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Reconceptualizing Education Quality in Higher Education: Insights from Indonesian Islamic Universities for a Context-Sensitive Global Framework

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Abstract. This study explored how education quality is conceptualized, enacted, and experienced within Indonesian Islamic universities, and developed a context-sensitive understanding of education quality that extends beyond dominant metric-driven frameworks. In responding to the limitations of standardized approaches to quality assurance in higher education, the study adopted a qualitative multiple-case design grounded in an interpretivist paradigm. Data was collected through semistructured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis involving lecturers and students at three institutions. The findings reveal that education quality is not a fixed or universally defined construct, but a context-sensitive, relational, and value-infused process that is shaped by pedagogical practices, institutional conditions, and moral-spiritual orientations. Five interrelated dimensions of education quality emerged from the analysis: transformative learning, dialogic and participatory pedagogy, relational engagement, ethical-spiritual integration, and context-dependent enactment. The study highlights key tensions between transformative ideals and institutional constraints, as well as between normative value integration and its practical implementation. These tensions demonstrate that education quality is continuously negotiated rather than fully achieved. The study contributes to global debates by proposing a context-sensitive framework that expands existing understandings of quality beyond standardization and measurement. It offers theoretical and practical implications for

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developing more inclusive, flexible, and human-centered approaches to educational quality in diverse higher education contexts.

Keywords: Education quality; Islamic higher education; teaching and learning practices; value integration; qualitative study

1. Introduction

Education quality has become a defining concern in higher education worldwide, and is shaped by the intersecting forces of globalization, digital transformation, and the expansion of knowledge-based economies (Ai Tran et al., 2025; Asiyai, 2022). In diverse contexts, universities are increasingly being evaluated through standardized and measurable indicators that include teaching effectiveness, research productivity, and graduate employability (Decuypere & Landri, 2021; Romanowski, 2022). While such metrics have enabled comparability and accountability, scholarly critiques increasingly question their adequacy for capturing the complexity of educational processes. In particular, standardized frameworks often marginalize contextual, cultural, and pedagogical dimensions of quality and reduce it to technocratic and decontextualized measures (Kohoutek et al., 2025; Naylor et al., 2021; Serrano et al., 2025).

In response, recent scholarship increasingly conceptualizes education quality not as a fixed outcome, but as a dynamic, relational, and context-sensitive process that is shaped by teaching practices, student engagement, and learning environments (Harrison et al., 2022; Heilporn et al., 2021). This shift has been accompanied by a growing emphasis on pedagogical innovation and participatory learning. Approaches such as differentiated instruction, game-based learning, and competency-based education are widely recognized as enhancing meaningful learning experiences (Shadan et al., 2025; Xu et al., 2023). Similarly, participatory practices, including co-created learning and feedback engagement, reposition students as active agents in shaping education quality (Gan et al., 2025; Zhang, 2021).

At the institutional level, leadership, teacher commitment, wellbeing, and organizational readiness for change are identified as critical enablers of quality (Al-Husseini et al., 2021; Hascher et al., 2021; Thien et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2023). At the same time, concerns surrounding inclusion and the quality of learning environments continue to prompt calls for more innovative and context-sensitive approaches to quality assurance (Beyene et al., 2023; Grazia & Molinari, 2021; Greere, 2023; Semenets-Orlova et al., 2026). Collectively, these developments signal emerging consensus that education quality must be understood as situated, participatory, and embedded in practice.

Within this evolving global discourse, Islamic higher education institutions offer a distinctive yet underrepresented perspective on reconceptualizing education quality. These institutions integrate academic objectives with moral and spiritual development, thereby expanding the meaning of quality beyond cognitive and economic outcomes (Altinyelken, 2021; Kolb, 2021). In such contexts, education quality encompasses the incorporation of religious and ethical values in

pedagogical practices (Wulan et al., 2021). However, this integrative orientation often exists in tension with dominant global quality frameworks, which tend to prioritize secular, market-oriented, and performance-driven indicators (Berger, 2021). This tension exposes a critical gap in the global literature: the limited recognition of alternative epistemologies and value systems for defining and evaluating education quality.

Indonesia represents a particularly significant context for addressing this gap, given its large and diverse Islamic higher education sector. In recent years, institutional reforms have emphasized internationalization, accreditation, and the strengthening of quality assurance systems (Fuadi et al., 2021; Musthofa et al., 2021), thereby reflecting broader global shifts toward governance models that extend beyond compliance-based approaches (Kohoutek et al., 2025). Despite these developments, persistent challenges remain, including uneven teaching quality, limited pedagogical innovation, and ongoing tensions between academic and religious priorities. Moreover, quality assurance practices frequently remain procedural rather than transformative, which limits their capacity to capture the lived realities of teaching and learning (Romanowski, 2022; Serrano et al., 2025).

