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(IJEPC)**<https://gaexcellence.com/ijepe>**AN ISLAMIC LEADERSHIP MODEL FOR HIGHER
LEARNING INSTITUTIONS: A VALUES-BASED
FRAMEWORK GROUNDED IN AHL AL-SUNNAH WA AL-
JAMA 'AH**

Noraini Ismail^{1*}, Nur Fatin Nabilah Shahrom², Nurliyana Mohd Talib³, Zuraimy Ali⁴, Ummi Syarah Ismail⁵, Marina Abu Bakar⁶, Subaidi⁷, Muhammad Danish Rif'qi Lukman⁸

¹Academy of Contemporary Islamic Studies (ACIS), UiTM Cawangan Perlis, Kampus Arau, Malaysia

 noraini045@uitm.edu.my

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5690-9692>

²Academy of Contemporary Islamic Studies (ACIS), UiTM Cawangan Perlis, Kampus Arau, Malaysia

 fatinnabilahshahrom@uitm.edu.my

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1817-5429>

³Academy of Contemporary Islamic Studies (ACIS), UiTM Cawangan Perlis, Kampus Arau, Malaysia

 liyanatalib@uitm.edu.my

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5731-5172>

⁴Academy of Contemporary Islamic Studies (ACIS), UiTM Cawangan Perlis, Kampus Arau, Malaysia

 zuraimy@uitm.edu.my

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3297-3881>

⁵Academy of Language Studies (APB), UiTM Cawangan Perlis, Kampus Arau, Malaysia

 ummi@uitm.edu.my

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3410-9421>

⁶Academy of Contemporary Islamic Studies (ACIS), UiTM Cawangan Perlis, Kampus Arau, Malaysia

 marinaab@uitm.edu.my

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3442-0575>

⁷Universitas Islam Nahdlatul Ulama (UNISNU), Jepara, Indonesia

 subaidi@unisnu.ac.id

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5871-1249>

⁸Fakulti Pengajian Islam, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi, Malaysia

 p172585@siswa.ukm.edu.my

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-1724-1489>

*Corresponding Author

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Abstract:

This article proposes an Islamic Leadership Model for Higher Education Institutions (ILM-HLI) to strengthen Islamic education based on the values of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama 'ah. Contemporary higher education is increasingly under pressure from globalization and value fragmentation, which requires a more integrated revelation-based leadership paradigm. Although existing leadership models in higher

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education partly emphasize modern administrative frameworks, there is still a need to better integrate Islamic epistemology, especially within the Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah tradition. To fill this gap, this study has developed a holistic Islamic leadership model that can serve as a guideline for academic and institutional leadership. A qualitative design is used through document analysis, covering the main sources of Islam, namely al-Quran and al-Hadith, as well as the views of classical and contemporary scholars in Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah. Literature related to leadership inside educational institutions was also analyzed to ensure more complete data. The data were analyzed thematically to obtain the core constructs underlying the proposed model. The findings of this study demonstrated a conceptual model consisting of three interrelated dimensions: *Rabbani* Core (monotheism and spiritual awareness), *Insani* Core (moral integrity, ethical behavior, and social well-being), and *Idari* Core (strategic leadership and efficient governance). This dimension is supported by five core values, namely *amanah* (trust), *'adl* (justice), *hikmah* (wisdom), *syura* (consultation), and *ihsan* (excellence). These five core values serve as the driving force behind leadership practices. Guided by the values of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama 'ah, the ILM-HLI model highlights a systematic, value-based leadership approach. This approach not only enriches the existing field of knowledge but can also serve as a reference for implementers and policymakers. In practical terms, the results of this study can be used to improve the process of policy formulation, curriculum content organization, and planning of more strategic leadership development programs.

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Keywords:

Ahl Al-Sunnah Wa Al-Jama'Ah, Higher Learning Institutions, Islamic Leadership, Islamic Education, Leadership Model



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Introduction

Institutions of higher learning (HLIs) play an important role in developing human capital, generating knowledge, and assisting with society's progress. This is consistent with Malaysia's aspiration to develop globally competitive, future-ready, and sustainable higher education institutions (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2026). However, in the context of Islamic higher education, their role goes above academic superiority and economic development. Islamic educational institutions are entrusted with nurturing individuals with intellectual competence, moral integrity, and spiritual awareness. Therefore, leadership in these institutions must ensure the effectiveness of the organization, while protect Islamic values and supporting the comprehensive development of students and the academic community.

The current higher education landscape is increasingly influenced by globalization, market-oriented governance, and modern epistemological frameworks. Universities are increasingly judged on research productivity, international standing, graduate employability, and financial sustainability. While this progress has increased institutional competitiveness and global visibility, it has also prompted concerns about the commercialization of education and the marginalization of ethical and spiritual values inside academic institutions (Alazmi & Bush, 2024; Tight, 2023). As a result, some universities have prioritized measurable performance indicators and managerial efficiency. This is a huge challenge for Islamic higher education institutions, since the basic educational philosophy is based on knowledge (*'ilm*), faith (*iman*) and good deeds (*amal*). According to Islam, educational institutions are not only a medium of imparting knowledge but also a center for the formation of human capital that is responsible for religion, society, and the environment. This complete Islamic approach stresses balanced development between intellectual, spiritual, moral, and social aspects. It also reflects the Islamic worldview that seeks harmony between revealed knowledge and acquired knowledge (Al-Attas, 1991; Al-Faruqi, 1982; Halstead, 2004).

