Western rhetoric related to pluralism theories, human rights, and others, because all of them must be returned to their original sources, namely the Qur'an and as-Sunnah, although with a critical spirit of every interpretation of these two sources (anggun & Mauli, 2019). The spirit of inclusivity at the University of Indonesia Maju (UIMA) is not just a slogan but is genuinely reflected in the integration of Islamic teachings within the curriculum of Islamic Religious Education (PAI). Through a holistic approach, UIMA ensures that Islamic values are not only taught theoretically but are also applied in daily life, creating a learning environment that fosters diversity and respects differences.

To address the challenges in education, a truly professional educator is needed. Educators are expected not only to perform their duties professionally but also to possess the knowledge and skills relevant to their areas of expertise, along with an Islamic personality. This approach will significantly impact the improvement of Islamic education quality in facing the challenges of modern times.

### **Position of Islamic Religious Education Courses in Public Universities**

In the curriculum structure of the University of Indonesia Maju (UIMA) (Yuliah, 2020), Islamic Religious Education (PAI) is not only an integral part but also a main pillar in each study program. The long history of this university reflects that from its inception, PAI has been a core component that cannot be separated from its curriculum (Mengki & Azhar, 2023). The importance of PAI as a key subject is further emphasized by the decision of the Director General of Higher Education, Ministry of National Education of the Republic of Indonesia, Number: 38/DIKTI/Kep/2002, which clearly regulates the Guidelines for the Implementation of Personality Development Courses in Higher Education

(Marfiyanto, 2018). The presence and continuity of PAI in the curriculum demonstrate the university's commitment to Islamic education as a crucial aspect in the development of students' personalities.

### **The relationship between PAI courses and General courses**

The relationship between PAI courses and other courses should be integrative and mutually supportive. PAI courses should ideally be the main courses that are functionally integrated with other courses, especially general courses, by containing religious moral content that is appropriate to the level and type of educational institution. Concretely, in learning PAI, students should be encouraged to develop science in more depth, which is in accordance with the framework of scientific concepts based on the study program they choose. Therefore, the field of knowledge or expertise that is in accordance with the student's study program must be really guided and sourced from Islamic teachings (Muhammad et al., 2023).

The importance of developing knowledge that aligns with religious values also contributes to creating an academically and religiously grounded campus life, even though the PAI course is only 3 credits. Unfortunately, in reality, PAI is often marginalized and alienated. It is considered a general subject that serves as a requirement rather than a specialized field of expertise. Furthermore, the development and implementation of science and technology (IPTEK) in daily behavior are not sufficiently linked to religious values (Wu et al., 2019). This indicates that there is still a lack of capability in developing theories or concepts of knowledge fully derived from Islamic teachings or values (Apriani et al., 2021).

Overall, PAI in Public Universities (PTU) is not only related to the cognitive aspect but also the affective aspect. PAI in PTUs is considered the foundation for shaping an Indonesian individual who is complete in character, faithful, and devoted to Allah SWT. PAI also serves as a source of inspiration for ethics, morals, and spirituality, as an effort to counter the negative impacts of modernity in the social and cultural changes of the nation. The implementation of PAI learning in PTU aims not only to fulfill the obligation of conducting lectures but also to have a clear vision and mission. The vision of PAI in PTU is to make religion a source of values and a guide for students' behavior as they engage with the discipline of their choice. Meanwhile, its mission is to motivate students to practice religious values for productivity and the utilization of science and technology.

Thus, the role of PAI at PTU is not only limited to the development of students' intelligence in religion theoretically and practically, but also as a driver for students to develop general science and its products. PAI at PTU is expected to function as a support for other courses, shape mentality, personality, and provide inspiration for students in the development of general course materials they study, with the hope that students have competence in general science based on the values and guidelines of Islamic religious teachings (Fuadi & Suyatno, 2020).

### **PAI Learning Design at Advanced Indonesia University**

The design of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning at Universitas Indonesia Maju (UIMA) is indeed well-formulated. However, it is important to emphasize that an essential aspect that must be addressed first is the vision of PAI learning in higher education. This serves as the foundation for achieving a common understanding among the academic community.

Currently, PAI learning is still focused on academic routines without a clear orientation toward character and personality development for students. The impact of this focus is felt in the lack of creativity in conveying the messages of PAI lessons. It must be acknowledged that religious doctrines have not been fully delivered in an academic manner and have not yet reached the experiential field of the students.

To improve the quality of PAI learning, a more holistic approach needs to be adopted. This approach should not only emphasize the academic aspects but also focus on character development, ethics, and religious values. By doing so, students will be able to internalize religious teachings more effectively, apply them in their daily lives, and gain deeper experiences. This will have a positive impact in shaping a generation that is both ethical and highly competitive.

