



An Autoethnographic Narrative of Institutional Resilience: Ma'had Aly Nurul Qodim within the National Education System

Imro Atus Soliha¹ , Abdul Haris² , Ulil Hidayah³ ,
Benny Prasetya⁴ , Sohirin Mohammad Solihin⁵

¹Universitas Muhammadiyah Malang, Indonesia

²Universitas Muhammadiyah Malang, Indonesia

³Institut Ahmad Dahlan Probolinggo, Indonesia

⁴Institut Ahmad Dahlan Probolinggo, Indonesia

⁵International Islamic University Malaysia, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

Background. This study examines the institutional resilience of *Ma'had Aly Nurul Qodim* as a form of pesantren-based higher education amid inconsistencies within Indonesia's national education system. Despite receiving formal legal recognition, *Ma'had Aly* continues to face significant challenges related to administrative legitimacy, accreditation, and limited affirmative state support.

Purpose. This study aims to analyze how *Ma'had Aly Nurul Qodim* maintains institutional resilience while navigating structural constraints within the national higher education system.

Methods. This research employed a qualitative case study approach combined with autoethnographic techniques. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with institutional leaders, lecturers, and students, supported by direct observation and document analysis. Data were analyzed using thematic qualitative procedures to identify patterns of institutional resilience and adaptation.

Results. The findings reveal that *Ma'had Aly Nurul Qodim* sustains its institutional resilience through adaptive governance, human resource development, institutional innovation, and strategic use of technology. This resilience is influenced not only by external policy environments but also by internal cultural resources such as collective ethos, social capital, and service-oriented values. However, structural limitations remain, including restricted access to state funding and incomplete integration into the national higher education system, which may affect long-term sustainability.

Conclusions. The study concludes that institutional resilience in *Ma'had Aly* is shaped by the interaction between internal cultural strength and external policy constraints. It contributes to the discourse on higher education resilience by offering insights into how community-based institutions negotiate structural challenges while preserving their epistemological identity.

Citation: Soliha, A. I., Haris, A., Hidayah, U., Prasetya, B., & Solihin, M. S. (2026). An Autoethnographic Narrative of Institutional Resilience: Ma'had Aly Nurul Qodim within the National Education System. *International Journal of Educational Narrative*, 4(2), 716–729.
<https://doi.org/10.70177/ijen.v4i2.3575>

Correspondence:

Imro Atus Soliha,
imroatussoliha214@gmail.com

Received: November 03, 2025

Accepted: March 15, 2026

Published: April 30, 2026

KEYWORDS

Affirmative Education Policy, Institutional Resilience, Islamic Higher Education, *Ma'had Aly* Institutions, Pesantren-based Higher Education

INTRODUCTION

Across many parts of the world, higher education systems are increasingly challenged to accommodate diverse institutional models that emerge from local cultural



and religious traditions while simultaneously meeting standardized national governance frameworks. This tension is particularly evident in Indonesia, where pesantren-based higher education institutions such as *Ma'had Aly* occupy a distinctive yet often marginalized position within the national higher education system. As an indigenous model of Islamic higher learning rooted in the pesantren tradition, *Ma'had Aly* represents not only an educational institution but also an epistemic community committed to preserving and transmitting classical Islamic scholarship (*turats*) through culturally embedded pedagogical practices (Isbah, 2020).

Ma'had Aly represents a distinctive form of Islamic higher education rooted in the pesantren tradition, occupying a unique position within Indonesia's national education landscape. Genealogically, Ma'had Aly emerged from the womb of *salaf* pesantren, which for centuries have played a central role in transmitting the classical Islamic scholarly tradition (*turats*) across the archipelago. Its establishment was a strategic response to the urgent need for regenerating authoritative scholars (*ulama*) figures not only deeply versed in the intellectual treasures of the *turats* but also capable of addressing contemporary challenges faced by the Muslim community through a profound and contextually relevant Islamic methodological framework (Dian, 2022; Zarkasyi, 2020).

The origins of Ma'had Aly can be traced to concerns among pesantren kiai over the post-New Order crisis of religious scholarship, as waves of modernization and the formalization of education increasingly overshadowed and eroded the pesantren's traditional model of scholarly formation. During the *Musyawahar Nasional Alim Ulama* (National Congress of Islamic Scholars) held at Pondok Pesantren Cipasung in 1994, a strong aspiration emerged from the pesantren community for the state to formally recognize the *turats*-based pathway for the education of future Islamic scholars. This aspiration was later followed up by the Directorate of Diniyah Education and Islamic Boarding Schools under the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs, which initiated the pilot establishment of Ma'had Aly in several pesantren across Indonesia beginning in 2006. The pioneering institutions included Maslakul Huda, Al-Tarmasi, Lirboyo, Dar al-Tauhid Arjawinangun, Darussalam, and Al-Munawwir Krapyak (Kementerian Agama Republik Indonesia, 2019; Zuhdi, 2022).