Educational institutions based on the Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah (ASWJ) tradition play an important function in preserving Islamic values. It works to strengthen faith and promote social harmony through a balanced and moderate educational approach (*wasatiyyah*) (Hashim & Langgulung, 2008; Zain et al., 2025; Zulkifli et al., 2026). Furthermore, Islamic higher education institutions are mandated to produce graduates who possess ethical leadership values and responsibility and adhere to the principle of *wasatiyyah* (moderation). These values enable them to deal with today's challenges whilst remaining focused on Islamic values and identity (Halstead, 2004; Sahin, 2018). Therefore, leadership in Islamic educational institutions ought to be guided by a worldview that unites revelation (*wahy*), reason (*'aql*), and human responsibility. Leadership based on Islamic values can ensure that institutional policies, governance structures, and academic programs continue to correspond to the objectives of Islamic education. These good Islamic leadership values enable leadership in Islamic higher education institutions to face various challenges competently (Khaeroni, Ilzamudin, & Subhan, 2025; Arar et al., 2023).

The concept of leadership in Islam encompasses a broader dimension than merely appreciating spiritual values. It also requires leaders to display commendable morals, act justly, practice *syura*, and build good relationships with others. Based on the Quran and Hadith, leadership is considered a trust that will be held accountable before Allah. Therefore, the values of trust, *'adl*, *hikmah*, *syura* and *ihsan* need to be applied as the basis for the implementation of Islamic leadership. Recent studies have also shown that applying Islamic values within the framework of educational leadership is increasingly needed to ensure that Islamic institutions can develop continuously. This approach also plays a role in strengthening the governance system and forming an academic culture that is in line with Islamic principles (Alazmi & Bush, 2024; Arar et al., 2023; El Junusi et al., 2024). However, despite the increasing number of studies related to Islamic leadership, several important gaps remain underexplored. Existing studies have examined concepts such as transformational, servant, prophetic, and value-based leadership in the context of Islam. However, much of the literature remains fragmented and lacks a complete framework created specifically for higher education institutions.

Furthermore, many present models include Islamic values into partially secular leadership theories rather than deriving leadership principles directly from Islamic epistemological foundations. More importantly, scientific studies on developing a clear leadership model based

on the principles of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah (ASWJ) still receive little attention. Studies related to the principles of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah (ASWJ) are important because they are a recognized theological framework in Malaysia. In addition, it is the basis of the dominant belief in Islamic education in the Muslim community in Malaysia. It also plays an important function in forming religious education, social harmony, and institutional development (Zain et al., 2025; Zulkifli et al., 2026). Furthermore, existing studies tend to examine the spiritual, ethical, and managerial dimensions of leadership separately. Few attempts have been made to integrate them into an all-encompassing framework adapted to the context of higher education institutions. Therefore, there is a need for an epistemologically based leadership framework in Islamic teachings. Practically, it is also relevant to the reality of governance of contemporary higher education institutions, especially in Malaysia. This integration can be achieved indirectly through integrating the dimensions of spirituality, ethics, and management into one whole structure.

In order to bridge this gap, this study suggests an Islamic Leadership Model of Higher Education Institutions (ILM-HLI), which is an integrated and value-based framework in terms of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah principles. The model is divided into three components that complement each other. The first is the *Rabbani* Core which is about monotheism and spiritual awareness, and the second is the *Insani* Core of human dignity and moral integrity. The third component is the *Idari* Core: governance, organizational management and strategic planning. These three components are guided by five values: *amanah*, *'adl*, *hikmah*, *syura* and *ihsan*. The values of these values are complementary to one another and play a key role in deciding the patterns of leadership behavior in an institution.

The findings of this study add to the literature on Islamic leadership, for three reasons. First, it links the Islamic epistemological tradition of revelation with contemporary educational leadership that is based on a structured leadership model and is able to address the needs and difficulties of higher education institutions. Also, it sets some guidelines for policymakers, university administrators and academic leaders to work on to improve the governance of Islamic education. The effectiveness of these guidelines can also develop institutions' management skills and their organizational viability in the long run.

Methodology

This study is qualitative and it intends on creating the conceptual foundation of the Islamic leadership model for higher learning institutions (ILM-HLI) (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). It is a systematic approach to study the complexity of the university administration process. It is through this approach that the principles and values of Islamic sources can be found and taken into account. Document analysis is the most essential tool for data collection and evaluation (Bowen, 2009). In qualitative research, it is a structured way of reading and understanding written material (Bowen, 2009). The study data sources are grouped into two main categories. The first one is the primary data collected directly from the Quran and Hadith. All sources are analyzed on the basis of the ASWJ value framework to understand the principles and practices of Islamic governance and apply it to study the literature. The second one is secondary data collected through a systematic literature review for educational governance, Islamic management practices, and contemporary leadership of institutions. The literature searches were done using keywords in online search databases. Most of the selected materials were published between 2020 and 2025, so the discussion is still relevant.

The data analysis was done with the reflexive thematic analysis method of Braun and Clarke (2022). The coding and theme study resulted in the creation of five main values (*amanah*, *'adl*, *hikmah*, *syura*, and *ihsan*). These five values were the starting point for the proposed model. The values were then organised in three dimensions in ILM-HLI, with *Rabbani* Core being spirituality, *Insani* Core being humanity, and *Idari* Core being administration. To improve the reliability of the analysis process and establish the validity of the results, source triangulation was also carried out. The comparison between classical Islamic sources and the latest educational leadership studies ensured that the model developed was consistent theoretically and suitable for application within Islamic higher education institutions.