Research on education quality has predominantly focused on structural and policy-oriented dimensions and has paid comparatively limited attention to the way quality is enacted, negotiated, and experienced in everyday academic practices. This represents a significant limitation, as educational quality is ultimately constituted through pedagogical interactions, meaning-making processes, and lived experiences in specific contexts (Harrison et al., 2022). Furthermore, while the integration of Islamic values is often acknowledged at the institutional level, its manifestation in classroom practices remains underexplored, despite evidence that religious learning is deeply embedded in social and educational interactions (Kolb, 2021).

To address these gaps, this study adopted a qualitative approach to examine how educational quality is understood, enacted, and experienced in Indonesian Islamic universities. Moving beyond descriptive accounts, the study sought to reconceptualize education quality by foregrounding situated pedagogical practices and the integration of moral and spiritual dimensions of learning. In doing so, it contributes to the development of a context-sensitive global framework that bridges local insights with broader theoretical debates on education quality (Ai Tran et al., 2025). By linking global discourses with contextually grounded evidence, this study advances a more pluralistic and inclusive understanding of quality in higher education. The study is guided by the following research questions: 1) How is educational quality understood and conceptualized at Indonesian Islamic universities? 2) How do lecturers and students experience and interpret education quality in their everyday academic practices?

2. Conceptual Framework

Understanding education quality in Indonesian Islamic higher education requires moving beyond narrow performance indicators toward a holistic, context-

sensitive perspective. This study adopted an integrative framework that combined 1) Multidimensional conceptions of quality; (2) Sociocultural and constructivist learning theories; and 3) Islamic education philosophy. These perspectives are informed by contemporary debates on quality assurance and pedagogical innovation in global higher education (Ai Tran et al., 2025; Kohoutek et al., 2025; Semenets-Orlova et al., 2026).

2.1 Education Quality as a Multidimensional Construct

Education quality is widely understood as a multidimensional and context-dependent construct that encompasses inputs, processes, and outcomes. Recent scholarship highlights a shift from accreditation-driven models toward more participatory and process-oriented approaches (Kohoutek et al., 2025; Serrano et al., 2025), although global systems still prioritize measurable indicators and competitiveness (Ai Tran et al., 2025); the latter type of approach risks overlooking contextual and pedagogical dimensions, particularly in faith-based settings (Semenets-Orlova et al., 2026).

In Indonesia, Islamic higher education institutions have strengthened quality assurance through accreditation and internal systems (Musthofa et al., 2021), yet these systems often emphasize compliance over pedagogical processes. A transformative view of quality that focuses on learners' intellectual and personal development offers a more suitable lens, by aligning with innovations such as competency-based education and game-based learning (Shadan et al., 2025; Xu et al., 2023). Additionally, efforts to integrate science, technology, and Islamic values, furthermore, reflect the multidimensional nature of quality (Wulan et al., 2021). This study, therefore, adopted a process-oriented perspective that focused on how quality is constructed through teaching and learning practices (RQ1).

2.2 Teaching and Learning as Sociocultural Practice

According to sociocultural and constructivist theory, learning is understood as a socially mediated and context-dependent process. Teaching involves guided participation, interaction, and scaffolding rather than knowledge transmission. Education quality, therefore, is reflected in meaningful learning environments that foster engagement and critical inquiry. Contemporary research supports relational and student-centered pedagogies and emphasizes co-creation of knowledge and inclusive practices (Zhang, 2021). Innovative approaches such as game-based learning highlight the importance of engagement in shaping quality further (Xu et al., 2023) and, at a broader level, internationalization and institutional strategies influence pedagogical practices (Fuadi et al., 2021). This perspective is particularly relevant in Islamic higher education, where learning integrates cognitive, social, and moral dimensions. It also informs the way lecturers and students interpret their experiences of quality (RQ2).

2.3 Islamic Education Philosophy and Value Integration

Islamic education philosophy emphasizes holistic development by integrating intellectual, moral, and spiritual dimensions (Kolb, 2021). However, Islamic institutions must balance these values with global academic standards, which could create tensions between religious identity and secular quality frameworks (Berger, 2021). Empirical studies report that the integration of Islamic values into

modern curricula remains uneven, particularly combining ethical principles with scientific knowledge (Wulan et al., 2021). At the same time, pedagogical approaches such as mentorship and competency-based models support holistic development that is aligned with Islamic principles (Shadan et al., 2025). Thus, education quality in this context is inseparable from value integration. This study examines how these values are enacted in practice and experienced by lecturers and students (RQ2).

