

Modernizing Islamic Boarding Schools as a Strategy for Global Transformation: Cultivating Globally-Minded Students in an Era of International Competition

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Abstract

Pesantren, as the oldest Islamic educational institution in Indonesia, faces the challenge of adapting to globalization and modernization in the 21st century. This research aims to analyze pesantren modernization strategies in preparing globally competitive students without abandoning Islamic identity. The method employed is library research with a qualitative descriptive approach, examining various academic sources related to pesantren educational transformation. The study results show that pesantren modernization includes the integration of traditional curricula with national and international curricula, the development of 21st-century competencies (critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, communication, and digital literacy), strengthening foreign language skills, and the utilization of information technology in learning. Effective transformation strategies include adaptive leadership, the development of international networks, and global alumni empowerment. The research conclusion affirms that moderate integration between tradition and modernization represents an ideal model for producing a generation of Muslims who are moral, critical, digitally literate, and prepared to face global challenges

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1. INTRODUCTION

Pesantren is the oldest Islamic educational institution in Indonesia and plays a central role in shaping the character of the Muslim generation. Amid the development of globalization and modern technology, pesantren are required to maintain their Islamic scholarly identity while adapting to 21st-century competency requirements (Siregar et al., 2026). The era of globalization presents significant challenges for traditional Islamic educational institutions that must balance the preservation of Islamic values with adaptation to global demands (Mujahada & Kurnia, 2025). In the context of rapid global change, pesantren face increasing pressure to equip students with 21st-century skills essential for global competitiveness (Sodikin et al., 2026). Rapid digital transformation and changing labor market demands require students to develop 21st-century competencies alongside mastery of religious knowledge (Husairi, 2025). This reality requires pesantren to undertake comprehensive renewal without abandoning their identity as educational institutions based on Islamic values. Globalization

brings complex challenges that require student generations to develop holistic independence (Zahroh & Fahmi, 2025). On one hand, pesantren must maintain the characteristics of traditional education that have proven to shape students' character and spirituality. On the other hand, the demand for graduates who are academically competent, professionally qualified, and able to compete at the international level becomes an unavoidable necessity. In this context, pesantren modernization becomes a crucial strategy to realize "globally competitive students" – students who are not only strong in religious knowledge but also possess global competencies.

This research aims to: (1) analyze the concepts and strategies of pesantren modernization in the context of global transformation; (2) identify key components in preparing internationally competitive students; and (3) formulate an integration model of traditional pesantren values with 21st-century competencies to produce graduates ready to compete in the global era..

2. METHOD

This research employs library research methodology with a qualitative descriptive approach. This method was selected because it allows researchers to comprehensively examine various academic sources related to pesantren modernization and educational transformation (Wardi et al., 2025). Data collection was conducted through literature searches from academic databases containing journal articles, books, and research reports relevant to the topics of pesantren modernization, Islamic education transformation, and student global competency development. The obtained data were then analyzed using content analysis techniques to identify central themes and synthesize findings descriptively (Sumiati et al., 2024). The analysis process included data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. Data validity was ensured through source triangulation by comparing various research findings from different pesantren in Indonesia and the Southeast Asian region. The criteria for literature review included: (1) nationally and internationally accredited journal articles; (2) research discussing pesantren educational transformation, modernization, or innovation; (3) studies on student competency development in facing global challenges; and (4) case studies of pesantren that have successfully implemented modernization strategies. The analytical framework refers to Talcott Parsons' AGIL theory (Adaptation, Goal Attainment, Integration, Latency) to understand the dimensions of pesantren institutional transformation (Suryati et al., 2025).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. The Concept of Pesantren Modernization in the Era of Globalization

Pesantren modernization is a transformation process encompassing the renewal of educational systems, curricula, management, and infrastructure without eliminating the identity and core values of pesantren (Maulidi et al., 2025). Research findings show that pesantren modernization in various regions includes curriculum reform, adoption of classical systems, strengthening of general education, and the use of information and communication technology (Maulidi et al., 2025). A hybrid model between traditional and contemporary Islamic education has become the dominant pattern in this transformation. Modern pesantren face the challenge of balancing the preservation of Islamic values with adaptation to global demands (Mujahada & Kurnia, 2025). The success of Pondok Pesantren Darussalam Gontor in facing the era of globalization demonstrates the importance of a multi-dimensional leadership strategy