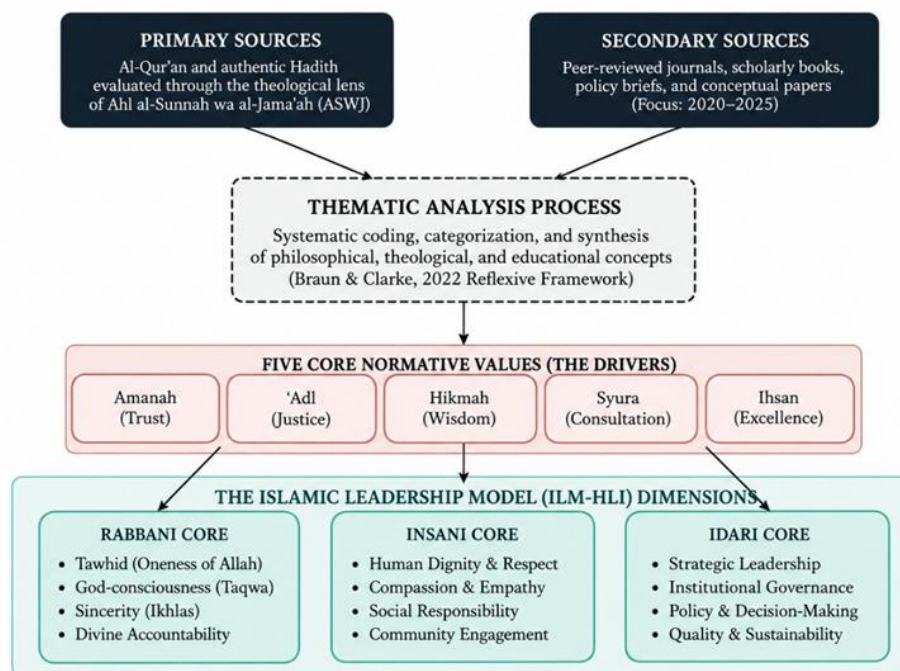


Figure 1: Qualitative Thematic Coding Methodology & Islamic Leadership (ILM-HLI) Model Development Process

Source: Developed based on paper's methodology and Braun & Clarke (2022)

Literature Review

Leadership is a key part of higher education research because of its impact on organisational effectiveness. It also determines how well change can be maintained in an institution. Given the global economy and competitive environment in higher education today, higher education institutions are facing challenges which are complex and very unpredictable. Universities have to keep up with fast-paced policy changes and intense competition in the market, and also community needs. That also has changed everyone's expectations of top management. Administrators can no longer just take over existing resources but must plan for the future to be able to encourage innovation as opposed to undermining academic quality. There has also been a massive increase in the work of university administrators over the past 10 years. Bureaucratic management systems of the past are no longer sufficient to cope with the needs of the modern world. Higher education leaders are now confronted with academic performance, stakeholder relations, financial management, digital transformation, and social accountability (Tight, 2023).

The ever-more complex management of institutions requires leaders to be aware and respond to the globalization of education, technological innovation, and changing needs of society (Arar et al., 2023). There is a wealth of literature on how higher education institutions are managed and led recently. Transformational leadership, for example, stresses leaders' capability to spark innovation and motivate their colleagues, but also to make organizational change (Bush, 2020; Hallinger, 2022). Servant leadership is about the empowerment of individuals and professional development in the entire organization. Unlike centralized leadership where the power is centralized in one leader, shared responsibility and collaboration are part of distributed leadership, and shared participation in decision making is also part of distributed leadership (Tian et al., 2016). In the same vein, authentic leadership is one of self-awareness, open relationships, and ethical consistency that is a good way to build trust in the institution (Gardner et al., 2021). That is why, in the end, the culture of ethical relationships, shared responsibility, and inclusive leadership practices are the building blocks for resilience and the development of institutions (Hallinger, 2022; Gardner et al., 2021).

However, despite their contributions, these leadership theories are largely based on secular organizational paradigms that focus on institutional performance, managerial efficiency, organizational effectiveness, and stakeholder satisfaction. While these objectives remain important, they often do not factor in spiritual responsibility, religious values, or ethical obligations to society beyond management (Gardner et al., 2021; Hallinger, 2022). As a result, there has been concern over whether only secular leadership models are suitable for educational institutions in religious and value-based settings. There has been increased attention in recent studies about the need for contextualized leadership practices and to understand that leadership practices are shaped by cultural, religious, historical, and societal factors which are more important than a managerial assumption (Arar et al., 2023). This view is particularly relevant to Islamic higher learning institutions where leadership is not only about organizational management but also about Islamic values, the maintenance of spirituality, and ethical behavior.

From an Islamic perspective, leadership is to be held accountable before Allah, ethical stewardship, justice (*'adl*), trustworthiness (*amanah*), and responsibility for society. They are spiritual leaders who have responsibility for the lives of the people and are both spiritually and economically accountable to Allah as well as society (Abu Bakar et al., 2024). The result is that leaders in Islamic education institutions are expected to be the leaders who lead moral development in Islam and to hold on to Islamic values and to make religious values and ethics the foundation of human flourishing. Higher education institutions in Muslim countries are not only an intellectual setting but also a place of moral and social development. This is why leadership is no longer measured by rankings, publications or financial performance, and as such it has to be based on the moral and social aspect of leadership.

