

Aligning islamic education management with the sdgs: Institutional transformation, policy coherence, and value-based leadership

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how Islamic educational institutions align their governance, policy frameworks, and leadership practices with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), focusing particularly on institutional transformation and policy coherence. Using an interpretivist qualitative design, the research explores three contrasting Islamic educational settings—a pesantren-based higher education institution, a modern Islamic university, and an urban madrasah—to understand how global development principles are translated into locally grounded practices. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and observations of governance processes. The findings reveal that Islamic educational institutions possess strong ethical foundations that naturally support principles of sustainability, human dignity, and social responsibility. Alignment with the SDGs becomes effective when institutions reinterpret their core values within a global vocabulary rather than treating the SDGs as external obligations. Policy coherence emerges as a critical condition for meaningful progress, enabling institutions to move beyond fragmented initiatives toward integrated and strategic reform. Equally important is the presence of value-based leadership capable of balancing tradition with innovation, guiding institutions through cultural, administrative, and pedagogical transitions. Despite these strengths, challenges remain, including limited leadership capacity in some contexts, gaps in curriculum integration, and the need for improved monitoring systems. Nevertheless, the study concludes that Islamic educational institutions hold substantial potential to contribute to the SDGs through a governance approach that harmonises ethical heritage with contemporary developmental aims. Their engagement with the SDGs demonstrates how local educational traditions can enrich global aspirations for inclusive and sustainable education.

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Introduction

The global movement toward the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) has placed education at the centre of long-term human development, social equity, and institutional resilience. SDG 4, which calls for inclusive, equitable, and high-quality education, is often regarded as the gateway through which all other goals may be realised. In the Muslim world, Islamic educational institutions ranging from pesantren and madrasah to Islamic universities play a significant role in shaping social consciousness, ethical character, and intellectual growth (Khan & Haneef, 2022). Their influence extends beyond classroom

teaching: they function as community anchors, cultural transmitters, and agents of moral leadership. Against this backdrop, aligning Islamic education management with the SDGs is not merely a technical exercise of compliance with global frameworks; it is a strategic pathway for institutional transformation, policy coherence, and value-driven leadership (Muchtar & Billah, 2022).

Although Islamic education has historically promoted values such as justice, compassion, environmental stewardship, and collective welfare—ideals that echo many SDG principles—the alignment has rarely been operationalised within contemporary management and governance systems (Laldin & Djafri, 2021a). Many institutions remain anchored in traditional administrative structures that prioritise routine compliance and moral formation but do not yet integrate global development agendas into strategic planning, curriculum design, institutional evaluation, or community outreach. This creates a gap between the philosophical foundations of Islamic education and the managerial mechanisms that guide its operation (Harahap et al., 2023). The SDGs, meanwhile, offer a universal language of progress, measurable targets, and governance tools that can enhance institutional accountability and public trust. Bringing these frameworks together has the potential to elevate the global competitiveness and social impact of Islamic educational institutions.

The transformation towards SDG-aligned Islamic education requires a recalibration of institutional management. This involves not only adopting new systems and frameworks but also rethinking organisational culture, leadership identity, and policy direction (Abdullah, 2018). Institutional transformation can take many forms: digital innovation to widen learning access, financial sustainability mechanisms that reduce inequality, environmental initiatives rooted in Islamic ethics of stewardship, and curriculum renewal that bridges religious sciences with contemporary disciplines (Asdlori, 2023). Such transformations demand a governance ethos that is proactive rather than reactive, outward-looking rather than insular, and adaptive to the complex demands of the twenty-first century.

Policy coherence forms the second major pillar of alignment. Within many Islamic educational systems, policy tends to be fragmented across ministries, accreditation bodies, religious councils, and internal governance boards. A coherent policy framework ensures that institutional mission, national priorities, and SDG targets are not siloed but instead reinforce one another (Laldin & Djafri, 2021b). Coherence requires harmonising curriculum regulation, teacher development standards, financial governance, and community engagement strategies so that each contributes meaningfully to holistic educational outcomes. Furthermore, policy coherence strengthens an institution's ability to produce long-term planning, monitor progress, and evaluate impact using indicators recognised at both national and international levels (Prabawani et al., 2022). When Islamic educational institutions align their internal regulations with broader human-development frameworks, they achieve not only compliance but strategic clarity.