2.4 Integrative Framework

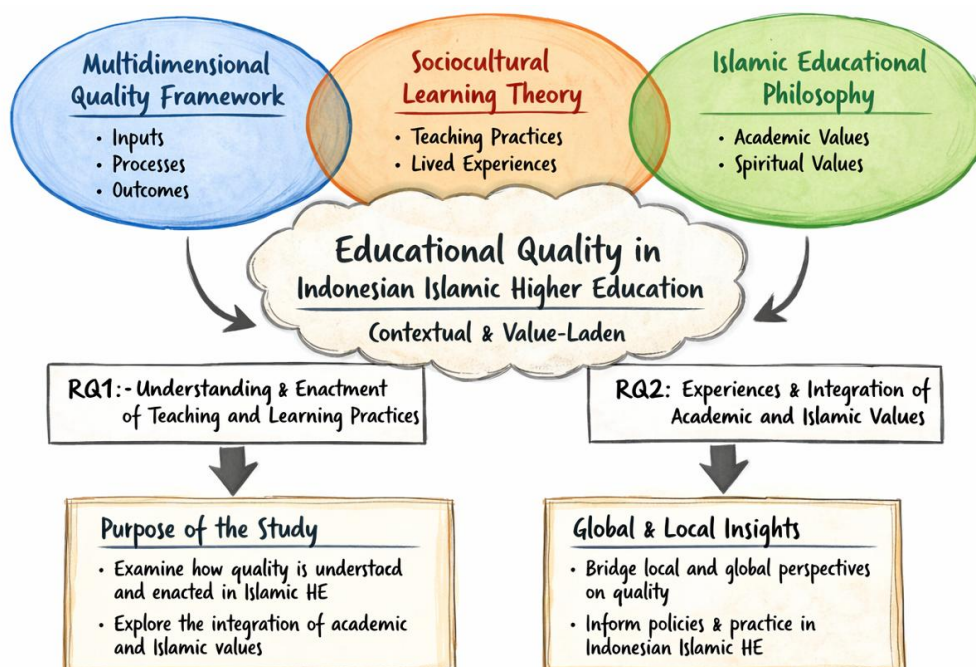


Figure 1: A Qualitative Framework for Understanding Education Quality in Islamic Higher Education

Note. HE = higher education

This study conceptualizes education quality as a dynamic, contextually constructed, and value-laden phenomenon. Quality emerges through the interaction of institutional goals, pedagogical practices, and stakeholder experiences. The multidimensional perspective defines what constitutes quality, sociocultural theory explains how it is enacted through practice, and Islamic philosophy situates it within a value-based framework. This integrative approach responds to critiques of standardized quality assurance by emphasizing participation, context, and cultural relevance (Kohoutek et al., 2025; Serrano et al., 2025). Overall, the framework enables a nuanced analysis of education quality that bridges global discourses with local Islamic educational contexts (Ai Tran et al., 2025; Semenets-Orlova et al., 2026).

3. Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design to investigate how education quality is understood, enacted, and experienced in Indonesian Islamic higher

education, with the aim of contributing to a context-sensitive global framework. A qualitative approach is particularly appropriate for examining complex, contextually embedded phenomena and for capturing participants' perspectives, lived experiences, and processes of meaning-making (Castell et al., 2022; Takona, 2024). By being grounded in an interpretivist paradigm, this study conceptualizes education quality as a socially constructed and context-dependent phenomenon that is shaped through interactions, beliefs, and situated practices rather than as a fixed or universally measurable construct (Irshaidat, 2022). This epistemological stance is consistent with the study objective of moving beyond standardized metrics toward a more nuanced and practice-oriented understanding of quality.

More specifically, the study employed a qualitative multiple-case study design to enable an in-depth exploration of education quality across institutional contexts. Case study methodology is particularly suitable for examining bounded systems and capturing the complexity of real-life settings through the integration of multiple data sources (Köhler, 2024; Priya, 2021). Three Indonesian Islamic higher education institutions that were either state Islamic universities or Islamic institutes were purposively selected as cases because of their distinctive integration of academic and religious education (Achruh & Sukirman, 2024). These institutions provided relevant sites for examining how global quality discourses are interpreted and negotiated in localized, value-laden contexts (Achruh & Sukirman, 2024; Sukirman & Kabilan, 2023). Using multiple cases enhances the analytical robustness of the study by enabling cross-case comparison and the identification of transferable insights.