encompassing: curriculum integration of traditional Islamic studies with modern sciences at a 60:40 ratio, technological adaptation through digital learning platforms used by 95% of students, international networking with 127 affiliated institutions in 18 countries, alumni empowerment programs reaching over 80,000 graduates worldwide, and sustainable institutional development with annual enrollment growth rates of 8-12% (Mujahada & Kurnia, 2025). The transformation of pesantren education is also evident in the shift in leadership models from charismatic style to a collective-delegative model (Hakim et al., 2025). This change promotes a more professional and innovative governance system and enhances the recruitment and training of competent human resources. As a result, pesantren experience improved graduate quality, increasing public interest, and a stronger reputation as an adaptive and quality-focused pesantren (Hakim et al., 2025).

2. Curriculum Integration: Tradition and Modernity

One of the key strategies in pesantren modernization is the development of an integrative curriculum that combines traditional diniyah curriculum based on classical Islamic texts (*kitab kuning*) with nationally standard general education curriculum (Mustafidin et al., 2025). This integration is realized not only in learning content but also in management systems, pedagogical methods, and character education. By integrating spiritual, academic, and life skill dimensions, this curriculum innovation effectively addresses local pesantren needs while meeting the demands of contemporary global education (Mustafidin et al., 2025). Pesantren Darunnajah Jakarta has undertaken significant innovations in designing a curriculum that prioritizes life skills, digital literacy, and comprehensive Islamic character formation through the implementation of the *Tarbiyatul Muallimin Al-Islamiyah (TMI)* curriculum based on *Maqashid al-Syari'ah* values, digital technology integration, and strengthening of 21st-century competencies (Fauzia et al., 2025). This approach demonstrates that pesantren can adapt to the Society 5.0 paradigm by developing curricula that combine traditional values with technological innovation. The transformation of English-based *Kitab Kuning* learning methods has also become an important strategy in opening student access to broader Islamic intellectual resources at the global level (Maftuhah et al., 2026). This transformation is carried out through several strategic steps, including the integration of traditional pesantren values with modern pedagogical approaches, the development of adaptive and integrated curricula, and the enhancement of teacher competencies in both religious and English language instruction. The use of English as the medium of instruction in *Kitab Kuning* learning encourages students to access broader Islamic intellectual resources at the global level (Maftuhah et al., 2026).

3. Development of 21st-Century Competencies

In preparing globally competitive students, pesantren must integrate 21st-century skills into their curricula. This integration encompasses strengthening critical thinking, communication, collaboration, creativity, and digital literacy (Husairi, 2025). Studies at Pesantren Al-Yasini demonstrate shared recognition of the urgency of strengthening these competencies. Integration is most feasible when these competencies are mapped into learning outcomes, content, pedagogy, and assessment, and operationalized through value-guided technology use, hybrid learning routines, and project-based activities such as Islamic entrepreneurship and leadership projects (Husairi, 2025). The integration of Islamic soft skills, the 4C learning framework, digitalization of Islamic literacy, and the cultivation of leadership and independence enable pesantren to produce

globally competitive graduates (Sodikin et al., 2026). However, several challenges persist, including limited technological infrastructure, resistance to modernization among some pesantren, and insufficient teacher adaptability to innovative pedagogical methods. To address these gaps, strengthened collaboration between pesantren, higher education institutions, and industry partners is needed to enhance student preparedness for global challenges (Sodikin et al., 2026). Pondok Pesantren Al Ulya Kendal implements a comprehensive educational strategy encompassing three key dimensions: (1) curriculum integration that blends religious and general education using interactive methods such as sorogan, bandongan, group discussions, and collaborative projects; (2) character formation through habituation and role modeling, emphasizing daily discipline, independence, regular worship, and the exemplary conduct of kyai and teachers; and (3) the development of 21st-century competencies and leadership skills through programs such as muhadharah (speech training), student organizations, and digital literacy initiatives (Setiyorini & Ibad, 2025).