The third pillar, value-based leadership, is pivotal because leadership culture determines whether institutional transformation and policy coherence become sustainable realities or remain aspirational rhetoric. Islamic educational leadership has traditionally emphasised moral integrity, humility, and service to the community (Shofiyyah et al., 2023). These values remain essential, yet the contemporary landscape demands leaders who can also navigate global policy discourses, formulate evidence-based strategies, and cultivate organisational cultures that support innovation. Value-based leadership thus

becomes an expanded model—one that blends ethical and spiritual commitments with managerial competence, strategic foresight, and collaborative governance. Leaders who embody this dual orientation are better equipped to create institutions that remain faithful to Islamic values while engaging confidently with global development agendas (M.M, 2025).

Aligning Islamic education management with the SDGs also addresses a broader question of relevance. Education systems around the world are pressured to demonstrate not only their academic quality but also their contribution to national development, social justice, environmental resilience, and global citizenship. Islamic educational institutions must therefore articulate how their missions align with societal needs and international goals (Annur et al., 2022). By adopting SDG-aligned frameworks, these institutions can make visible their contributions in areas such as poverty reduction, gender equity, environmental protection, community empowerment, and ethical leadership. More importantly, this alignment reinforces the idea that Islamic education is not isolated from global realities but is an indispensable partner in shaping a just and sustainable world.

This article argues that successful alignment between Islamic education management and the SDGs requires integrated action across three fronts: institutional transformation, policy coherence, and value-based leadership. These three dimensions are interdependent. Without leadership that embodies both ethical values and strategic competence, transformation efforts lack direction (Prabawani et al., 2022). Without coherent policies, institutional change becomes inconsistent and fragmented. Without innovation and renewal, leadership remains symbolic rather than impactful. Together, these pillars create a holistic framework that enables Islamic educational institutions not only to meet the SDGs but also to revitalise their identity and mission in a rapidly changing world.

The following sections examine each of these pillars in depth, offering conceptual grounding, practical insights, and implications for the future of Islamic educational governance. The broader aim is to propose a model of alignment that strengthens institutional credibility, enhances social contribution, and preserves the distinctive ethical heritage of Islamic education—while simultaneously engaging with global frameworks that shape educational development today. In doing so, the article situates Islamic educational institutions as active participants in the global pursuit of sustainable development, capable of bridging tradition and modernity, spirituality and policy, local values and global aspirations.

Method

This study employs a qualitative research design crafted to understand how Islamic educational institutions interpret, negotiate, and implement alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The complexity of Islamic education—rooted in tradition, community trust, and moral-cultural expectations—demands an approach that captures meaning rather than measurement (Miles et al., 2014). A qualitative, interpretivist lens therefore offers the most appropriate route for uncovering the reasoning, tensions, and aspirations that shape institutional transformation, policy coherence, and leadership practices.

The research was conducted across three Islamic educational settings representing different organisational models and degrees of engagement with global policy frameworks.

These included a pesantren-based higher education institution, a modern Islamic university, and an urban madrasah integrated into the national curriculum system. Their differences provided a spectrum of perspectives, allowing the study to trace how varying institutional identities influence the process of alignment with the SDGs (Hacking, 2019). Participants were chosen purposively from among those who hold influential roles in governance and organisational direction, such as senior leaders, curriculum developers, policy officers, and members of quality assurance units. Their positions placed them at the heart of institutional decision-making and therefore offered insights into both strategic intentions and operational realities.

Data were gathered through extended conversations, document reading, and periods of direct observation. Semi-structured interviews were particularly valuable because they allowed participants to reflect on their experiences in their own words. These interviews explored how leaders understood the SDGs, how internal policies were constructed, and how they perceived the institution's capacity to transform (Drew, 2016). Institutional documents—strategic plans, accreditation reports, curriculum guidelines, and regulatory manuals—served as an essential counterpart to these conversations, revealing how ideals were translated into written commitments. Observations during meetings, curriculum reviews, and quality assurance discussions allowed the study to witness institutional culture in action, offering a sense of how values, authority, and decision-making intersected in daily practice (Achjar et al., 2023).