Unlike madrasah or other Islamic higher education institutions, Ma'had Aly places strong emphasis on the transmission of knowledge through *sanad* (chains of scholarly authority), the internalization of values through service (*khidmah*), and direct mastery of classical texts via traditional methods such as *sorogan* and *bandongan*. Nevertheless, Ma'had Aly has also been directed to integrate into the modern higher education system through structured academic levels, standardized curricula, and institutional management systems. This positions Ma'had Aly between two epistemic worlds tradition and modernity requiring a complex methodological synthesis. This dual institutional demand requires not only curricular adaptation but also institutional resilience, particularly in balancing traditional epistemic authority with contemporary regulatory expectations.

From a legal perspective, the existence of Ma'had Aly is reinforced by Law Number 18 of 2019 on Pesantren. Article 10 paragraph (2) stipulates that pesantren are authorized to provide higher education in the form of Ma'had Aly. This legal recognition symbolically positions Ma'had Aly on an equal footing with other higher education institutions, including *Perguruan Tinggi Keagamaan Islam Negeri* (State Islamic Higher Education Institutions, PTKIN) and private universities. However, the primary issue does not lie in its normative legitimacy. This indicates that legal recognition alone is insufficient without supportive administrative and policy mechanisms, but rather in the technical implementation of policies, which has not yet fully aligned with the specific

needs and distinctive characteristics of *Ma'had Aly* as a pesantren-based higher education institution (Maskuri, 2024a).

The first challenge concerns institutional legitimacy in administrative terms. Many *Ma'had Aly* institutions are not yet integrated into Indonesia's Higher Education Database (*Pangkalan Data Pendidikan Tinggi* [PDDikti]) because they fall outside the higher education management framework under the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology. Consequently, graduates of *Ma'had Aly* face significant obstacles in diploma recognition, civil service registration, and other forms of academic mobility (Misbakhudin, 2024). This reflects a systemic gap between the state's regulatory structure and community-based institutional models such as pesantren (Maskuri, 2024a).

The second challenge concerns institutional accreditation. Most accreditation standards applied by the National Accreditation Board for Higher Education (BAN-PT) and the Institute for Education Accreditation (LAMDIK) remain oriented toward modern university parameters, including the proportion of doctoral-level faculty, international publications, digital-based information systems, and standardized models of institutional governance. In contrast, *Ma'had Aly* prioritizes substantive qualities rooted in the moral authority of the *kiai*, mastery of *turats*, and the continuity of scholarly *sanad*. This epistemological mismatch often renders *Ma'had Aly* incompatible with formal accreditation frameworks, leaving it administratively marginalized despite its high academic quality (Zarkasyi, 2020).

The third challenge involves the lack of affirmative state policies. Unlike *PTKIN* or private universities, *Ma'had Aly* receives minimal financial support. Programs such as School Operational Assistance (BOS), State Higher Education Operational Assistance (BOPTN), or research and human resource development grants are either unavailable or inaccessible to pesantren-based higher education institutions. As a result, *Ma'had Aly* largely operates on a self-sustaining basis and remains vulnerable to institutional stagnation. Yet, realizing a superior model of Islamic higher education rooted in tradition requires sustained and affirmative state investment (Ali, 2019; Rohman, 2022).

In this context, *Ma'had Aly Nurul Qodim* serves as a concrete example of a pesantren striving to transform itself into an authentic yet adaptive institution of Islamic higher education, making it a particularly relevant case for examining how pesantren-based institutions negotiate structural constraints. Anchored in a strong *salaf* pesantren tradition, *Ma'had Aly Nurul Qodim* has remained consistent in cultivating classical Islamic scholarship while simultaneously pursuing institutional transformation toward national higher education standards. Nevertheless, such achievements do not come without obstacles. From limited resources and the absence of access to national data systems, to inadequate incentives for research and faculty training, *Ma'had Aly Nurul Qodim* operates within a framework far from ideal. Without such analysis, the broader integration of *Ma'had Aly* into Indonesia's higher education system remains poorly understood.

Unfortunately, academic studies examining the relational dynamics between *Ma'had Aly* and state policies within the framework of the national higher education system remain limited. Existing studies have primarily emphasized pedagogical and curricular dimensions, while overlooking how institutional resilience is shaped by external policy environments and administrative exclusion. Most existing research tends to focus on curriculum development, instructional systems, or the advancement of scholarly traditions within *Ma'had Aly*, without sufficiently addressing the policy dimension and its integration into the broader national education system. Several studies, for instance, emphasize the development of *kitab kuning*-based curricula and the dynamics of educational practices in pesantren that administer *Ma'had Aly* (Zulkhairi, T., & Muzakir,

2020;Tajussubki, 2021). This condition indicates a significant gap in the literature, particularly concerning the technocratic and structural dimensions that influence the integration of *Ma'had Aly* into the national higher education system. It is precisely this academic gap that the present study seeks to address by empirically examining the concrete forms of policy-related challenges faced by *Ma'had Aly* at the institutional level.