Table 1: Profile of Research Participants

Participant group	Number of participants	Selection criteria	Characteristics	Purpose in study
Lecturers	10	Minimum three years of teaching experience; active involvement in curriculum implementation	Various disciplines; different academic ranks	To explore how education quality is understood and enacted
Students	10	Enrolled in undergraduate/postgraduate programs	Different years and backgrounds	To examine how education quality is experienced
Institutions	Three Islamic higher education institutions	Selected state Islamic universities/Islamic institutes	Public Islamic higher education institutions in Indonesia	Contextual understanding

Participants were selected through purposive and maximum variation sampling to ensure the inclusion of individuals with direct and diverse experiences of teaching and learning processes (Ahmad & Wilkins, 2025). The sample consisted of 20 participants: 10 lecturers and 10 students at the selected institutions. Lecturers were required to have a minimum of three years of teaching experience and to be actively involved in curriculum implementation; students with varied

academic backgrounds were drawn from undergraduate and postgraduate programs. Maximum variation sampling enabled the study to capture a wide range of perspectives across disciplines, institutional contexts, and levels of study, thereby enhancing the depth and richness of the data. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection.

Data was generated through three complementary qualitative methods to ensure depth, triangulation, and contextual richness (Carter et al., 2021). First, in-depth semi structured interviews were conducted to explore participants' conceptualizations and lived experiences of education quality. This method is well suited for eliciting subjective meanings and interpretive insights (Mahat-Shamir et al., 2021). The semi structured format promoted consistency across interviews while maintaining flexibility to probe emerging themes (Castell et al., 2022). Interviews were conducted in either face-to-face or online formats, acknowledging the evolving role of digital environments in qualitative research (Braun et al., 2021; Carter et al., 2021).

Second, non-participant classroom observations were undertaken to examine how education quality is enacted in practice. Observations focused on pedagogical strategies, lecturer-student interactions, and patterns of student engagement, thereby providing practice-based evidence that complements self-reported data (Köhler, 2024). This approach is particularly important for capturing the enacted dimension of quality, which is often overlooked in policy-oriented research. Third, document analysis was undertaken to contextualize and triangulate the findings. Institutional documents, namely curricula, syllabi, and quality assurance policies, were analyzed to examine how education quality is formally defined and operationalized. The integration of multiple data sources strengthened the credibility and comprehensiveness of the study by enabling the convergence of evidence across different forms of data (Carter et al., 2021).

Data were analyzed using the reflexive thematic analysis approach of Braun and Clarke, which emphasizes analytical flexibility, reflexivity, and depth of interpretation (Braun et al., 2021; Byrne, 2022; Nawas et al., 2025). The analysis proceeded through several iterative phases, namely data familiarization, initial coding, category development, and theme construction. Transcripts and field notes were repeatedly reviewed to achieve immersion, after which inductive codes were generated and progressively refined to represent broader themes. While the analysis was primarily data-driven, it was also theoretically informed to ensure alignment with the study aim of reconceptualizing education quality (Byrne, 2022). This iterative and reflexive process enabled the development of analytically robust themes that capture both shared patterns and contextual nuances of the cases.

To ensure trustworthiness, the study employed established qualitative rigor criteria. Credibility was enhanced through methodological triangulation across interviews, observations, and document analysis (Carter et al., 2021). Transferability was supported by the provision of thick, context-rich descriptions

that enable readers to assess the applicability of findings to other settings (Priya, 2021). Dependability was addressed through a transparent and systematic research process that included detailed documentation of data collection and analysis procedures. Confirmability was strengthened through reflexive practices, including critical self-awareness of the researcher's positionality and interpretive role in the research process (Kocabaş-Gedik & Ortaçtepe Hart, 2021).

Ethical considerations were rigorously observed throughout the study. Participants were fully informed about the purpose, procedures, and potential implications of the research, and informed consent was obtained prior to participation. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured by using pseudonyms and applying secure data management practices. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty. All data were securely stored and used exclusively for academic purposes.

Overall, this methodological approach aligns closely with the study objective of reconceptualizing education quality by foregrounding lived experiences, pedagogical practices, and contextual dynamics. By integrating multiple data sources and employing a rigorous qualitative design, the study generates a holistic and contextually grounded account of education quality in Indonesian Islamic higher education, while also producing insights with relevance for broader global debates.

4. Findings

This study reveals that education quality in Indonesian Islamic higher education cannot be adequately understood through dominant, standardized metrics. Instead, it emerges as a context-sensitive, relational, and value-infused praxis that is constructed through the interplay of pedagogical practices, institutional conditions, and moral-spiritual orientations. Rather than presenting as isolated themes, the findings collectively advance a reconceptualization of education quality as a multidimensional construct that comprises five interrelated dimensions: 1) Transformative learning; 2) Dialogic pedagogy; 3) Negotiated enactment; 4) Ethical-spiritual integration; and 5) Relational engagement. Together, these dimensions form the basis of a context-sensitive global framework grounded in lived educational practices.