Leadership frameworks that bring together organizational effectiveness with spiritual awareness and ethical responsibility are needed. Educational leaders have to promote ethical organizational culture and social responsibility and make sure that the culture is inclusive of all people. So, the current debate about educational leadership should be based on other frameworks that relate to the values, beliefs, and worldviews of various educational contexts. For Islamic higher education institutions, good leadership models should be able to align academic competitiveness, institutional sustainability, and governance effectiveness with Islamic values. And that is also the only way to address the challenges of modern higher education and to serve Islamic institutions' spiritual, ethical and educational mission.

Islamic Leadership Concepts and Foundations

Islamic leadership is a unique approach to leadership based on the Islamic worldview (*tasawwur Islam*). Contrary to traditional leadership theories that primarily emphasize organizational effectiveness and human-centered outcomes, leadership is not only a position of authority but a sacred trust and has both worldly and spiritual responsibilities too. The leaders should uphold justice (*'adl*), consultation (*syura*), benevolence (*ihsan*), and ethical conduct while fulfilling their obligations as servants and vicegerents of Allah (Abu Bakar et al., 2024; Halstead, 2004).

The concept of *tawhid* is the theology of Islamic leadership which considers Allah the supreme authority, guidance, and sovereignty. Human beings, as *khulafa'*, are entrusted to manage affairs according to divine guidance. Consequently, leadership is seen as an act of worship (*'ibadah*) and a way of fulfilling responsibilities to Allah, society, and humanity (Beekun & Badawi, 1998). The Qur'an and Sunnah also provide extensive guidance on leadership (e.g. *amanah*, *'adl*, *syura*, *hikmah*, and *ihsan*) and Prophet Muhammad SAW is the primary model of ethical governance and community development (Beekun & Badawi, 1998; Rahman, 2025). Islamic leadership has been increasingly prevalent in education systems in recent years. Alazmi and Bush (2024) stress that education leadership in Muslim institutions should be based on Islamic values, principles, and ethics, not just Western leadership frameworks. Similarly, Khaeroni, Ilzamudin, and Subhan (2025) identify prophetic leadership as a model of contemporary Islamic higher education and identify trustworthiness, justice, wisdom, compassion, integrity, and accountability as the basic characteristics of leadership. These views are a part of a wider shift towards leadership models grounded in Islamic epistemology. A systematic review by Arar et al. (2022) shows a huge increase in Islamic educational leadership research over the past decades. However, much of this literature is about school environments and rarely addresses higher education institutions. The review also stresses the need for more in-depth and context-based frameworks to address current educational challenges. To this end, more and more research has been done into value-based leadership frameworks that integrate Islamic values into governance, decision-making, and institutional culture.

In Islam, the most important values - *amanah*, *'adl*, *hikmah*, *syura*, and *ihsan* - are the key components of leadership effectiveness as they help leaders balance organizational objectives and moral and spiritual obligations (Rahman, 2025). *Syura* is central to Islamic leadership. Consultation promotes engagement, participation, and legitimacy in decision-making and the organization as well as divine accountability and moral responsibility (Tamsiyati et al., 2025). It has been shown that effective leadership in Muslim institutions is achieved when organizational practices are aligned with Islamic values and ethical principles (Alazmi & Bush, 2024; Rahman, 2025). Visionary leadership in Islamic education facilitates curriculum innovation, community involvement, institutional sustainability, and technological development in Islamic education while preserving Islamic identity (Manaf et al., 2025).

Islamic leadership in higher education is increasingly expected to reconcile this Islamic perspective with globalization, digital transformation, and technological advance. Good leaders should be able to demonstrate adaptability, creativity and strategic thinking while also being ethical and *Tawhidic* (El Junusi et al., 2024; Mohd Zuraini et al., 2025; Talib et al., 2024; Ghani et al., 2025). In spite of the growing research, we have a number of models that are predominantly based on some sort of leadership style and Western concepts as opposed to the

Islamic epistemological foundations. These need to be aligned with the concept of ethical leadership and visionary higher education (Arar et al., 2022; Rahman, 2025; Mohd Zuraini et al., 2025). To continue this kind of framework, we must have a framework that is consistent with Islamic epistemology and relevant to contemporary institutional needs (Alazmi & Bush, 2024; Khaeroni, Ilzamudin, & Subhan, 2025; Manaf et al., 2025) as well as with contemporary challenges in higher education.

Values-Based Leadership in Higher Education

Values-based leadership has emerged as a major paradigm for higher education and one that leadership should not only be measured by institutional performance, managerial efficiency, or organizational results but also ethics, common values, and moral responsibility. Values-based leadership in higher learning institutions fosters integrity, trust, accountability, collaboration, and passion so leaders can balance organizational excellence with the development of people and society in general. In educational settings, this kind of leadership is conducive to good institutional culture, stakeholder engagement, sustainable governance, and the long-term development of organizational structures.

From a religious perspective, values-based leadership is rooted in spiritual, moral and management perspectives. Rahman (2025) believes that Islamic educational leadership should reflect core Islamic principles (*tawhid*, *amanah*, *‘adl*, and ethical responsibility) but also respond to contemporary education challenges. Value-based leadership enables educational institutions to evolve and be innovative and not give up their religious and moral principles, the study indicates. Alazmi and Bush (2024) suggest that leadership models for Muslim educational institutions should be rooted in Islamic values and ethical principles rather than based on secular leadership theories. The Islamic educational leadership model emphasizes moral integrity, accountability, consultation (*syura*) and faith-informed decision making as core values of good educational leadership which is what is at the heart of Islamic educational leadership. These values enhance the legitimacy, trust and organizational sustainability of Islamic educational institutions. In higher education, El Junusi et al. (2024) further highlight that values-based leadership is crucial to the internationalization of Islamic universities. The ADL Relational Global Leadership framework focuses on adaptive and dynamic leadership for schools to compete globally at an institutional level and to retain their Islamic identity and core values. They find that a good institutional development style requires a leader with strategic vision, ethical integrity and stakeholder engagement in the current globalized education landscape.