Analytical work proceeded through a sustained immersion in the data. Transcripts, documents, and field notes were examined repeatedly to identify emerging patterns and contradictions. Themes gradually formed around the three core concerns of this study: the nature of institutional transformation, the degree of policy coherence that framed institutional activities, and the quality of leadership that guided these processes. The analysis remained iterative, with interpretations constantly compared across different sources to ensure depth and credibility (Alaslan, 2022). This continual movement between voices, texts, and institutional contexts strengthened the reliability of the findings. Ethical considerations shaped the entire process. Given the close-knit nature of Islamic educational communities, confidentiality was treated as paramount. Institutions and individuals were anonymised, and sensitive governance details handled with discretion to preserve trust. This methodological approach establishes a strong foundation for understanding how Islamic educational institutions engage with the SDGs, not only as an administrative obligation but as a transformative journey shaped by values, leadership, and institutional identity.

Result

Institutional Transformation and the Changing Architecture of Islamic Educational Management

The findings from this study reveal that institutional transformation within Islamic educational settings is neither linear nor uniform. Instead, it manifests as a gradual reconfiguration of organisational norms, managerial practices, and educational priorities. This transformation is shaped by the interplay between internal institutional identities—rooted in long-standing religious traditions—and the external pressures introduced by national reform agendas and the global influence of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Desmaniar et al., 2022). Islamic educational institutions, whether traditional or modern in orientation, are increasingly required to exhibit forms of adaptability that challenge their conventional modes of operation. The result is a dynamic process in which institutions negotiate between the preservation of their educational

heritage and the pursuit of internationally recognised developmental commitments (Ebrahim et al., 2021).

A central dimension of this transformation is the restructuring of strategic planning. Historically, many Islamic educational institutions relied on informal planning mechanisms grounded in the authority of senior leaders and the continuity of tradition. Decision-making tended to be concentrated, with limited emphasis on long-term planning, performance indicators, or systematic evaluation (Saleh, 2022). In recent years, however, this pattern has begun to shift. Institutions participating in this study demonstrated a growing effort to formalise their strategic planning frameworks. Strategic documents increasingly articulate institutional missions in a more structured form, identify long-term development goals, and align organisational strategies with broader educational priorities such as inclusivity, community service, digital readiness, and environmental responsibility (Permatasari et al., 2021). Although the terminology of the SDGs is not always used explicitly, the underlying principles of improved access, gender sensitivity, sustainability, and quality enhancement are reflected in these planning documents. This imbrication of global development logic into institutional planning signals a more outward-looking orientation and a recognition that educational institutions must demonstrate measurable contributions to societal well-being.

Curriculum innovation represents another significant area of institutional transformation. The traditional curriculum in many Islamic institutions prioritises classical Islamic sciences, jurisprudence, theology, and ethical formation. These disciplines form the epistemological backbone of the institution and shape its identity (Marshall, 2018). Nonetheless, the findings indicate that many institutions are increasingly incorporating cross-disciplinary elements, integrating contemporary issues such as environmental awareness, social justice, technological literacy, and global citizenship. These additions are not intended to replace the traditional curriculum but to complement it by equipping students with the competencies required to navigate contemporary global realities (Sarif & Ismail, 2022). This approach reflects a belief among institutional leaders that Islamic education must prepare students not only as ethical individuals but also as contributors to broader societal progress. The process, however, has not been without challenges. Some educators expressed concerns about maintaining the integrity of the traditional curriculum, while others questioned whether global policy instruments should influence Islamic education. Institutions that successfully navigated these tensions achieved coherence by framing contemporary additions as extensions of long-standing Islamic principles such as justice, stewardship, and social responsibility. Thus, curriculum transformation becomes feasible when it is articulated within the institution's own value framework (Arifin et al., 2018).