Beyond identifying policy-related challenges, the present study seeks to advance current discussions on pesantren-based higher education by examining how Ma'had Aly responds to structural constraints through institutional resilience and adaptive strategies. Existing studies have largely focused on curriculum development, learning traditions, and the preservation of classical Islamic scholarship within Ma'had Aly, while relatively little attention has been given to how these institutions negotiate regulatory pressures, accreditation requirements, and limited policy support within the national higher education system. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the interplay between institutional legitimacy, accreditation adaptation, and state affirmation in shaping the resilience of Ma'had Aly Nurul Qodim. The novelty of this research lies in its integration of policy analysis and institutional resilience perspectives to explain how a pesantren-based higher education institution maintains its epistemological identity while simultaneously adapting to contemporary higher education demands.

This study aims to examine how Ma'had Aly Nurul Qodim responds to institutional challenges related to legitimacy, accreditation, and policy marginalization. Specifically, this study addresses two questions: (1) How does Ma'had Aly Nurul Qodim navigate structural challenges within Indonesia's higher education system? (2) What forms of institutional resilience enable its sustainability? The study contributes to the growing literature on institutional resilience by extending the concept to pesantren-based higher education institutions.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative case study approach, with Ma'had Aly Nurul Qodim selected as the focal case for examining how a pesantren-based higher education institution navigates structural challenges within Indonesia's national higher education system. A case study design was chosen because it enables an in-depth exploration of institutional dynamics within their real-life context (Yin, 2014). Although the study focuses on a single institution, the findings are intended to provide analytical insights relevant to other pesantren-based higher education institutions facing similar institutional constraints.

In addition to the case study design, this research incorporated autoethnographic techniques to enrich contextual understanding. The researcher holds an insider position within the pesantren environment and has long-term academic and social involvement in Ma'had Aly Nurul Qodim. This positionality provided privileged access to institutional practices, informal interactions, and internal cultural meanings that may not be readily accessible to external researchers. At the same time, to minimize subjective bias, the researcher employed reflexive journaling throughout the research process, maintained analytic memos, and engaged in peer debriefing with academic colleagues to critically examine emerging interpretations and ensure greater analytical rigor.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure the inclusion of individuals who possessed direct knowledge and experience regarding the institutional development of Ma'had Aly Nurul Qodim. A total of 15 participants were involved in the study, consisting of 3 institutional leaders, 5 lecturers, 5 students, and 2 officials from the Ministry of Religious Affairs who were directly engaged with policies related to Ma'had Aly. Selection criteria included a minimum of three years of involvement with the institution for leaders and lecturers, active enrollment for

students, and direct professional responsibility for policy implementation among government officials. This diversity of participants enabled the study to capture multiple perspectives on issues of institutional legitimacy, accreditation, and state support.

To strengthen data triangulation, interviews were complemented by direct observation and document analysis. The interview protocol was organized around three major themes: (1) institutional legitimacy and recognition within the national higher education system, (2) experiences and challenges related to accreditation and quality assurance processes, and (3) perceptions of state support and policy affirmation toward Ma'had Aly. Prior to data collection, the interview guide was reviewed by two scholars specializing in Islamic education to ensure content relevance and clarity. Follow-up probing questions were employed to explore emerging issues and obtain richer contextual explanations from participants.

To strengthen data triangulation, interviews were complemented by direct observation and document analysis. Observations were conducted over a four-month period and focused on teaching and learning activities, institutional meetings, academic discussions, student–lecturer interactions, and selected administrative processes. Observational data were systematically recorded using structured field-note templates that documented setting descriptions, participant interactions, institutional practices, and reflective observations. Documentary sources included curriculum documents, institutional decrees, accreditation materials, internal policy documents, and official government regulations related to Ma'had Aly. In addition, ongoing institutional developments were monitored through internal communication platforms, particularly WhatsApp discussion groups, which served as important informal spaces for discussing institutional development, modernization initiatives, and policy recognition. All observational records and documentary materials were subsequently coded alongside interview transcripts to facilitate triangulation, strengthen data credibility, and support the thematic analysis process.

Data were analyzed using the interactive qualitative analysis model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and (Miles, 2014). The coding process was conducted in three stages. First, open coding was used to identify meaningful units of information from interview transcripts, field notes, and institutional documents. Second, axial coding was employed to connect related categories and explore patterns among emerging themes. Finally, selective coding was undertaken to integrate the findings into broader analytical themes concerning legitimacy, accreditation adaptation, institutional resilience, and state affirmation. To enhance analytical trustworthiness, coding decisions and thematic interpretations were periodically reviewed through peer debriefing sessions with colleagues experienced in qualitative educational research.

To ensure trustworthiness, the study applied several validation strategies, including data triangulation, member checking, and peer debriefing. Preliminary interpretations were shared with selected participants to verify the accuracy of the findings and reduce the risk of researcher misinterpretation. Furthermore, triangulation across interviews, observations, and documentary sources strengthened the credibility and dependability of the results.

Ethical considerations were carefully observed throughout the study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection, participant anonymity and confidentiality were maintained, and the researcher remained attentive to cultural sensitivities and ethical norms within the pesantren environment.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Legitimacy of *Ma'had Aly* in the National Education System: Regulatory Inconsistencies and Structural Implications

From a juridical perspective, the position of *Ma'had Aly* has gained strong legitimacy through Law No. 18 of 2019 on Pesantren. However, structurally and administratively, this recognition has not been fully implemented. This is reflected in the absence of a unified mechanism that integrates the national higher education system with pesantren-based institutional models. Such disconnection creates a domino effect, ranging from the non-recognition of diplomas for administrative purposes (e.g., civil servant recruitment), limited access to national scholarships, to the inability to participate in tracer studies or academic achievement recognition programs.