All of these studies suggest that values-based leadership is relevant to contemporary higher learning institutions, especially in Islamic educational institutions. Values-based leadership is rooted in spiritual awareness, moral responsibility, and good governance, and leads to better institutions while also making sure educational development is aligned with the moral, social, and religious value systems. The above perspective supports the theoretical framework for the Islamic Leadership Model for Higher Learning Institutions (ILM-HLI) for the implementation of the values of *amanah* (trust), *‘adl* (justice), *hikmah* (wisdom), *syura* (consultation), and *ihsan* (excellence) in higher education.

Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama‘ah (ASWJ) as an Epistemological Framework

The Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama ‘ah (ASWJ) tradition is the most widespread theological and epistemological framework in the Muslim world. The ASWJ has been the basis for the study

of Islam for centuries in terms of its adherence to the Qur'an, Sunnah, consensus (ijma'), and sound reasoning ('aql) and moderation (*wasatiyyah*), balance (*tawazun*), justice ('*adl*), and harmonious integration of revelation and reason. This has led to the ASWJ stance which is still the most well accepted theological orientation for Muslim communities in general and is very relevant in all areas of life: religious, social, education and governance (Abdullah et al., 2025). In Malaysia, ASWJ is the main theological basis for Islamic education and religious administration. The ASWJ framework is very much a way of maintaining doctrinal consistency, moderation, and social cohesion within Malaysian Muslims. The *wasatiyyah* is an important aspect of ASWJ philosophy and is considered a basis for ethical governance, social harmony, and balanced development in Malaysia (Abdullah et al., 2025). Through educational institutions, these values are passed from generation to generation and in turn lead to morally sound and socially responsible citizens.

ASWJ is a theology-based epistemological base for educational leadership. It is a matter of moderation and moderation is not a place of rigidity and liberalism, and it can enable educational leaders to face the challenges that are in place today and still remain faithful to Islamic principles. ASWJ encourages the integration of *naqli* (revealed knowledge) and '*aqli* (rational knowledge) and it is particularly relevant for higher education institutions where the academic questions and religious values must be seen in an integrated manner. This will lead to a leadership style which is intellectually rigorous, ethically sound, and spiritually sensitive (Rahman, 2025).

The ASWJ framework also drives leadership ethics. Its principles promote accountability, justice, communal welfare (*maslahah*), and responsible governance. Leaders are expected to hold power with wisdom and fairness and the community's well-being in mind. These values are especially relevant to Islamic education and form the basis for higher education leadership in higher education institutions. Islamic leadership is guided by faith-based values and based on those principles of fairness, integrity, compassion, responsibility, and organizational commitment and is thus believed to enhance the quality of leadership as well as the quality of the institutional environment (Azizi et al., 2024). At the same time, ASWJ is a balanced approach to addressing today's educational challenges. With world events such as globalization, technological advances, and market-driven governance in the news at universities, ASWJ provides a stable reference point that is still of interest and helps institutions to live a life that is Islamic but also work with new developments.

Wasatiyyah encourages institutions to embrace technological advancements without compromising basic Islamic values and promotes a sustainable institution to flourish and be relevant in society (Abdullah et al., 2025; Rahman, 2025). ASWJ is also a theological perspective as well as a framework in educational leadership, governance, and institutional development. A focus on moderation, justice, ethical responsibility, and balanced interdependence of knowledge is key for universities that aim for academic excellence in the face of complex global scenarios and maintain their Islamic identity (Azizi et al., 2024; Rahman, 2025).

Islamic Leadership In Higher Education

The increasing complexity of contemporary higher education has inspired a surge of interest in leadership models that can meet the needs of Islamic higher learning institutions. Islamic higher education institutions are expected to achieve academic excellence in line with Islamic faith

(religious identity, ethical values, and spiritual values) while maintaining their traditional education philosophy. Therefore, institutional leaders must balance governance effectiveness, research productivity, internationalization, technological advancement, and Islamic values. Leadership in Islamic higher education has been a topic of intense research in recent years, highlighting the role played by leadership in driving institutional culture, strategic direction, and educational quality. Leadership is essential for the growth of Islamic universities internationally and to maintain institutional identity and values (El Junusi et al., 2024; Manaf et al., 2025; Talib et al., 2024). To achieve this balance, leaders need to be flexible, adaptive, and relational in order to respond to ever-changing international educational needs and not to compromise Islamic values (Manaf et al., 2025).

Leadership also is important for organizational change, curriculum development, technological adaptation, community engagement, and institutional sustainability. The rise of internationalization has prompted a growing need for leadership who can balance global competitiveness with religious authenticity (El Junusi et al., 2024). Islamic universities are also looking to achieve international distinction through research excellence, faculty collaboration, and global exposure. But these aspirations often create conflict between modernization and Islamic identity. As such, educational leaders should be flexible, innovative, and strategic thinkers, and the system is to be developed according to Islamic values and educational philosophy (Manaf et al., 2025; Talib et al., 2024).