Technological advancement also plays a decisive role in institutional transformation. As digital systems become increasingly indispensable, Islamic educational institutions have been compelled to adapt. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this process, forcing institutions to adopt online learning platforms, digital administrative systems, and new modes of academic delivery. The institutions in this study demonstrated varying degrees of digital readiness, yet all acknowledged that digitalisation has become essential for organisational sustainability and relevance (Anggraeni et al., 2023). Beyond mere adoption of technology, digital transformation fostered a cultural shift toward innovation and efficiency. Leaders emphasised that digital tools improved transparency in governance, expanded access to learning for students in remote areas, and enhanced monitoring and evaluation processes (Arruda Filho et al., 2019). Furthermore, digitally enabled learning environments supported inclusive education agendas—particularly in relation to students with limited mobility or socioeconomic constraints—thus indirectly aligning with the inclusive spirit of SDG 4.

Environmental consciousness emerged as an unexpected yet significant component of institutional transformation. Although environmental stewardship has deep roots in Islamic ethical teachings, its integration into institutional management and student activities has only recently gained momentum. The findings show that institutions introduced initiatives such as waste segregation campaigns, tree-planting activities, energy-saving measures, and sustainable campus

planning (Sanchez-Carrillo et al., 2021). These efforts, although modest in scale, signify the emergence of sustainability as a governance concern rather than merely an extracurricular activity. Leaders noted that environmental initiatives provided opportunities to integrate religious values with contemporary global concerns, reinforcing the idea that Islamic ethics and sustainability are not contradictory but mutually supportive. Despite these advancements, the research identifies notable barriers that slow the pace of transformation. Financial constraints remain among the most significant challenges, particularly in institutions with limited external funding (Rant, 2020). Digitalisation, curriculum reform, and infrastructural improvement require substantial investment—resources that many Islamic educational institutions struggle to secure. Human resource limitations also impede transformation (A'la & Makhshun, 2022). The study found that some educators lacked the expertise required to implement new curricula or engaged hesitantly with digital technologies. Institutional cultures shaped by hierarchy and long-standing traditions sometimes resisted change, with some staff members perceiving transformation initiatives as external impositions.

Nevertheless, the overall trajectory of change suggests that Islamic educational institutions are increasingly moving toward structured reform. Transformation is driven partly by external pressures—national accreditation requirements, government regulations, and global development discourses—but also by internal motivations. Leaders recognise that preserving institutional relevance requires a proactive approach to change (Alamsyah et al., 2023). The institutions that achieved the most substantial transformation tended to adopt a hybrid strategy: maintaining fidelity to religious values while embracing contemporary educational norms that improve quality, equity, and sustainability.

In summary, institutional transformation within Islamic educational settings is a multidimensional and evolving process. It encompasses strategic planning reforms, curriculum innovation, digital integration, and environmental engagement. These developments reflect growing efforts to align institutional practices with broader societal goals, including those emphasised within the global SDG agenda. Although challenges persist, the findings illustrate that Islamic educational institutions possess the capacity to transform in ways that honour their heritage while responding constructively to global educational demands. This capacity positions them as potential contributors to national and international development initiatives, provided that transformation continues to be supported by effective leadership, adequate resources, and coherent policy direction.

Policy Coherence, Ethical Alignment, and the Emergence of Value-Based Leadership

Institutional transformation within Islamic educational settings that seek alignment with the SDGs often encounters the complex interplay of overlapping policies, expectations, and cultural legacies. Many schools and pesantren operate rather like an orchestra in which each section performs a beautiful piece of its own, yet the overall harmony is not always achieved. Policy coherence, in this sense, becomes the art of arranging these dispersed notes into a unified composition. Islamic educational institutions typically stand at the crossroads of state regulation, community demands, religious authority, and internal aspirations—an environment where achieving policy alignment is both a technical and a moral undertaking (Ghasemy et al., 2022). The first task lies in reading the SDGs not as a distant global checklist, but as a structural framework capable of being translated into the institutional vocabulary of Islamic education. This requires a systematic review of policy documents, strategic plans, curriculum frameworks, teacher development policies, standard operating procedures, and administrative guidelines—to assess their clarity and alignment across four dimensions: purpose, strategy, implementation, and embedded values (Leal Filho et al., 2020). When these documents lack coherence, the SDGs easily become empty slogans. Yet, once they are revisited, revised, and mapped against institutional realities, fresh connections emerge between global targets and the distinctive ethos of Islamic education.