Studies by Misbakhudin (2024) highlight that the core issue does not lie within *Ma'had Aly* as an institution, but rather in the absence of a bridging system that accommodates differentiated models of higher education. The findings of the present study support this argument; however, they further reveal that the consequences of such regulatory inconsistency extend beyond administrative limitations. In the case of *Ma'had Aly Nurul Qodim*, the lack of institutional integration also affects academic mobility, graduate recognition, and broader participation in the national higher education ecosystem.

In the case of *Ma'had Aly Nurul Qodim*, these challenges manifest in the uncertain legal standing of its graduates in the eyes of formal institutions. This situation persists despite its achievement of “*Mumtaz*” (A) accreditation, which demonstrates that the institution has met high academic standards. Such findings indicate that formal legality does not necessarily reflect substantive quality.

Furthermore, the position of *Ma'had Aly* outside the conventional higher education framework should not necessarily be interpreted as institutional marginalization. Rather, it reflects the distinctive historical, cultural, and epistemological foundations of pesantren-based higher education. Unlike modern universities that primarily emphasize bureaucratic and managerial standards, *Ma'had Aly* is rooted in the transmission of Islamic scholarship through sanad, mastery of classical Islamic texts (*turats*), and the moral authority of religious scholars (*kiai*). These characteristics constitute a unique academic tradition that contributes significantly to the preservation and development of Islamic intellectual heritage in Indonesia (Isbah, 2020; Lukens-Bull, 2021).

This perspective suggests that the integration of *Ma'had Aly* into the national higher education system should not be pursued through uniform institutional standards alone. Contemporary studies on pesantren transformation emphasize the importance of recognizing institutional diversity and accommodating alternative models of higher education that emerge from local socio-religious traditions (Isbah, 2020; Maskuri, 2024b). Therefore, policy frameworks should move beyond administrative standardization and adopt recognition mechanisms that acknowledge the distinctive educational philosophy, governance structure, and scholarly traditions of pesantren-based institutions.

The present findings extend previous discussions on *Ma'had Aly* that primarily focus on regulatory implementation and institutional recognition (Maskuri, 2024a; Misbakhudin et al., 2024). While earlier studies generally portray legitimacy challenges as administrative and policy-related issues, this study demonstrates that the problem is also epistemological in nature. The case of *Ma'had Aly Nurul Qodim* reveals that institutional legitimacy is not merely constrained by the absence of regulatory mechanisms but also by the limited recognition of pesantren-based knowledge traditions within the national higher education framework. This finding suggests that the

integration of Ma'had Aly requires more than administrative accommodation; it also necessitates recognition of alternative forms of academic authority, scholarly transmission, and educational quality. In this regard, the study contributes to the growing literature on Islamic higher education by highlighting legitimacy as a multidimensional issue that encompasses legal, institutional, and epistemological dimensions.

Consequently, the challenge of Ma'had Aly's legitimacy extends beyond administrative harmonization and reflects a broader tension between standardized state regulations and community-based educational traditions. A more inclusive policy approach is therefore required, one that balances regulatory accountability with respect for institutional diversity. Such an approach would enable Ma'had Aly to gain not only formal recognition but also substantive support as an integral component of Indonesia's higher education system (Lukens-Bull, 2021; Maskuri, 2024a).

Adaptation Amid Paradigmatic Differences

Ma'had Aly Nurul Qodim successfully achieved an “*Mumtaz*” (A) accreditation rating an accomplishment that reflects significant progress in the institutionalization of *Ma'had Aly* as part of an alternative higher education system in Indonesia. This achievement was the result of a long process that involved adjustments to various institutional documents, including the development of quality standards, curriculum design, learning evaluation systems, and graduate profiles aligned with national regulations, while at the same time retaining the distinctive characteristics of pesantren's scholarly tradition.

Nevertheless, challenges emerged in the adaptation process, particularly concerning the incompatibility of conventional accreditation indicators with the unique features of *Ma'had Aly* (Ali, 2019). Certain standards such as the ratio of doctoral-qualified faculty, the requirement for internationally indexed publications, and modern governance systems cannot be straightforwardly applied to a pesantren-based educational context that prioritizes the study of *kutub al-turats* (classical Islamic texts).

To address these challenges, *Ma'had Aly Nurul Qodim* adopted a number of adaptive and innovative strategies. Among them was the invitation of visiting lecturers from both state and private Islamic higher education institutions (*PTKI*) to strengthen teaching capacity and meet certain academic requirements in the accreditation process. In addition, regular quality improvement programs were introduced, including training in research methodology, scientific discussion forums, and workshops on academic writing all of which aimed to foster an academic culture aligned with national higher education standards (Hasan, 2022).