4.1 Education Quality as Transformative Learning Beyond Content Mastery

A central finding of this study is a shift from viewing education quality as content delivery toward understanding it as transformative learning. Participants consistently emphasized that quality lies not in the quantity of material covered, but in the extent to which learning reshapes students' understanding, thinking, and real-life application. Lecturers problematized the dominance of coverage-oriented teaching:

"Sometimes we are pressured to finish all topics, but I think quality is when students can really understand, even if we cover less content." (L1)

"Quality is not about how much material we deliver, but how deeply students engage with it." (L4)

"If students leave the class with memorized points but no understanding, then the teaching is not successful. "(L9)

Students, similarly, framed quality as meaningful comprehension:

"If the lecturer just reads slides, it is difficult to follow. But when they explain step by step and give examples, we understand better. "(S2)

"I feel the class is high quality when I can relate the lesson to real life, not just memorize it for exams. "(S5)

"Good learning is when I can apply it outside the classroom, not just pass the exam. "(S10)

Importantly, participants extended this benefit beyond cognition toward personal transformation:

"Studying here changes how I think and behave. I become more responsible. "(S9)

"Education should influence how students make decisions in life. "(L3)

This finding indicates that education quality is experienced as transformative capacity that challenges dominant global models that prioritize measurable outputs over meaningful learning processes.

4.2 Education Quality as Dialogic and Participatory Pedagogy

A second key dimension is the centrality of dialogue, interaction, and student participation in constructing education quality. Learning was perceived as a co-constructed process; meaning emerged through engagement rather than transmission. Lecturers emphasized the importance of shifting pedagogical roles:

"In my class, I try to reduce lecturing and give more space for discussion. When students talk, that is when learning happens. "(L7)

"A silent class is not a good class. Without interaction, we cannot know if students understand. "(L2)

"I encourage students to question and challenge ideas. That is where quality learning occurs. "(L5)

Students described participation as enabling deeper engagement:

"When we discuss in groups and present ideas, it helps us think critically. "(S1)

*"If the lecturer invites us to share opinions, we feel more confident. (S8)
Interactive classes make learning more interesting and easier to understand. "(S3)*

However, this ideal was not consistently realized:

"Some classes are interactive, but others are still one-way. It depends on the lecturer. "(S3)

"We want to participate, but sometimes there is no opportunity. "(S6)

These findings highlight that education quality is a dialogic accomplishment that is dependent on pedagogical design and classroom interaction, and challenge hierarchical, teacher-centered models that are embedded in many global quality frameworks.

4.3 Education Quality as Negotiated Practice Within Institutional Constraints

Despite strong pedagogical ideals, participants emphasized that education quality is not fully controllable but is continuously negotiated within institutional and structural constraints.

Lecturers described tensions between innovation and system demands:

"We want to make the class interactive, but with more than 40 students, it is difficult." (L5)

"Sometimes we focus on completing the syllabus because of administrative requirements." (L9)

"Accreditation pressures make us prioritize documentation rather than improving teaching." (L10)

Students also experienced these limitations:

"Sometimes the class becomes too fast, and we cannot follow properly." (S9)

"There is not enough time for discussion, even when we need it." (S4)

"Some lecturers are creative, but others just follow the system." (S1)

These accounts demonstrate that education quality is shaped by institutional logics, policy pressures, and resource conditions, rather than solely by pedagogical intention. Thus, quality emerges as a negotiated and context-bound practice, which highlights the limitations of universal benchmarks that ignore institutional realities.

4.4 Education Quality as Ethical-Spiritual Integration

A defining contribution of this study is its identification of ethical-spiritual integration as a core dimension of education quality. In contrast to secular global frameworks, participants emphasized that quality education must integrate knowledge, values, and moral responsibility. Lecturers articulated this integrative vision:

"In Islamic universities, we cannot separate knowledge from values." (L3)

"Even in general subjects, we include ethical dimensions." (L8)

"Education is not complete if it does not guide students' character." (L6)

Students experienced this ethical-spiritual integration as enhancing meaning and purpose:

"It makes learning more meaningful because we are reminded of our responsibilities." (S10)

"We learn not only knowledge, but also how to use it in a good way." (S2)

"The values we learn here influence how we act in society. "(S7)

However, participants distinguished between superficial and meaningful integration:

"Sometimes the lecturer starts with a verse, but it is not connected to the lesson. "(S4)

"If the values are not explained clearly, we don't understand their relevance. "(S6)

"I try to connect values with real-life situations, not just mention them. "(L1)

Moreover, values were embodied through lecturer behavior:

"Students observe how we act. Being fair and respectful is part of teaching. "(L6)

"We remember the lecturer's attitude more than the content. "(S8)

These comments demonstrate that education quality includes ethical enactment and moral modelling, thereby expanding the definition of quality beyond academic and economic outcomes.