The contemporary literature also highlights the importance of value-based leadership in Islamic educational institutions. In contrast with conventional approaches that are focused on organizational performance, Islamic leadership places a premium on ethical responsibility, spiritual consciousness, accountability (*amanah*), justice (*'adl*), consultation (*syura*), and unity of purpose (*tawhid*). These are the guiding principles and help build trust, organizational commitment, and institutional legitimacy. Value-based leadership is therefore the way to ensure that educational leaders are able to achieve institutional excellence with ethical and religious integrity (Rahman, 2025; Beekun & Badawi, 1998). More research shows that good leadership in Islamic education organizations can also be the combination of managerial competency with spiritual values. The leadership of *amanah*, *syura*, and *ukhuwah* is based on cooperative organizational cultures in which there is shared responsibility, open communication, and collective decision-making. Such practices are helpful in enhancing organizational effectiveness and foster moral and spiritual development among the participants (Tamsiyati et al., 2025).

Another emerging theme is the role of *wasatiyyah* (moderation) as a guiding principle for leadership and governance. With respect to balance, justice, inclusivity, and the avoidance of extremes, *wasatiyyah* gives a way to reconcile competing demands between tradition and innovation, local identity and global engagement, and spiritual development and academic achievement. Leadership based on this principle is necessary for the sustainable development of institutions and ethical governance (Abdullah et al., 2025). In addition, rapid technological advancement and the emergence of Education 4.0 have changed expectations of educational leadership. Leaders are now expected to be digital natives, innovators/leadership architects, strategic visionaries, and data-based decision makers. Islamic educational institutions, therefore, need leadership models that integrate technological innovation with spiritual and ethical values (Mohd Zuraini et al., 2025; Ghani et al., 2025).

As a whole, it is well known that Islamic higher learning institutions need a leadership model that is holistic in nature and that takes spiritual thinking and good governance into account (i.e., ethical governance, strategic management, organizational efficacy, technological capabilities, and human development). These frameworks are regarded as key to Islamic universities handling contemporary challenges and preserving their distinct educational mission and identity. Thus, the creation of Islamic leadership models for higher education remains a crucial research sphere.

Existing Leadership Models And Research Gaps

Despite the growing literature on Islamic leadership, there are still gaps. Recent studies on Islamic leadership focus on specific leadership practices like transformational, servant, prophetic, spiritual or values-based leadership. While these approaches are helpful, they often focus on a few aspects of leadership and do not provide a comprehensive framework to deal with the governance requirements of current higher education institutions. Islamic universities today are governed in an environment that is globalized, technological, and has high stakeholder expectations such that leaders are not just seen in a single-dimensional perspective (Manaf et al., 2025; Mohd Zuraini et al., 2025). Also, many Islamic leadership models have been based on Western-based theories. Islamic values are present, but the fundamental theoretical structures are often based on secular grounds. Alazmi and Bush (2024) argue that educational leadership models in Muslim societies should be rooted in Islamic beliefs, values and epistemological grounds, not solely based on conventional leadership models.

Contemporary literature also stresses the need to develop and apply basic Islamic concepts like *tawhid*, *amanah*, *syura* and *‘adl* to the education leadership. These concepts are often not integrated in a coherent leadership framework (Rahman, 2025; Tamsiyati et al., 2025). Leadership is also discussed separately in the literature, in terms of spiritual, ethical and managerial aspects. The focus on spiritual leadership is largely on faith and personal development, and governance-oriented studies emphasize organizational effectiveness and strategic management, and ethical leadership studies are concerned with values, accountability and moral behavior. As a result, very few studies have attempted to integrate these dimensions into a single educational model for higher learning institutions. This fragmentation of the frameworks has limited the potential for current models to address the many interrelated challenges of modern Islamic universities, which need to be considered as spiritual identity, ethical leadership, academic excellence and organizational sustainability within one framework (Beekun & Badawi, 1998; Rahman, 2025).

The lack of a clear academic interest in leadership models based on the Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama‘ah (ASWJ) is also another issue. Although ASWJ is still the most popular theological and educational model in many Muslim countries, its application to education is still relatively limited. There are many studies on ASWJ in theology, religious education, moderation and social harmony, but they have not yet brought their ideas into the context of a more holistic leadership model for higher education. Many concepts related to ASWJ such as *wasatiyyah*, balance, justice, moderation and communal responsibility are rarely in practice as core leadership models which are relevant for governance and decision making (Abdullah et al., 2025; Alazmi & Bush, 2024). Today’s universities are also finding governance challenges so different from those in schools and other higher education institutions. Academic freedom in the face of competition for students and professionalization, global competition, the need to work with global research and the need to have leadership models that are suited for higher

education rather than general education models (Talib et al., 2024; Ghani et al., 2025; Mohd Zuraini et al., 2025).

The literature indicates that Islamic leadership models in the context of Islamic leadership have been developing to deal with spiritual, ethical, management and strategic aspects as well. But the model for higher learning is quite limited and in terms of the principles of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah is not yet considered. The present study proposes the Islamic Leadership Model for Higher Learning Institutions (ILM-HLI) which integrates three interrelated dimensions, namely, the Rabbani Core, the Insani Core and the Idari Core. Based on ASWJ principles and current higher education realities, the ILM-HLI provides leadership practice, institutional transformation and sustainable excellence for Islamic higher learning institutions based on the above, balanced and valued-based model which provides a framework to guide the development of the education pathway and the leadership and the students.