Institutional networking has also become a crucial strategy. *Ma'had Aly Nurul Qodim* established partnerships with other *Ma'had Aly*, pesantren, and academic institutions to collaboratively develop curricula, enhance human resource quality, and carry out joint academic activities.

The adaptive strategies adopted by *Ma'had Aly Nurul Qodim* also reveal an important dimension that has received limited attention in previous studies. While earlier research commonly focuses on curriculum development and the preservation of pesantren traditions, the findings of this study indicate that accreditation functions not merely as an external quality assurance mechanism but also as a catalyst for institutional learning and organizational transformation. Through the accreditation process, the institution was encouraged to strengthen governance structures, improve academic quality assurance systems, and expand scholarly networks. Consequently, accreditation should not be viewed solely as a regulatory requirement but as a strategic instrument for enhancing institutional capacity within pesantren-based higher education.

More profoundly, this achievement reflects the capacity of pesantren to transform traditional values into instruments of institutional strengthening. This transformation demonstrates the ability of pesantren to integrate the legacy of classical Islamic scholarship (*turats*) with the demands of modernity in curriculum development. This finding supports previous studies that emphasize the importance of integrating the pesantren intellectual tradition with modern educational approaches (Tan, 2019; Hidayat, 2022). However, the experience of Ma'had Aly Nurul Qodim demonstrates that such integration is not limited to curriculum reform alone. Rather, it involves a broader process of institutional transformation encompassing accreditation management, organizational governance, academic culture, and knowledge production. This suggests that adaptation within pesantren-based higher education should be understood as a multidimensional process that extends beyond pedagogical innovation.

In addition, the use of digital technology through online learning platforms and internal learning management systems has been implemented as part of the institution's adaptation to the growing role of information technology in education. This demonstrates that pesantren do not reject technology but instead strive to manage and utilize it selectively and ethically. Such an approach aligns with Madjid (2022) concept of "dynamic tradition-based education," which argues that pesantren must remain rooted in their traditional values while creatively responding to contemporary realities.

Unlike previous studies that primarily discuss the challenges faced by pesantren in adapting to modern educational systems, this study demonstrates that adaptation can generate new forms of institutional strength without diminishing traditional scholarly identity. The findings show that Ma'had Aly is capable of selectively adopting national higher education standards while preserving its epistemological foundations rooted in *turats*, *sanad*, and pesantren values. This contributes to the growing literature on Islamic higher education by highlighting the possibility of a hybrid institutional model in which traditional and modern knowledge systems coexist and mutually reinforce one another. Such a model challenges the assumption that modernization necessarily leads to the erosion of traditional educational identities.

Thus, the adaptive and transformative approaches undertaken by *Ma'had Aly Nurul Qodim* not only demonstrate institutional capacity in meeting national accreditation requirements but also highlight its contribution to enriching and reshaping the paradigm of Islamic higher education in Indonesia. This process further illustrates that pesantren possess strong epistemological vitality and institutional resilience to serve as credible and relevant actors in modern higher education.

Limited State Affirmation: Between Expectations and Reality

One of the key findings from the field study on the institutional dynamics of *Ma'had Aly* is the limited level of state affirmation in the form of policy and financial support. Unlike state and private Islamic higher education institutions (*PTKI*), which regularly receive budget allocations from the government such as School Operational Assistance (*BOS*), State Higher Education Operational Assistance (*BOPTN*), or grants for research and community engagement *Ma'had Aly Nurul Qodim* carries out all of its academic and managerial activities independently, relying primarily on support from its managing foundation and the wider pesantren community.

This disparity in state support not only creates difficulties in sustaining academic programs but also slows down the process of institutional strengthening in areas such as infrastructure development, human resource capacity building, and the advancement of research and academic publication (Rohman, 2022). In the long run, this situation may undermine the competitiveness of

Ma'had Aly as a higher education institution, especially in responding to increasingly complex contemporary demands.

The state's limited affirmation toward *Ma'had Aly* demonstrates the lack of alignment in Indonesia's religious higher education policy, particularly in integrating pesantren-based institutions into the national education system on an equal and just footing. In reality, the existence of *Ma'had Aly* including *Ma'had Aly Nurul Qodim* has contributed significantly to society in social, religious, and cultural domains.

Through its specialized (*takhassus*) program in Qur'anic exegesis (*tafsir*), for example, *Ma'had Aly Nurul Qodim* not only produces competent cadres of scholars with expertise in Qur'anic sciences but also plays the role of a social transformation agent within the community, promoting a moderate, contextual, and locally rooted approach to Islamic da'wah (Qomaruzzaman, 2019).

The findings of this study suggest that the consequences of limited state affirmation extend beyond financial constraints. While previous studies generally emphasize funding shortages and institutional inequality within Islamic education (Rohman, 2022), the present research reveals that insufficient policy support also affects institutional visibility, academic mobility, and long-term sustainability. In the case of *Ma'had Aly Nurul Qodim*, the absence of comprehensive policy recognition restricts opportunities for broader academic engagement despite the institution's demonstrated contribution to religious scholarship and community development. This indicates that state affirmation should be understood not merely as financial assistance, but as a mechanism for ensuring equitable participation within the national higher education ecosystem.