Policy coherence, however, cannot stand on its own without a form of leadership grounded in ethical commitment. In many Islamic educational institutions, school principals, headmasters, or pesantren leaders carry dual responsibilities: the administrative mandate and the moral guardianship of the institution's soul (Tomasella et al., 2022). Their function extends far beyond signing official papers or producing annual reports; they serve as the interpretive conduit through which the SDGs acquire meaning in daily educational practice. This is where value-based leadership finds its deepest expression. Value-based leaders do not govern through rigid commands; they cultivate transformation through personal example, sustained dialogue, and the ability to translate global ideas into culturally resonant forms. When SDG 4—quality, inclusive, and lifelong education—is brought into the teachers' meeting room, it no longer appears as a UN slogan. It becomes a conversation about humanising classroom environments, embracing student diversity, supporting teachers' professional growth, and managing resources sustainably (Kioupi & Voulvoulis, 2019). Under such leadership, the SDGs function less as targets and more as ethical lenses through which decisions are made.

As institutions move deeper into transformation, structural tensions inevitably surface. Reform rarely unfolds in a straight line. Teachers may fear increased workloads, administrators may worry that innovation threatens the stability of tradition, and stakeholders often disagree on priorities. This is precisely where wise leadership becomes indispensable. Leaders who are grounded in ethical clarity do not dismiss tradition; instead, they reinterpret it so that it continues to breathe within modern contexts (Avelar et al., 2019). They seek bridges between pesantren heritage—discipline, moral integrity, communal responsibility—and SDG imperatives such as gender equity, inclusivity, and environmental stewardship.

Ultimately, this second section emphasises that transformation in Islamic education rests on two intertwined forces: the ability to build coherent policies and the presence of leaders who anchor institutional change in shared values. When these forces converge, institutions do more than comply with global agendas; they contribute moral depth, cultural distinctiveness, and educational vitality to the global landscape. The journey toward aligning Islamic education with the SDGs therefore becomes not a process of imitation, but a meaningful act of institutional re-imagining that enriches both local identity and global progress.

Discussion

The findings reveal that Islamic educational institutions engaging with the SDGs are navigating a terrain that is both promising and demanding. The transformation described in the results sections illustrates that alignment with SDG principles is neither a simple technical adjustment nor a superficial policy exercise. It is, instead, a multi-layered cultural process that requires institutions to rethink their governance structures, recalibrate their priorities, and reinterpret their core values within a global frame of reference (Bruns et al., 2019). A central insight emerging from the study is that Islamically grounded educational environments possess a unique advantage: they already operate within a value-rich tradition. This means the moral infrastructure necessary for sustainable development—ethics, social responsibility, human dignity, and communal welfare—is deeply embedded within their institutional memory. The challenge, therefore, is not the absence of values but the translation of these values into operational governance frameworks that resonate with the SDGs. The results show that institutions succeed when they treat SDG alignment not as an external imposition but as an opportunity to revitalise their educational missions (Iqbal & Piwowar-Sulej, 2021).

Policy coherence emerges as a decisive element of this journey. Without coherent policies, institutions tend to scatter their efforts across isolated initiatives that lack strategic continuity. The study shows that coherent policies provide a sense of direction, reduce internal contradictions, and create a stable foundation for long-term sustainability. Yet coherence does not simply mean uniformity. It requires institutions to navigate tensions between national education policies, internal aspirations, and religious mandates. Where leaders are capable of balancing these layers,

transformation occurs more naturally (Kioupi & Voulvoulis, 2020). Leadership, therefore, is the axis on which institutional transformation turns. Leaders who are value-based those who express alignment between ethical principles and managerial decisions become catalysts for integrating global frameworks with local educational cultures. They act as translators who bridge traditional educational philosophy with contemporary development priorities. The results demonstrate that such leaders play a pivotal role in shaping organisational behaviour, facilitating teacher engagement, and reducing resistance to change. Their influence is particularly visible when they frame the SDGs not as bureaucratic obligations but as meaningful expressions of Islamic educational purpose (Mori Junior et al., 2019).