Findings and Development of the Islamic Leadership Model for Higher Learning Institutions (ILM-HLI)

Based on the thematic analysis of the Qur'an, Hadith, classical Islamic scholarship, and contemporary educational leadership literature, we have found that there are three interrelated dimensions that form the Islamic Leadership Model for Higher Learning Institutions (ILM-HLI). They are the *Rabbani* Core, *Insani* Core, and *Idari* Core. These dimensions contribute to a holistic framework that combines spiritual consciousness, ethical responsibility, and good governance in higher education leadership. Five core values— *amanah* (trust), *'adl* (justice), *hikmah* (wisdom), *syura* (consultation), and *ihsan* (excellence) are also incorporated into the model. The *Rabbani* Core is the foundational dimension of the ILM-HLI.

This dimension is based on the concept of *rabbaniyyah*, *tawhid* (the oneness of Allah), and spiritual consciousness in leadership. Leadership is not an administrative responsibility, but a worship (*'ibadah*) and an *amanah* entrusted by Allah in Islamic thinking. So not only are the institutions but also Allah responsible for their decisions and behavior. This leads to leaders to seek to align organizational goals, policies, and practices to Islamic principles and values. It calls on leaders to practice sincerity (*ikhlas*), God-consciousness (*taqwa*), humility (*tawadu'*), and accountability (*muhasabah*) in their leadership. These spiritual qualities allow leaders to act in a responsible way and do so without violating the law of nature, abuse of power, and personal interest and do what is in the interest of the institution and what is best for society.

Rabbani Core

In higher learning institutions, the *Rabbani* Core is the spiritual basis for leadership to be defined and shaped leadership vision and decision making. It guarantees that institutional development is not only to benefit from the material benefit or the prestige of the company but it is for knowledge and ethical development and service to society. The leader of the organization is a way to achieve both institutional excellence and spiritual growth as well, this dimension of leadership.

Key Elements of the *Rabbani* Core:

- *Tawhid* (Oneness of Allah)
- *Taqwa* (God-consciousness)
- *Ikhlas* (Sincerity)

- Accountability before Allah
- Spiritual leadership and moral guidance

Associated Core Values:

- *Amanah* (Trust)
- *Ihsan* (Excellence)
- *Hikmah* (Wisdom)

Insani Core

The *Insani* Core is the human and ethical aspect of the ILM-HLI framework. *Insani* comes from insan (human being) and is the Islamic concept of human dignity, social responsibility, and moral development. This dimension is about the development of ethical character, relationships, and the overall well-being of the people in the education community. Islamic leadership is very much based on education and has always been human-centered. So, it is very important to have good relationships, empathy, inclusiveness, and a good work culture to be good leaders and to build the people in the organization. This is in line with the Islamic spirit of human dignity (*karamah insaniah*) and holistic human development. Leaders are expected to be moral role models and represent the Islamic values in the interaction of students, faculty, and all the others (Ismail@Yaakub et al., 2024).

The *Insani* Core focuses on justice, compassion, integrity, respect, and social responsibility as core values to build ethical academic communities. It encourages leaders to build environments that nurture personal development, intellectual development, and community involvement. This dimension also highlights the need to balance institutional objectives and the welfare and wants of the people. The importance of this dimension is illustrated by the fact that education is not about the institution, it is about the people. In higher learning institutions, the *Insani* Core promotes an ethical academic culture of respect, trust, cooperation, and harmony. It is more than just a university; it is an institution that produces knowledge; it also generates ethical graduates, ethical professionals, and leaders to lead positively for society and we have to be conscious to do that.

Key Elements of the *Insani* Core:

- Compassion and empathy
- Social responsibility
- Community engagement

Associated Core Values:

- *‘Adl* (Justice)
- *Amanah* (Trust)
- *Ihsan* (Excellence)

Idari Core

The *Idari* Core is the managerial and governance aspect of the ILM-HLI. It is a concept inspired by the Arabic term *idarah* (administration or management) and is about strategic leadership, organizational effectiveness, institutional governance, and decision-making processes. In the *Rabbani* Core, spiritual direction is given, but the *Insani* Core is ethical, and the *Idari* Core makes sure that these values are put to practice at the institutional level. The leadership

functions are planning, policy formulation, resource management, quality assurance, risk management, and organizational development. Islamic leadership is not trying to undermine modern management practices but to connect them to an Islamic ethical framework. The leaders are expected to uphold Islamic values and ethical standards while working for the organization to achieve organizational excellence. Wisdom (*hikmah*), consultation (*syura*), justice (*‘adl*), and accountability must lead to strategic decisions.

Also, the *Idari* Core promotes participatory governance through *syura*, as it enables the participation of all the stakeholders in the governance process and ensures that it is inclusive and transparent in decision-making, contributing to the sustainable development of the institution. In higher learning, the *Idari* Core allows leaders to meet current challenges such as globalization, technological change, internationalization, financial sustainability, and quality assurance. It guarantees that institutions are still competitive and effective while maintaining their Islamic identity and mission.

Key elements of the *Idari* Core:

- Strategic leadership
- Institutional governance
- Policy making and decision making
- Organizational effectiveness
- Quality assurance and sustainability

Associated Core Values:

- *‘Adl* (Justice)
- *Ihsan* (Excellence)

Integration of the Three Dimensions

The ILM-HLI framework is based on integrating the *Rabbani*, *Insani*, and *Idari* dimensions. Each dimension has its own characteristics and functions but is all interlinked and mutually reinforcing. Effective Islamic leadership is not achieved through a single aspect of leadership as such. It is a harmonious convergence of spiritual consciousness, ethical, and organizational competence. The *Rabbani* Core is the spiritual basis of leadership, which is founded on tawhid and accountability to Allah. The *Insani* Core also brings these spiritual principles of leadership to life in ethical practice and human-centered practices. The *Idari* Core plays a role in both the governance, strategic planning, and institutional management. At the heart of this integration are the five core leadership values identified through thematic analysis: *amanah*, *‘adl*, *hikmah*, *syura*, and *ihsan*.