4.5 Education Quality as Relational and Context-Sensitive Engagement

Finally, education quality was consistently experienced as relational, grounded in mutual respect, care, and responsiveness between lecturers and students.

"When the lecturer listens to us, we feel valued. That motivates us to learn. "(S6)

"Understanding students' needs is part of quality teaching. "(L10)

"Good teaching is about connection, not only content. "(S5)

This relational dimension positions education quality as a human-centered experience, rather than a technical or procedural outcome. It reinforces the idea that quality is situated and context-dependent and emerges from specific social and cultural interactions.

4.6 Toward a Context-Sensitive Global Framework of Education Quality

Taken together, these findings advance a reconceptualization of education quality as a context-sensitive praxis that consists of five interdependent dimensions: 1) Transformative learning: Quality as meaningful and life-relevant understanding; 2) Dialogic pedagogy: Quality as co-constructed through interaction; 3) Negotiated enactment: Quality as shaped by institutional constraints; 4) Ethical-spiritual integration: Quality as moral and value-based formation; and 5) Relational engagement: Quality as grounded in human connection. This framework challenges dominant global models that privilege standardization, measurement, and performance indicators.

Instead, it proposes a pluralistic and contextually grounded understanding of education quality and offers insights that are transferable across diverse higher education contexts, particularly in the Global South. By foregrounding lived

experiences and value-based practices, this study contributes to ongoing efforts to rethink education quality as a dynamic, culturally embedded, and ethically informed process, thereby extending its relevance beyond Indonesian Islamic higher education to global debates on the future of higher education.

5. Discussion

This study sought to reconceptualize education quality in higher education by examining how it is understood, enacted, and experienced in Indonesian Islamic universities. The findings demonstrate that education quality extends beyond dominant global indicators such as rankings, performance metrics, accreditation standards, and standardized evaluations. Rather, participants conceptualized quality as a contextually situated, relational, and value-laden process that emerges from everyday teaching and learning experiences.

This finding supports interpretivist perspectives that view education realities as socially constructed through interactions and contextual conditions (Braun et al., 2021; Irshaidat, 2022; Takona, 2024). However, unlike other studies that primarily emphasized the subjective nature of educational experiences, this study reveals how education quality is co-produced through the dynamic interaction of pedagogical practices, institutional constraints, and religious-ethical values. This finding contributes to a more integrated understanding of quality that incorporates dimensions that are often marginalized within dominant quality assurance frameworks.

5.1 From Measurable Outcomes to Meaningful Learning

A central finding of this study is that participants rarely defined education quality in terms of measurable outputs alone. Instead, they emphasized meaningful learning characterized by deep conceptual understanding, critical engagement, personal transformation, and the ability to apply knowledge in real-life situations.

This finding aligns with studies that highlighted the limitations of performance-based approaches to quality and the importance of learner experiences for evaluating the effectiveness of education (Braun et al., 2021; Castell et al., 2022; Takona, 2024). Nevertheless, the findings also reveal an important contradiction. Although both lecturers and students valued meaningful learning, institutional structures frequently prioritized curriculum completion, administrative compliance, and assessment requirements. Similar tensions were reported by other studies, namely that institutional accountability systems often shape pedagogical practices in ways that restrict innovative or student-centered approaches (Carter et al., 2021; Köhler, 2024).

The present study extends these findings by demonstrating how lecturers continuously negotiate between educational ideals and institutional demands rather than simply implementing prescribed quality standards. The discrepancy between participants' understanding of quality and institutional definitions also raises a critical question regarding whose perspectives are represented by quality assurance systems. While formal frameworks often privilege measurable outcomes, participants viewed quality primarily through the lens of meaningful

educational experiences. This divergence suggests that prevailing quality frameworks may inadequately capture dimensions of learning that are considered valuable by those directly involved in educational processes. Consequently, the findings support critiques of globally standardized quality models that overlook contextual realities and locally meaningful educational goals (Priya, 2021; Sukirman & Kabilan, 2023).