4. Strengthening Foreign Language Skills and Intercultural Communication

Proficiency in foreign languages, particularly English and Arabic, becomes a vital component in preparing globally competitive students. Sabilul Rahmah International Islamic Boarding School (Sabira-IIBS) implements a learning system that combines traditional Islamic pesantren values with modern learning, with a curriculum based on national and international standards (Al-Azhar University for diniyah and Cambridge for Mathematics, Science, and English) (Pariyanto et al., 2025). Most students are encouraged to pursue further studies at preferred universities both domestically and abroad. The implementation of a bilingual approach in madrasah learning provides positive impacts on students' understanding of religious teachings while enhancing their international language abilities (Hanifah et al., 2025). The integration of religious education and global competencies enables students to be better prepared to face modern world challenges without abandoning Islamic values. Cross-cultural communication skills become increasingly important in the era of globalization, which has significant impact on the world of work. In this context, many companies recognize that cross-cultural communication skills are key to facilitating effective interactions between workers from heterogeneous cultural backgrounds (Pariyanto et al., 2025). The phenomenon of increasing numbers of individuals migrating from one country to another further strengthens the urgency of developing cross-cultural communication skills in the educational domain.

5. Adaptive and Transformative Leadership

The success of pesantren modernization is highly dependent on visionary and adaptive leadership. The transformative leadership of kyai in developing Islamic educational modernization is demonstrated through the organization of Islamic religious education and teaching with a madrasah system alongside maintaining the sorogan system, opening general schools beside madrasahs, integrating religious and general knowledge, implementing multicultural education, and developing higher education (Muiz et al., 2024). Pesantren Modern Ibadurrahman implements visionary, democratic, paternalistic, and spiritual leadership styles that create an inclusive environment encouraging collaboration and innovation (Salim et al., 2025). Democratic leadership enables active participation in decision-making, while paternalistic leadership strengthens emotional bonds between kyai and staff, creating a harmonious working environment.

Additionally, the integration of spiritual leadership helps maintain balance between traditional religious values and modern educational needs (Salim et al., 2025). Adaptive leadership contributes significantly to the development of Islamic education management by balancing tradition and modernity through pedagogical innovation, integration of digital technology, and strengthening of students' soft skills (Mahmudi & Aimah, 2025). Practically speaking, the adoption of digital media, entrepreneurship through pesantren-based business units, and the establishment of pesantren economic cooperatives strengthen institutional autonomy while generating tangible benefits for community and alumni welfare.

6. The Ideal Model: Integration of Tradition and Modernization

Research findings affirm that moderate integration between tradition and modernization is regarded as an ideal model for producing a generation of Muslims who are moral, critical, digitally literate, and prepared to face global challenges (Siregar et al., 2026). Traditional pesantren emphasize character development through mastery of classical Islamic texts, intensity of worship, simplicity, discipline, and exemplary behavior of kyai, thereby producing students who are religious, humble, and deeply rooted in classical Islamic tradition (Siregar et al., 2026). On the other hand, modern pesantren implement an integrative approach that combines religious education, sciences, technology, foreign languages, and life skills so that students are more adaptive, communicative, and critical (Siregar et al., 2026). An educational model that combines moral toughness with global competence while maintaining Islamic identity offers an integrative framework relevant to modern challenges such as digital disruption and multiculturalism (Zahroh & Fahmi, 2025). Graduates of modern pesantren demonstrate strong religious, academic, and social competencies, and alumni actively contribute to society, higher education, and the workforce (Zakiah et al., 2025). This demonstrates that an appropriate integration model can produce graduates who are not only ethically competent but also professionally competent, offering a sustainable model for Islamic educational institutions in navigating modernization.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the study conducted, several important conclusions can be drawn as follows:

First, pesantren modernization is a strategic imperative in preparing globally competitive students in the era of international competition. This transformation encompasses curriculum reform, technology adoption, development of international networks, and strengthening of 21st-century competencies without eliminating pesantren's identity and core values. Second, effective strategies in realizing globally competitive students include: (1) integration of traditional diniyah curriculum with national and international curricula; (2) development of 4C competencies (critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, communication) plus digital literacy; (3) strengthening of foreign language skills and cross-cultural communication; (4) transformative and adaptive leadership; and (5) global alumni empowerment. Third, the ideal model of pesantren modernization is moderate integration that balances preservation of Islamic tradition with innovation in modern education. This model produces graduates who are morally strong, academically and professionally competent, digitally literate, and ready to contribute at the global level. Fourth, major challenges in pesantren modernization include limited technological infrastructure, resistance to change, and teacher capacity gaps. Collaboration

among pesantren, government, higher education institutions, and industry is needed to address these challenges.

The recommendations of this research are that pesantren should continue to strengthen the development of hybrid curricula that integrate religion, science, and technology; increase the integration of e-learning tools; promote pesantren-based economic initiatives; and strengthen alumni networks to support institutional growth and student career development sustainably.

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