These are normative drivers that connect and sustain all three dimensions. *Amanah* promotes accountability and trustworthiness in leadership roles. *‘Adl* ensures fair and ethical decision-making. *Hikmah* trains leaders in sound judgment and strategic thinking. *Syura* promotes consultation and participatory governance. *Ihsan* encourages excellence and continuous improvement. The integration of the above dimensions makes for a holistic leadership system that can accommodate the spiritual, ethical, and managerial needs of modern higher learning institutions.

By integrating these interrelated elements, the ILM-HLI framework can be a model that can also be used to improve Islamic educational leadership, institutional sustainability, and organizational effectiveness in a way that is in accordance with Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah principles.

Proposed Model of ILM-HLI

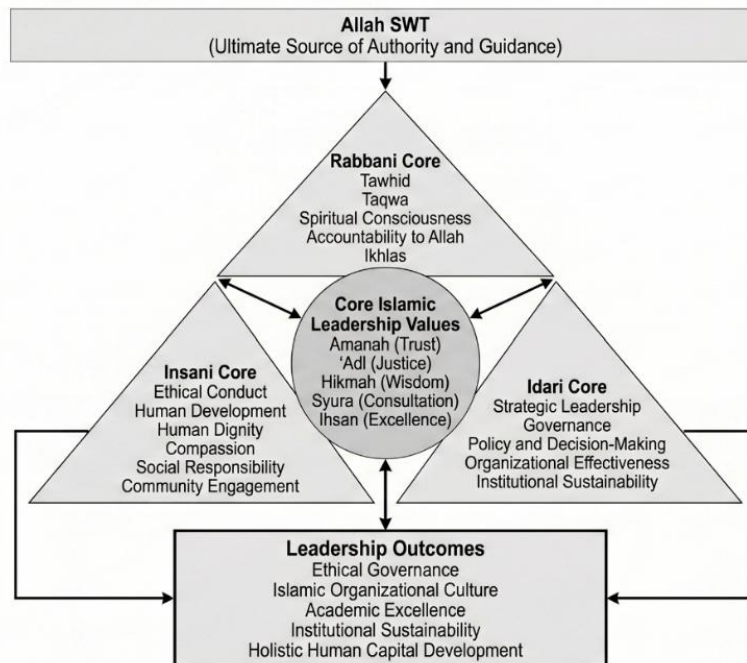


Figure 1. Islamic Leadership Model for Higher Learning Institutions (ILM-HLI) grounded in Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah (ASWJ)

Source: Developed by Authors

Conclusion

This research has proposed the Islamic Leadership Model for Higher Learning Institutions (ILM-HLI) as a holistic, values-based leadership framework based on the principles of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah. The model was established as a leadership model with a view toward meeting the needs of contemporary higher education where we need to provide a leadership model that addresses the problems of today's higher education and is rooted in Islamic paradigms and values and leadership that is also rooted in Islamic epistemology. Higher education institutions are now working with globalization, market-oriented governance, and secularism, so the need for leadership approaches to the world of higher education is evolving, and we are increasingly working with the need for the integration of spiritual, ethical, and managerial aspects in a holistic and meaningful way.

Qualitative document analysis of the Qur'an, Hadith, classical Islamic scholarship, and the current educational leadership literature has identified three main elements to form the framework of the ILM-HLI as the *Rabbani* Core, the *Insani* Core, and the *Idari* Core. The *Rabbani* Core is the one that is theologically based on tawhid, spiritual consciousness, and the responsibility to Allah; the *Insani* Core is about ethical behavior, human development, and social responsibility; and the *Idari* Core is about strategic leadership, effective governance, and organizational excellence. These dimensions are interwoven and represented by five core

leadership values (*amanah* (trust), *‘adl* (justice), *hikmah* (wisdom), *syura* (consultation), and *ihsan* (excellence)). The findings of this study indicate that good leadership in Islamic higher education institutions is not only managerial competence. However, a leadership style that is sustainable and responsible needs to combine spiritual commitment with ethical obligation and institutional effectiveness.

By integrating these dimensions in a framework, the ILM-HLI model fills gaps in the literature, especially the lack of leadership models that are based on Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama‘ah principles and are designed for higher education institutions. This study is a theoretical development to enhance Islamic educational leadership by integrating Islamic epistemology with contemporary leadership discussion. In practice, the model can be used to inspire policymakers, university administrators, academic leaders, and education practitioners to strengthen governance, organizational culture, and leadership development in Islamic higher education institutions. The model can also serve as a guide to integrate Islamic values into institutional policies, leadership training programs, and strategic planning. Furthermore, it can also be useful for strengthening internationalization efforts, ethical governance, and sustainable leadership development at Islamic higher learning institutions.

The empirical study here is conceptual and is based on only document analysis. Future research is therefore needed to empirically validate our proposed model by qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-method studies in Islamic higher education institutions with leaders, academics, and stakeholders. It is likely that the ILM-HLI framework should also be considered in the context of higher education and other institutions. The Islamic Leadership Model for Higher Learning Institutions (ILM-HLI) provides a coherent and sustainable framework for leadership that is rooted in Islamic values while remaining responsive to contemporary higher education challenges. The *Rabbani*, *Insani*, and *Idari* dimensions of the model help shape ethical and spiritually wise leaders who will be able to contribute to the mission of Islamic higher education in the twenty-first century.

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