5.2 Educational Quality as a Relational Process

Another significant finding is the central role of interaction and relationships in shaping perceptions of education quality. Students consistently associate high-quality learning with opportunities to participate actively, exchange ideas, ask questions, and engage in meaningful dialogue. Likewise, lecturers interpreted student participation as evidence of effective learning.

These findings support sociocultural perspectives that position learning as a socially mediated process that occurs through interaction and participation (Irshaidat, 2022; Takona, 2024). However, this study also identifies a notable gap between participants' experiences and institutional quality assessment mechanisms. While participants perceived interaction, trust, and engagement as essential indicators of quality, these dimensions were rarely reflected in formal evaluation systems because they are difficult to quantify. Similar concerns were raised by Braun et al. (2021) and Carter et al. (2021), who argue that quality assurance processes often prioritize documentation and measurable indicators over lived educational experiences.

Importantly, the findings suggest that standardization and meaningful engagement may not always be compatible objectives. Whereas institutions seek consistency across programs and courses, participants emphasized that quality emerges differently in classrooms, depending on lecturer's characteristics, student needs, and contextual conditions. This finding partially contradicts managerial approaches to quality assurance that assuming education quality can be standardized in different contexts. Instead, the present study suggests that excessive standardization may unintentionally reduce the flexibility necessary for meaningful teaching and learning, thereby supporting calls for more context-responsive quality frameworks (Köhler, 2024; Priya, 2021).

5.3 Integrating Islamic Values: Beyond Symbolic Inclusion

One of the most distinctive findings of this study concerns the role of Islamic values in shaping education quality. Participants consistently viewed quality education as encompassing not only academic achievement but also moral development, ethical responsibility, and character formation. This finding aligns with Islamic education philosophy, which conceptualizes education as a holistic process that integrates intellectual, spiritual, and moral dimensions (Nawas et al., 2025).

Scholars acknowledge the importance of value-based education in Islamic institutions (Achruh & Sukirman, 2024), and this study provides a more nuanced understanding by highlighting the gap between institutional aspirations and classroom realities. Although lecturers frequently incorporated religious

references in their teaching, students often perceived these efforts as superficial or disconnected from disciplinary content. Similar discrepancies between pedagogical intentions and student experiences have been documented in qualitative education research (Castell et al., 2022; Mahat-Shamir et al., 2021). This finding suggests that the challenge is not the absence of Islamic values in higher education but rather the difficulty of integrating those values meaningfully in academic learning processes. Unlike other research that primarily documents the presence of religious content, this study demonstrates that effective value integration requires substantive connections between disciplinary knowledge and reflection on ethics. Consequently, the findings extend current discussions on Islamic higher education by identifying the distinction between symbolic inclusion and authentic integration of values.

Furthermore, participants emphasized that values are transmitted not only through curricular content but also through lecturers' behaviors, including their expression of fairness, respect, empathy, and integrity. This observation supports research that emphasizes the importance of relational and emotional dimensions of learning (Kocabaş-Gedik & Ortaçtepe Hart, 2021; Mahat-Shamir et al., 2021). However, the findings also reveal considerable variation between lecturers, which indicates that value integration often depends on individual commitment rather than institutional support. This finding contrasts with the assumption that institutional missions alone are sufficient to ensure value-based education. Therefore, a stronger institutional strategy is needed to embed ethical and spiritual dimensions consistently in teaching and learning practices.

5.4 Educational Quality as Contextually Negotiated

The findings demonstrate, furthermore, that education quality is inherently context dependent. Participants consistently described how class size, resource availability, workload, institutional policies, and administrative requirements influenced their ability to enact quality teaching and learning practices. These findings reinforce qualitative studies that emphasize the importance of contextual conditions for shaping educational experiences (Irshaidat, 2022; Köhler, 2024; Takona, 2024). This study contributes additional insight by illustrating how education quality is continuously negotiated rather than merely constrained by context. Lecturers did not simply adapt passively to institutional conditions; instead, they actively balanced competing expectations, priorities, and limitations.

This perspective advances discussions by framing quality as an ongoing process of negotiation among multiple actors and institutional forces rather than as a fixed outcome or predefined standard. These findings also challenge universalist assumptions embedded within many international quality frameworks. While global models often promote standardized indicators applicable across institutions, participants' experiences suggest that education quality cannot be separated from local realities. Consequently, the findings support the argument that quality frameworks should be sufficiently flexible to accommodate diverse educational, cultural, and institutional contexts.