### **Development of Facilities and Infrastructure**

Higher education institutions should support religious aspects by providing supporting facilities such as mosques or prayer rooms, spiritual units, and student activity units focused on Islamic affairs. While having a mosque at Universitas Indonesia Maju in Cianjur is a point of pride, there has not been sufficient effort to enhance religious activities there. The mosque has not been fully utilized as a center for education and culture. Religious education infrastructure, such as worship facilities on campus, plays a significant role. Many studies have examined the importance of worship facilities in Islamic boarding schools or religious-based schools, but the application of these facilities in general universities with a more diverse student population and different religious backgrounds has not been extensively studied. This raises the question of how religious facilities on campus can influence the learning of PAI and student participation in religious activities.

Islamic Religious Education (PAI) in higher education plays a strategic role in shaping students' character, morality, and ethics. As a compulsory course for Muslim students, PAI not only provides theoretical knowledge of Islamic teachings but also aims to shape students' personalities and character in line with religious values. However, the management of PAI in general universities faces various challenges that affect its effectiveness and relevance to the needs of today's students.

One of the biggest challenges in managing PAI is the teaching method, which tends to be non-interactive. Many PAI lessons still rely on lecture-based methods, which are inadequate for stimulating student interest and active participation. The constructivist learning theory proposed by Piaget and Vygotsky emphasizes that knowledge is built through experience and interaction. In this context, more active and collaborative teaching methods, such

as group discussions and problem-based learning, could improve students' understanding and engagement with PAI material. This is supported by research showing that students are more likely to understand the material when they actively engage in the learning process, rather than just being passive listeners.

The PAI curriculum that is less relevant to the needs of the times is also an issue faced (Alhamuddin et al., 2021). Most of the PAI curriculum still focuses on memorization and theory without relating them to the student's real-life context. Constructivist learning theory and its theory of contextual learning emphasize the importance of connecting learning materials with daily life. Therefore, there is a need to update the PAI curriculum that includes more applicable topics, such as ethics in the world of work, Islamic values in the face of globalization, and the application of religious teachings in students' social and professional lives (Dian et al., 2023).

The diversity of student backgrounds in public universities is also a challenge in the management of PAI. Not only Muslim students, but also students with different religious backgrounds and beliefs. In this case, the theory of inclusive education developed by Baker (2006) states that education must be able to respect diversity and provide space for all individuals to develop without discrimination (Walker & Graham, 2021). Therefore, PAI in public universities must be acceptable to all parties, with an approach that respects differences and prioritizes the values of tolerance and pluralism.

The use of technology in teaching PAI presents another challenge that needs attention. In Anderson's (2008) digital learning theory, technology is recognized as a tool that can expand access to education and provide a more interactive and engaging learning experience (Anderson & Vargas, 2020). The integration of technology in PAI teaching can offer students the opportunity to access broader and more in-depth materials, as well as engage with a variety of online platforms. The use of educational applications or online learning platforms can help students understand Islamic teachings through modern and engaging media, as well as increase their motivation to learn.

Character development theory, particularly from Lickona (1991), is also relevant in the context of PAI management in higher education. Lickona emphasizes the importance of character education that integrates knowledge, feelings, and actions (Pike et al., 2021). Therefore, PAI teaching should instill religious values in students that are not only intellectual but also emotional and practical, enabling students to apply Islamic teachings in their everyday lives, both inside and outside the campus.

Overall, managing PAI in general higher education faces significant challenges, ranging from monotonous teaching methods, irrelevant curricula, to the diversity of student backgrounds. Therefore, a more interactive approach is needed, one that aligns with the needs of the times and respects diversity. Referring to more modern learning theories, such as constructivism, contextual learning, and inclusive education, as well as leveraging technology, it is hoped that the management of PAI can be more effective in shaping students' character and understanding that aligns with the challenges of the present age.



## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, this study discusses the challenges of managing Islamic Religious Education (PAI) in general higher education, with a focus on Universitas Indonesia Maju (UIMA). Several challenges identified include differences in the development models of Islamic education, the spirit of inclusivity in Islamic teachings, the role of educator professionalism, the position of PAI courses, the design of learning, and the development of supporting infrastructure. An alternative solution proposed is to build a conceptual framework based on the fundamental doctrines and values found in the Qur'an and Sunnah.

Another key challenge is integrating the spirit of inclusivity of Islamic teachings into the PAI curriculum, not merely following Western rhetoric of inclusivity, but focusing on original sources, namely the Qur'an and Sunnah. Addressing these educational challenges requires professional educators with knowledge, skills, and an Islamic personality who can contribute to improving the quality of Islamic education in response to contemporary developments. The PAI course is not only an integral part but also a key pillar of the UIMA curriculum, reflecting the university's commitment to shaping students' character.

The design of PAI learning at UIMA needs improvement by focusing on character and personality development through a holistic approach that encompasses academic, ethical, and religious values to enhance the quality of education. Religious facilities, such as mosques, should be strengthened and optimally utilized to support religious activities by providing adequate facilities. Overall, this study provides an overview of the challenges faced in managing Islamic education in general higher education, highlighting the key aspects that need attention in order to improve the quality of Islamic education at UIMA.

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