While the findings point towards strong potential, several vulnerabilities also come to light. First, institutions that lack policy clarity or leadership continuity often struggle to maintain momentum. Second, while many stakeholders agree in principle with SDG values, operationalising these values requires investment in training, monitoring systems, and resource planning—areas where institutions may still be limited (Alcántara-Rubio et al., 2022). Third, tensions between tradition and innovation can slow progress when not managed with cultural sensitivity. Taken together, the study suggests that successful SDG alignment in Islamic educational institutions depends on sustained coherence between governance, culture, policy, and values. Rather than treating the SDGs as merely external benchmarks, institutions benefit most when they use them as reflective tools—mirrors that help them identify gaps, reaffirm strengths, and articulate future ambitions. The interplay between global frameworks and Islamic educational values thus becomes a productive dialogue rather than a site of conflict. The table below summarises the key areas of alignment identified in the study, capturing both institutional progress and remaining challenges.

Table 1. Alignment Between Institutional Practice and SDG-Oriented Educational Governance

Dimension	Current Institutional Strengths	Emerging Challenges
Governance Structure	Strong moral foundations; clear hierarchy of authority	Limited integration of SDG indicators in planning documents
Leadership Approach	Presence of value-based leaders with moral legitimacy	Variability in leadership capacity across institutions
Curriculum and Pedagogy	Religious values support inclusion, dignity, and community learning	Curriculum not always mapped to SDG competencies

The discussion ultimately demonstrates that aligning Islamic education management with the SDGs is neither a shift in identity nor a departure from tradition. Instead, it is a process of re-articulating long-standing values within a global vocabulary. When institutions treat the SDGs as complementary to their educational mission, they become active contributors to a universal agenda while retaining their distinct character. This convergence of tradition and global aspiration offers a promising path for Islamic educational institutions aiming to shape ethical, resilient, and future-oriented learning environments.

Conclusion

The study demonstrates that aligning Islamic education management with the Sustainable Development Goals is both feasible and deeply compatible with the ethical foundations of Islamic educational traditions. Rather than requiring institutions to abandon their identity, the SDGs provide a structured framework through which schools and pesantren can strengthen their governance, modernise their policy systems, and articulate their long-standing values in globally recognisable terms. The findings reveal that the most effective transformation occurs when institutions approach SDG alignment as a culturally grounded process—one that reinterprets global aspirations through the moral vocabulary of Islamic education.

Two elements emerge as decisive in this journey. First, policy coherence enables institutions to move beyond fragmented initiatives and towards a more integrated, strategic approach to sustainable development. Coherent policies help clarify purpose, streamline implementation, and minimise internal contradictions. Second, value-based leadership acts as the engine of cultural and organisational change. Leaders who embody ethical consistency and demonstrate a deep understanding of both tradition and contemporary challenges are uniquely positioned to translate the SDGs into meaningful institutional practices. The analysis also highlights several vulnerabilities, including variability in leadership capacity, limited integration of sustainability competencies within curricula, and the need for more robust monitoring frameworks. These challenges do not undermine the viability of SDG alignment; instead, they emphasise the importance of investment in capacity-building, community engagement, and infrastructural development.

Overall, the study concludes that Islamic educational institutions possess significant potential to contribute to the SDGs through their strong ethical heritage, communal orientation, and commitment to human development. When governance, policy, and leadership work in concert, these institutions can become models of value-driven transformation—demonstrating how local educational traditions can enrich global developmental efforts. The alignment between Islamic education and the SDGs thus emerges not as a compromise, but as a constructive synthesis that strengthens institutional purpose and enhances the quality of education for future generations.

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