5.5 Theoretical and Practical Contributions

The principal contribution of this study lies in its reconceptualization of education quality from the perspective of stakeholders in Indonesian Islamic higher education. Existing quality frameworks largely emphasize measurable performance indicators, accountability mechanisms, and institutional effectiveness. In contrast, this study demonstrates that education quality is experienced as a multidimensional phenomenon that encompasses meaningful learning, relational engagement, formation of ethics, and contextual responsiveness.

Based on these findings, the study proposes a context-sensitive framework consisting of five interrelated dimensions: 1) Meaningful and transformative learning; 2) Interaction and participation; 3) Relationships and engagement; 4) Integration of ethical and spiritual values; and 5) Responsiveness to institutional context. The novelty of this framework lies not merely in its identification of these dimensions individually, many of which have appeared in previous studies, but in demonstrating how they interact within the specific context of Islamic higher education to shape stakeholders' understandings of quality. The framework also contributes to international discussions on education quality by bringing perspectives from a non-Western educational context into a field that has traditionally been dominated by Western quality assurance paradigms.

Rather than rejecting global quality frameworks, the findings suggest a need for a more inclusive approach that recognizes multiple understandings of quality and incorporates local educational values and priorities. In conclusion, this study demonstrates that education quality is not simply a matter of meeting institutional standards or achieving measurable outcomes. Instead, it is a dynamic, negotiated, and contextually embedded process shaped by pedagogical practices, interpersonal relationships, ethical values, and institutional conditions. By critically examining these dimensions within Indonesian Islamic universities, the study offers both conceptual and practical contributions to ongoing debates about how education quality should be understood, assessed, and enhanced in diverse higher education contexts.

6. Conclusion

This study set out to reconceptualize education quality in higher education by examining how it is understood, enacted, and experienced in Indonesian Islamic universities. Moving beyond dominant metric-driven frameworks, the findings demonstrate that education quality is best understood as a context-sensitive, relational, and value-infused process that is shaped by the interaction of pedagogical practices, institutional conditions, and moral-spiritual orientations.

A key contribution of this study lies in its challenge of the assumption that education quality can be universally defined through standardized indicators such as performance metrics, rankings, or employability outcomes. Instead, the findings highlight that quality is experienced and constructed through meaningful learning, active participation, relational engagement, and ethical development. In this sense, education quality is not a fixed outcome but an

ongoing and negotiated practice that is deeply embedded in specific institutional and cultural contexts.

Importantly, this study advances a context-sensitive global framework of education quality that integrates five interconnected dimensions: 1) Transformative and meaningful learning; (2) Dialogic and participatory pedagogy; (3) Relational and affective engagement; (4) Ethical-spiritual integration; and (5) Context-dependent enactment shaped by institutional realities. This framework contributes to a growing body of literature that calls for more pluralistic and inclusive understandings of quality, particularly by incorporating perspectives from non-Western and value-based educational contexts. The findings also reveal important tensions that shape educational practice. These include tensions between transformative educational ideals and institutional constraints, between normative value integration and its practical implementation, and between standardization and the need for context-sensitive approaches. Rather than viewing these tensions as limitations, this study suggests that such tensions are inherent to complex educational systems and must be acknowledged by any meaningful effort to improve quality.

From a practical perspective, the study highlights the need for higher education institutions to move beyond compliance-based quality assurance systems toward more practice-oriented and human-centered approaches. Doing so would include supporting lecturers to develop interactive and meaningful pedagogies, creating institutional conditions that enable rather than constrain quality teaching, and fostering deeper integration of ethical and spiritual values within curricula and classroom practices. At the policy level, the findings suggest that global and national quality frameworks should be more flexible and responsive to local contexts. Rather than imposing uniform standards, policymakers should encourage contextual adaptation and innovation and enable institutions to define and enact quality in ways that are meaningful for their specific cultural and educational settings.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. The research is based on a qualitative case study of three Indonesian Islamic higher education institutions, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. The study aimed for analytical rather than statistical generalization, and further research in different contexts is needed to expand and refine the proposed framework. Additionally, the study focuses primarily on teaching and learning practices, and future research could explore other dimensions of education quality, such as leadership, governance, and student outcomes. Scholars are also encouraged to examine how the proposed context-sensitive framework can be applied and adapted across diverse higher education systems, including non-Islamic and Western contexts. Comparative and longitudinal research could provide deeper insights into how education quality evolves over time and across different institutional environments.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that reconceptualizing education quality requires a shift from viewing quality as a set of measurable indicators to

understanding it as a dynamic, contextually embedded, and value-driven process. By foregrounding lived experiences, relational dynamics, and ethical dimensions, the study offers a more comprehensive and globally relevant perspective on education quality. This reconceptualization not only contributes to academic debates but also provides practical insights for improving teaching and learning in higher education worldwide.

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