On the other hand, the emergence of *Ma'had Aly* can be interpreted as a tangible articulation of the revitalization of pesantren as centers of tradition-based Islamic higher education. This institution serves as a bridge between the classical pesantren educational system and the modern higher education system, while simultaneously preserving the *turats* tradition and responding to contemporary challenges through more structured methodological and institutional approaches. This transformation reflects the ability of pesantren to adapt to social dynamics and the demands of modern education without losing their intellectual identity as centers for the transmission of traditional Islamic knowledge (Isbah, 2020; Lukens-Bull, 2021). Therefore, the role of *Ma'had Aly* is not merely academic, but also cultural and social, positioning it as a key pillar in strengthening the Islamic intellectual tradition in Indonesia.

Unlike previous studies that primarily discuss pesantren as institutions of religious learning and character formation (Isbah, 2020; Lukens-Bull, 2021), this study demonstrates that *Ma'had Aly* also functions as a strategic actor within the broader higher education landscape. The findings reveal that pesantren-based higher education institutions contribute not only to the preservation of Islamic intellectual traditions but also to social transformation, community empowerment, and the production of contextually relevant religious knowledge. This broadens existing understandings of *Ma'had Aly* by positioning it as both a cultural institution and a contemporary knowledge-producing organization. Consequently, policies concerning *Ma'had Aly* should move beyond symbolic recognition and toward substantive institutional empowerment.

In this regard, the state should act not only as a regulator but also as a facilitator and accelerator in strengthening community based educational institutions such as *Ma'had Aly*. Without affirmative policy intervention, there is a real risk of stagnation, or even regression, that would hinder *Ma'had Aly's* strategic role in cultivating an Islamic civilization deeply rooted in tradition yet responsive to the demands of the present.

This momentum should be taken seriously by the government through the development of sustainable and equity-based affirmative policy schemes. Several concrete measures may be undertaken, including expanding access to operational and research funding for *Ma'had Aly*, granting full institutional recognition within the national higher education system, and formulating derivative regulations that support institutional autonomy and the development of pesantren-based higher education. Strengthening human resource capacity through advanced study scholarships and professional development training is also a crucial aspect that must be addressed within such affirmative policies.

Thus, strengthening Ma'had Aly should not be viewed solely as an educational policy agenda, but as part of a broader strategy for sustaining Indonesia's Islamic intellectual tradition and promoting epistemic diversity within the national higher education system. The findings of this study demonstrate that pesantren-based higher education institutions possess significant social, cultural, and academic capital that remains underutilized due to limited policy affirmation. Therefore, greater institutional support is required not only to improve organizational sustainability but also to enable Ma'had Aly to contribute more effectively to the development of inclusive, moderate, and contextually grounded Islamic scholarship in Indonesia.

Local Excellence and Adaptive Strategies of Pesantren

This finding supports previous studies suggesting that pesantren possess strong institutional resilience rooted in collective culture, social capital, and value-based leadership networks (Isbah, 2020; Lukens-Bull, 2021). However, the present study reveals a more dynamic form of resilience. In the case of Ma'had Aly Nurul Qodim, resilience is not merely reflected in the institution's ability to survive under conditions of limited external support, but also in its capacity to continuously innovate, expand academic programs, strengthen organizational structures, and adapt to changing educational demands. This suggests that institutional resilience within pesantren-based higher education should be understood as an adaptive and transformative process rather than simply a defensive mechanism for survival.

One of the primary indicators of this resilience is the strength of its human resources. With a total of 74 lecturers most of them whom hold master's degrees and have pesantren educational backgrounds *Ma'had Aly Nurul Qodim* demonstrates that high-quality human resources can be developed without full dependence on state support. This quality is further reinforced by a leadership model grounded in *khidmah* (service), which contemporary studies identify as a distinctive ethical framework of pesantren leadership capable of mobilizing collective participation and strengthening institutional solidarity (Fauzi, 2021).

Furthermore, the student admission system, which requires proficiency in *kutub al-turats*, reflects a strong commitment to maintaining the quality of academic input. Unlike the quantitative selection models commonly employed in formal higher education, this system is qualitative in nature and grounded in classical Islamic epistemology. Recent studies indicate that mastery of classical Islamic texts remains a central mechanism for preserving the continuity of traditional Islamic knowledge transmission within pesantren (Chaudhry et al., 2022). In this context, *Ma'had Aly Nurul Qodim* consistently maintains the quality and authenticity of its scholarly tradition from the point of admission.

Moreover, the institution's adaptive strategy is evident in its initiative to propose a master's degree program. This marks a maturation of institutional vision that is not only oriented toward preserving tradition but also toward pursuing academic expansion. If successful, this initiative could serve as an important precedent for strengthening pesantren-based higher education within the

national system. Recent studies highlight that the development of advanced levels in Islamic higher education is a crucial component in building a sustainable and competitive academic ecosystem (Isbah, 2020; Lukens-Bull, 2021).

Geographically and culturally, Probolinggo occupies a strategic position in the development of Ma'had Aly as a model of pesantren-based higher education. This is evidenced by the presence of three Ma'had Aly institutions with different fields of scholarly concentration, namely Nurul Jadid, which specializes in Fiqh; Zainul Hasan, which focuses on Hadith studies; and Nurul Qodim, which concentrates on Qur'anic exegesis (tafsir). The coexistence of these institutions' positions Probolinggo as an emerging cluster of pesantren-based Islamic higher education. This phenomenon aligns with studies highlighting the importance of community-based educational clusters in promoting decentralization and strengthening local knowledge ecosystems within Islamic higher education (Tan, 2019; Hefner, 2021). Consequently, this cluster possesses significant potential to evolve into a center of excellence rooted in local wisdom, pesantren traditions, and specialized Islamic scholarship.

The emergence of this regional cluster also extends current discussions on the development of Islamic higher education in Indonesia. While previous studies generally examine pesantren as individual institutions, the findings of this study suggest that inter-institutional specialization within a particular geographical area may generate a collaborative knowledge ecosystem. The coexistence of Ma'had Aly institutions specializing in Fiqh, Hadith, and Qur'anic exegesis demonstrates the potential for academic complementarity rather than institutional competition. This finding highlights the importance of regional knowledge clusters as a strategy for strengthening scholarly production, academic networking, and institutional sustainability within pesantren-based higher education.

The adaptive capacity of *Ma'had Aly Nurul Qodim* is also reflected in its adoption of technology and institutional innovation, including the integration of online learning systems, the strengthening of internal quality assurance mechanisms, and the digitalization of academic documentation. This digital transformation aligns with studies emphasizing that pesantren must adopt technology as part of their institutional modernization strategy without compromising their traditional identity (Zarkasy, 2020; Zamroni, 2021). Thus, *Ma'had Aly* not only preserves its epistemic heritage but also embraces contemporary educational management practices.

Unlike previous studies that primarily emphasize the role of pesantren in preserving Islamic traditions and moral values, the present study demonstrates that local excellence can also become a source of institutional innovation and academic competitiveness. The findings reveal that the combination of strong leadership, selective student recruitment, specialized scholarly focus, technological adaptation, and community support creates a distinctive model of higher education development. This contribution broadens existing understandings of pesantren by showing that local wisdom and institutional modernization are not mutually exclusive, but can instead function as complementary forces in shaping sustainable educational transformation.

From the perspective of national education policy, the local excellence demonstrated by *Ma'had Aly Nurul Qodim* should be recognized as part of the diversification of the higher education system, enriching Indonesia's academic landscape. Recent studies suggest that higher education rooted in local traditions plays a significant role in fostering epistemic justice, namely the recognition of diverse sources of knowledge and scholarly practices within the national education system (Hefner, 2021). Within this framework, *Ma'had Aly* should not be viewed as a peripheral institution, but rather as a key pillar of Islamic higher education that is community-based, value-driven, and adaptive to changing times.

In conclusion, the local excellence demonstrated by Ma'had Aly Nurul Qodim reflects not only epistemological uniqueness but also a sophisticated capacity for institutional adaptation, innovation, and knowledge production. The findings indicate that pesantren-based higher education institutions possess significant potential to contribute to the diversification of Indonesia's higher education system through specialized scholarship, community engagement, and locally rooted educational models. Therefore, affirmative state support should not be viewed merely as assistance for institutional sustainability, but as a strategic investment in strengthening alternative knowledge systems and expanding the intellectual diversity of national higher education.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the resilience of Ma'had Aly Nurul Qodim is rooted not only in its ability to survive amid structural and policy constraints but also in its capacity to adapt, innovate, and transform within the national higher education system. The findings reveal that the integration of pesantren traditions, such as turats, sanad, and khidmah, with contemporary institutional practices including accreditation management, curriculum development, digital transformation, and academic networking has enabled Ma'had Aly to maintain its distinctive identity while responding effectively to modern educational demands. Theoretically, this study contributes to the growing literature on Islamic higher education by proposing that institutional resilience in pesantren-based higher education should be understood as a multidimensional process encompassing legal recognition, epistemological legitimacy, organizational adaptation, and community-based social capital. Furthermore, the study highlights the uniqueness of the Indonesian pesantren context, where traditional Islamic scholarship and modern higher education systems interact in a dynamic and mutually reinforcing manner.

Nevertheless, this study is limited to a single case of Ma'had Aly and therefore does not fully capture the diversity of institutional experiences across different pesantren-based higher education institutions in Indonesia. Future studies are encouraged to undertake comparative research involving multiple Ma'had Aly institutions with different academic specializations and regional contexts to generate a more comprehensive understanding of institutional resilience and policy integration. From a policy perspective, the findings underscore the importance of developing affirmative and context-sensitive regulatory frameworks that recognize the distinctive characteristics of pesantren-based higher education. Looking ahead, Ma'had Aly has the potential to emerge not merely as an alternative educational institution, but as a strategic model for strengthening Indonesia's Islamic intellectual tradition and enriching the diversity of knowledge systems within the national and global higher education landscape.

DECLARATION OF AI AND AI ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS

During the preparation of this work the author(s) used ChatGPT in order to help to improve the grammar of the article. After using this tool/service, the author(s) reviewed and edited the content as needed and take(s) full responsibility for the content of the publication.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

Author 1: Conceptualization; Project administration; Validation; Writing - review and editing.

Author 2: Conceptualization; Data curation; Investigation.

Author 3: Data curation; Investigation.

Author 4: Formal analysis; Methodology; Writing - original draft.

Author 5: Supervision; Validation.

DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

REFERENCES

- Ali, N. (2019). Integrative Curriculum of Religion and Science at Special Pesantren for University Students. *Ulul Albab Jurnal Studi Islam*, 20(1), 95–122. <https://doi.org/10.18860/ua.v20i1.6353>
- C, T. (2019). Educative Tradition and Islamic Schools in Indonesia. *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies*, 14(1), 47–62. <https://doi.org/10.5617/jais.4630>
- Chaudhry, M. A., Cukurova, M., & Luckin, R. (2022). *A Transparency Index Framework for AI in Education*. <https://doi.org/10.35542/osf.io/bstcf>
- Fauzi, A., & Rohmadi, Y. (2021). Kepemimpinan pesantren berbasis nilai khidmah dalam pengembangan kelembagaan pendidikan Islam. *Jurnal Pendidikan Islam*, 9(2), 155–170.
- Fawaid, A. (2021). Pesantren dan tantangan modernitas: Transformasi kurikulum dalam menghadapi era disrupsi. *Jurnal Pendidikan Islam*, 7(2), 123–138.
- Hefner, R. W. (2021). *Islam and the making of the modern Indonesian education system*. Honolulu.
- Hidayat, T., & Nizar, M. (2022). Integrasi keilmuan dalam pendidikan pesantren: Upaya menjembatani turats dan modernitas. *Jurnal Pendidikan Agama Islam*, 19(1), 45–60.
- Huda. (2020). Digital transformation in Islamic education: Opportunities and challenges for pesantren. *Journal of Islamic Education Research*, 5(2), 89–102.
- Isbah, M. F. (2020). Pesantren in the changing Indonesian context: History and current developments. *Qudus International Journal of Islamic Studies*, 8(1), 65–106. <https://doi.org/10.21043/qjijis.v8i1.5629>
- Lukens-Bull, R. (2021). *Islamic higher education in Indonesia: Continuity and change*. PALGRAVE MACMILLAN® in the United States.
- Maskuri, M. (2024a). Implementasi kebijakan Peraturan Menteri Agama Nomor 32 Tahun 2020 tentang Ma'had Aly: Antara harapan dan dilema. *Lisan Al-Hal: Jurnal Pengembangan Pemikiran Dan Kebudayaan*, 18(1), 148–164. <https://doi.org/10.35316/lisanalhal.v18i1.148-164>
- Maskuri, M. (2024b). Implementasi kebijakan Peraturan Menteri Agama Nomor 32 Tahun 2020 tentang Ma'had Aly: Antara harapan dan dilema. *Lisan Al-Hal: Jurnal Pengembangan Pemikiran Dan Kebudayaan*, 18(1), 148–164. <https://doi.org/10.35316/lisanalhal.v18i1.148-164>
- Misbakhudin, A., Makmun, M., & Ashari, M. Y. (2024). Peran Mahasantri dan Alumni Ma'had Aly Hasyim Asy'ari dalam Program Pengabdian di Pesantren Tebuireng Jombang. *Dirasat: Jurnal Manajemen Dan Pendidikan Islam*, 10(1), 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.26594/dirasat.v10i1.4025>
- Rohman, A., & Muhtamiroh, S. (2022). Shaping the Santri's Inclusive Attitudes Through Learning in Pesantren: A Case Study of Pesantren Al-Anwar Sarang Rembang Indonesia. *Journal of Educational and Social Research*, 12(2), 367. <https://doi.org/10.36941/jesr-2022-0058>
- Tajussubki, T. (2021). Pengembangan kurikulum Ma'had Aly (Studi kasus Ma'had Aly Darul Munawwarah Pidie Jaya). *Jurnal At-Tarbiyyah: Jurnal Ilmu Pendidikan Islam*, 7(2). <https://doi.org/10.54621/jiat.v7i2.143>

- Zamroni. (2021). Innovation and institutional transformation in pesantren education. *International Journal of Instruction*, 14(3), 1–16.
- Zarkasyi, H. F. (2020). Imam Zarkasyi's Modernization of Pesantren in Indonesia (A Case Study of Darussalam Gontor). *Qijis (Qudus International Journal of Islamic Studies)*, 8(1), 161. <https://doi.org/10.21043/qijis.v8i1.5760>
- Zulkhairi, T., & Muzakir, M. (2020). Pengembangan kurikulum berbasis kitab kuning pada Ma'had Aly di Aceh. *Mudarrisuna: Media Kajian Pendidikan Agama Islam*, 10(4). <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.22373/jm.v10i4.8476>

Copyright Holder :

© Imro Atus Soliha et al. (2026).

First Publication Right :

© International Journal of Educational Narratives

This article is under:

