

# State Policy, Islamic Knowledge Integration, and Academic Modernization in Malaysian Islamic Higher Education

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## Abstract

This article examines the transformation of Malaysian Islamic higher education within the intersecting dynamics of state policy, Islamic knowledge integration, and academic modernization. Using a qualitative library-based approach, the study analyzes scholarly literature, policy-oriented studies, and institutional discussions related to Islamic higher education governance, curriculum reform, digital transformation, and comparative educational development. The article argues that Malaysian Islamic higher education is neither merely preserving inherited religious traditions nor simply adopting secular models of modernization. Rather, it is undergoing a negotiated transformation shaped by centralized state governance, Islamic epistemology, curriculum integration, financial sustainability, digital innovation, and global academic pressures. The findings show that state policy provides coherence, legitimacy, and regulatory direction, but may also constrain academic autonomy and intellectual plurality. At the same time, the integration of naqli and aqli knowledge, *Maqāṣid al-sharīʿa*-based education, and the mainstreaming of Islamic knowledge offer important foundations for reform. However, these efforts require stronger faculty development, coherent curriculum design, digital capacity, and institutional flexibility. The article contributes an integrated framework for understanding how governance, epistemology, and modernization jointly shape Islamic higher education reform in Malaysia and other Muslim-majority contexts.

## Keywords

Islamic higher education, Malaysia, state policy, Islamic knowledge integration, academic modernization, *maqāṣid al-sharīʿa*, digital transformation

## Introduction

Malaysia offers one of the most significant cases for examining how Islamic higher education is shaped by the close relationship between religion, state policy, and academic modernization. Unlike contexts where Islamic education grows mainly through community initiatives or independent religious institutions, Malaysian Islamic education has been deeply embedded in state formation, national identity, and bureaucratic governance. Hosen and Shukri (2024) show that Islamic governance in Malaysia has increasingly been organized through formal state mechanisms, while Tayeb (2017) reminds us that state-defined Islamic orthodoxy has become an important force in shaping educational institutions and religious authority. This does not mean that Islamic higher education in Malaysia is merely an administrative project. It is also an intellectual, moral, and civilizational project, one that tries to preserve Islamic knowledge while responding to the demands of modern universities, global competitiveness, digital transformation, and professional education.

The Malaysian case is important because it reveals a form of state-led Islamic educational reform that is both ambitious and complicated. Tayeb (2018) argues that Islamic education in Malaysia and Indonesia has long been connected to broader efforts to shape Muslim minds and moral identities, yet Malaysia's model is marked by stronger central coordination and a more explicit concern for religious standardization. In this setting, Islamic higher education is expected to produce graduates who are not only professionally competent but also ethically grounded and Islamically oriented. Idris, Sirat, and Da Wan (2019) place Islamic-based higher education institutions within the broader agenda of sustainable Islamic communities, suggesting that these institutions are not peripheral to national development. They are expected to contribute to social cohesion, religious continuity, intellectual formation, and national modernization. That is a demanding role, perhaps even an uneasy one.

State policy has therefore become a central force in shaping the governance of Malaysian Islamic higher education. Federal agencies and related religious institutions influence curriculum direction, institutional identity, and the boundaries of acceptable religious discourse. Tayeb (2017) links this pattern to the formation of state Islamic orthodoxies, while Hosen and Shukri (2024) describe the strategic implementation of Islamic governance as part of Malaysia's institutional development. At one level, this centralized approach provides coherence. It helps align Islamic education with national priorities, public regulation, and institutional accountability. Yet it also raises a difficult question. How much centralization can Islamic higher education absorb before academic autonomy, intellectual plurality, and local initiative begin to narrow? This question becomes more visible in states such as Kelantan, where Aroney and Neoh (2026), Salleh (1999), and Tayeb and Annuar (2018) show that federal-state tensions affect the management of Islamic education, the autonomy of religious institutions, and the relationship between local Islamic traditions and federal policy structures.

At the same time, Malaysian Islamic higher education faces growing pressure to modernize. Modernization here should not be understood simply as adopting new technology or following global university rankings. It involves curriculum reform, pedagogical innovation, research productivity, digital infrastructure, internationalization, quality assurance, and the ability to engage modern disciplines without losing Islamic ethical orientation. Hanafi (2021) discusses the shift at the International Islamic University Malaysia from the earlier discourse of Islamization of knowledge toward the mainstreaming of Islamic knowledge, a shift that reflects a broader attempt to integrate Islamic epistemology into modern academic structures. Mohiuddin and Borham (2024) similarly indicate that Islamic education in Malaysia must operate within a globalized world, where religious knowledge, professional competence, and cross-cultural engagement increasingly overlap. It is understandable, then, that Islamic higher education institutions are no longer judged only by their fidelity to tradition, but also by their capacity to innovate.

Curriculum modernization is one of the most visible expressions of this transformation. Mazlan, Wakil, Noh, and Riyaldi (2025) argue that integrated education in Malaysian Islamic higher education presents both opportunities and serious challenges, especially in relation to faculty readiness, curriculum design, and institutional support. Mohd Saad, Mohamad, Mohd Ataa, and Amran (2025) show that higher-order thinking skills can be strengthened through tahfiz-integrated curriculum, while Abdullah et al. (2024), Abdullah et al. (2025), and Awang et al. (2025) suggest that tahfiz-academic integration has become an important model for combining Qur'anic formation with contemporary academic achievement. These developments show that Islamic knowledge integration is not merely a slogan. It requires pedagogical design, assessment reform, faculty development, and careful negotiation between revealed knowledge and rational inquiry.

Digital transformation adds another layer to this negotiation. Huda and Hussin (2010) had already identified organizational barriers to ICT implementation in Islamic-based higher education, and more recent studies by Zahari et al. (2018), Abbas, Naz'ri Mahrin, and Maarop (2023), Yasin et al. (2025), and Widodo (2025) show that digital platforms, artificial intelligence, and technology-enhanced learning are increasingly relevant to Islamic educational reform. Yet digitalization is not neutral. It changes how knowledge is accessed, how authority is mediated, and how students encounter religious and academic content. Wedi, Mardiana, and Umiarso (2025), together with Rashed et al. (2025), suggest that Islamic education in the digital era must address both innovation and value preservation. In our view, this is one of the most delicate issues in contemporary Islamic higher education. Technology may expand access and efficiency, but it can also unsettle older forms of authority, discipline, and spiritual formation.

The main problem addressed in this article is how Malaysian Islamic higher education negotiates religious authority, academic autonomy, knowledge integration, and modernization within a highly structured policy environment. The central argument is that Malaysian Islamic higher education is neither a simple continuation of traditional religious learning nor a straightforward adoption of secular academic modernization. Rather, it is a negotiated formation shaped by state policy, Islamic epistemology, institutional adaptation, financial sustainability, digital transformation, and global higher education pressures. This article therefore asks how state policy shapes Islamic higher education governance in Malaysia, how Islamic knowledge is integrated into modern academic structures, what challenges emerge from curriculum and digital modernization, and what broader implications the Malaysian case offers for Islamic higher education reform in Muslim-majority societies.

## **Literature Review and Theoretical Framework**

### *State Policy and the Governance of Islamic Education*

State policy is a decisive entry point for understanding Islamic education in Malaysia because religious education has never developed outside the orbit of public authority. Hosen and Shukri (2024) show that Islamic governance in Malaysia has been institutionalized through state strategies, bureaucratic coordination, and policy instruments that seek to align religious life with national development. In education, this means that Islamic institutions are not only spaces of learning, but also sites where the state defines, regulates, and legitimizes particular forms of Islamic knowledge. Tayeb (2017) describes this process as the production of state Islamic orthodoxy, a concept that helps explain why curriculum, religious authority, and institutional direction are often shaped by centralized governance.

This centralization has certain strengths. Tayeb (2018) suggests that the Malaysian model offers coherence in shaping Muslim identity, moral discipline, and national educational direction. Yet the same model also produces tensions. Aroney and Neoh (2026) explain that Malaysian federalism creates complex boundaries between federal authority and state jurisdiction in Islamic affairs, while Salleh (1999) and Tayeb and Annuar (2018) show that Kelantan illustrates the difficulty of preserving local Islamic autonomy within a broader federal policy structure. The issue is not merely administrative. It touches the deeper question of who has the authority to define Islamic education and for what purposes.

Financial governance further complicates this picture. Latief et al. (2021) indicate that madrasahs may face difficult choices between state funding and institutional autonomy. Don et al. (2025) and Sanusi et al. (2025) therefore become relevant because waqf and digital generosity offer alternative models of sustainability. Hamdan et al. (2023) also remind us that social capital and Islamic microfinancing can support educational ecosystems. In this sense, governance includes law, bureaucracy, funding, and community trust.

### *Islamic Knowledge Integration in Higher Education*

Islamic knowledge integration is one of the most distinctive intellectual foundations of Malaysian Islamic higher education. Hanafi (2021) argues that the International Islamic University Malaysia has moved from the earlier project of Islamization of knowledge toward the mainstreaming of Islamic knowledge. This shift is important. Islamization of knowledge often implies the reconstruction of modern disciplines through Islamic epistemological principles, while mainstreaming suggests a more institutionalized attempt to embed Islamic values, concepts, and ethical purposes into the ordinary structures of university education. The difference may appear subtle, but it matters for curriculum design and academic practice.

Idris et al. (2019) frame Islamic-based higher education institutions as contributors to sustainable Islamic communities, which means that knowledge integration is not limited to classroom content. It includes social purpose, ethical formation, institutional mission, and graduate identity. Mohiuddin and Borham (2024) also show that Islamic education in a globalized world must engage modern knowledge without weakening its religious foundations. Here, the concepts of naqli and aqli knowledge become central. Naqli refers to revealed knowledge, while aqli refers to rational, empirical, and human intellectual inquiry. The task of Islamic higher education is not simply to place these two domains side by side, but to create a meaningful intellectual relationship between them.

Mazlan et al. (2025) demonstrate that integrated education in Malaysia still faces difficulties in faculty readiness, curriculum overload, and institutional implementation. Umar et al. (2012) make a similar point through the challenge of incorporating the al-Azhar curriculum into Malaysia's national system. Zul et al. (2026) further indicate that integrating Islamic ethics into modern curricula requires more than moral vocabulary. It needs pedagogical clarity and institutional commitment. Rekan et al. (2025), Mohd Saad et al. (2025), and Jima'ain et al. (2024) suggest that language, higher-order thinking, and sirah education can become bridges between Islamic tradition and modern learning. This is where *Maqāṣid al-sharī'a* becomes useful, because it links knowledge with human welfare, moral reasoning, and educational purpose.

### *Academic Modernization and Institutional Transformation*

Academic modernization in Islamic higher education refers to the transformation of institutions so that they can respond to contemporary academic expectations without abandoning their Islamic orientation. Ismail and Othman (2020) show that curriculum evaluation in Islamic education must consider philosophical coherence, content relevance, and educational outcomes. Hendek et al. (2022) and Ismail et al. (2024) further indicate that comparative curriculum structures reveal how Islamic higher education is shaped by national policy, accreditation demands, disciplinary expectations, and professional standards. In simple terms, modernization asks Islamic higher education to become more accountable, more innovative, and more globally conversant.

Internationalization is part of this transformation. Sidhu and Kaur (2011) discuss Malaysia's strategic initiatives in enhancing global competence, while Mustapha et al. (2021) show that Malaysian higher education is increasingly oriented toward global education. Yean (2012) reminds us, however, that domestic regulations remain influential in shaping higher education governance. This means that international competitiveness does not remove the state. It often intensifies the need for regulatory adjustment, institutional strategy, and policy coordination. Ahmad et al. (2013) similarly show that strategic planning in Malaysian higher education can incorporate Islamic principles, although it must still respond to organizational realities and social costs.

Digital transformation has become another major expression of modernization. Zahari et al. (2018) propose a digital transformation design for IIUM as a university of the future, while Abbas et al. (2023) show how the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated digital

transformation in Malaysian higher education. Bujang et al. (2022) emphasize information technology governance, and Bin Md Ajis et al. (2020) point to information security as a critical issue for higher learning institutions. Hishamudin et al. (2025), Yasin et al. (2025), and Wedi et al. (2025) show that digital platforms, innovative learning, and AI-era religious education can expand access and engagement. Still, Nugraha et al. (2025), Setiowati and Handayani (2025), and Siregar and Susilawati (2026) remind us that learning achievement, Islamic integration, and spirituality depend on human guidance, not technology alone.

### *Conceptual Framework*

The conceptual framework of this article is built on the interaction among state policy, Islamic knowledge integration, and academic modernization. These three dimensions should not be treated as separate variables. They are better understood as overlapping forces that shape how Malaysian Islamic higher education defines its mission, governs its institutions, designs its curriculum, and responds to global change. State policy provides regulation, resources, authority, and ideological direction. Islamic knowledge integration provides epistemological and ethical orientation. Academic modernization provides the institutional pressure to innovate, compete, digitalize, and internationalize.

Tayeb (2018) and Thoha et al. (2023) are useful for situating Malaysia comparatively, especially in relation to Indonesia's more decentralized and plural educational governance. Faishal et al. (2026) also show that Islamic higher education in Indonesia negotiates tradition and modernity through different institutional pathways. These comparisons help clarify that Malaysia's model is not universal. It is shaped by its own federal structure, religious bureaucracy, national development agenda, and institutional history. That is why Malaysia is analytically valuable. It allows us to see how Islamic higher education becomes a negotiated space between state-defined order and intellectual renewal.

Within this framework, modernization is not assumed to be secularization. Nor is Islamic tradition assumed to be static. The more productive argument is that Malaysian Islamic higher education develops through negotiated adaptation. State policy may create coherence, but it can also limit autonomy. Islamic knowledge integration may strengthen ethical and spiritual formation, but it can also face implementation challenges. Digital and academic modernization may open new opportunities, but they can also create pressures that unsettle inherited educational practices. According to this article's framework, the future of Malaysian Islamic higher education depends on its ability to balance these forces without reducing one dimension to the others.

### **Method**

This article employs a qualitative library-based research design using conceptual and critical analysis. Since the study does not involve fieldwork, interviews, surveys, or classroom observation, its methodological strength lies in the careful interpretation of existing scholarship and policy-related literature. Tayeb (2017) and Tayeb (2018) are used to frame the relationship between Islamic education, state orthodoxy, and national governance, while Hanafi (2021) and Idris et al. (2019) help explain the intellectual movement from Islamization of knowledge to the mainstreaming of Islamic knowledge in Malaysian higher education. The study is therefore not intended to measure institutional performance statistically. Rather, it seeks to understand how ideas, policies, institutions, and educational reforms interact within a particular national and religious context.

The data sources consist of peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, conference proceedings, policy-oriented studies, and institutional literature related to Malaysian Islamic higher education. Hosen and Shukri (2024), Aroney and Neoh (2026), Salleh (1999), and Tayeb and Annuar (2018) provide important materials for examining governance, federal-state relations, and the role of Islamic bureaucracy. Studies by Mazlan et al. (2025), Mohd

Saad et al. (2025), Umar et al. (2012), and Zul et al. (2026) are used to examine curriculum integration, pedagogical reform, and the institutional challenges of combining Islamic and modern academic knowledge. Meanwhile, Zahari et al. (2018), Abbas et al. (2023), Huda and Hussin (2010), and Bujang et al. (2022) support the discussion of digital transformation, ICT governance, and technological modernization in higher education.

The analytical procedure follows thematic analysis, although it is applied in a conceptual rather than purely empirical sense. The collected sources were read and grouped into several recurring themes, including state governance, federal-state tension, Islamic knowledge integration, curriculum modernization, digital transformation, financial sustainability, and comparative policy implications. Sanusi et al. (2025), Don et al. (2025), and Latief et al. (2021) were considered when analyzing alternative financial models such as waqf, zakat, digital fundraising, and institutional autonomy. Mustapha et al. (2021), Sidhu and Kaur (2011), Yean (2012), and Thoha et al. (2023) were used to interpret internationalization, higher education regulation, and comparative governance. In this process, the sources were not treated as isolated findings. They were examined relationally, with attention to how Malaysian Islamic higher education negotiates religious authority, academic autonomy, knowledge integration, and modernization. This approach allows the article to build a coherent argument while still acknowledging complexity, tension, and some unresolved questions within the field.

## **Results and Discussion**

### *State Policy and the Centralized Governance of Malaysian Islamic Higher Education*

State policy occupies a formative position in Malaysian Islamic higher education. It does not merely regulate institutions from the outside, as if policy were only an administrative layer added after religious education had already developed on its own. Rather, state policy has become part of the internal architecture of Islamic educational governance. Hosen and Shukri (2024) show that Islamic governance in Malaysia has been organized through formal strategies, institutional mechanisms, and bureaucratic procedures that seek to align Islamic values with national development. In higher education, this alignment produces a distinctive model in which Islamic knowledge, institutional authority, and curriculum direction are shaped within a centralized policy environment. This is one of the reasons Malaysia is often seen as a strong example of state-led Islamic education reform.

Tayeb (2017) argues that Malaysian Islamic education is shaped by state Islamic orthodoxy, and this concept is useful for understanding how religious knowledge is not only transmitted but also authorized. Orthodoxy here does not simply refer to theological correctness in a narrow sense. It also refers to the state's capacity to define what counts as legitimate Islamic discourse, which institutions may teach it, and how Islamic identity should be cultivated through education. Tayeb (2018) further shows that Islamic education in Malaysia has been closely linked to the formation of Muslim subjectivity, national identity, and moral discipline. In this respect, Malaysian Islamic higher education does not operate as a neutral academic space. It is part of a larger project of shaping citizens, professionals, and religiously conscious graduates.

Centralized governance provides several advantages. It allows the state to standardize educational expectations, coordinate curriculum policy, regulate institutional development, and ensure that Islamic education remains connected to national priorities. Hosen and Shukri (2024) indicate that Islamic governance strategies in Malaysia have sought to make religious administration more systematic and publicly accountable. From one angle, this strengthens institutional coherence. It helps Islamic higher education avoid fragmentation, especially in a society where religious authority, ethnic politics, and national development are deeply intertwined. It is something of a practical necessity, or at least the state presents it that way.

Yet this coherence also produces constraints. Tayeb (2017) reminds us that state orthodoxy may narrow the range of acceptable Islamic interpretations within formal education. Academic institutions, especially universities, are expected to cultivate critical inquiry, intellectual openness, and disciplinary debate. However, when Islamic higher education is closely governed by centralized religious and political structures, academic autonomy may become limited. This tension is not always visible as open conflict. Sometimes it appears in curriculum decisions, staffing norms, accreditation requirements, research priorities, or the implicit boundaries placed around sensitive religious questions. The problem is subtle but important. A university may remain formally academic while its intellectual space is quietly shaped by policy expectations.

The centralization of Islamic higher education also affects curriculum design. Idris, Sirat, and Da Wan (2019) suggest that Islamic-based higher education institutions in Malaysia are expected to support sustainable Islamic communities. This expectation gives Islamic higher education a moral and social mission beyond the production of technical expertise. Curriculum, therefore, is not designed only to transfer disciplinary knowledge. It is also expected to form ethical awareness, religious identity, and communal responsibility. Mohiuddin and Borham (2024) similarly note that Islamic education in Malaysia must respond to globalization without losing its religious foundation. Such a task requires state support, but it also requires curricular flexibility. The difficulty is that centralization may create consistency while reducing the space for experimentation.

The issue becomes sharper when institutional authority is considered. Centralized governance tends to place religious bureaucracy in a strong position. Federal religious agencies and state-linked bodies influence how Islamic education institutions are recognized, funded, evaluated, and sometimes ideologically guided. In principle, this may protect Islamic education from commercialization, doctrinal confusion, or institutional disorder. Still, according to Tayeb (2018), the Malaysian approach differs from more plural and decentralized models because it relies more heavily on authoritative regulation. This creates a trade-off. The state can protect Islamic education, but it can also domesticate it. That is perhaps the most delicate point in the Malaysian case.

The governance of Islamic higher education also reflects broader national educational direction. Sidhu and Kaur (2011) discuss Malaysia's efforts to enhance global competence in higher education, and this agenda inevitably influences Islamic institutions as well. Islamic universities and colleges are expected to meet modern standards of academic quality, employability, research productivity, and international relevance. At the same time, they must preserve Islamic ethical commitments. These expectations are not always easy to reconcile. A centralized system can help coordinate reform, but it may also turn reform into compliance. When modernization becomes a policy mandate, institutions may focus on meeting formal standards rather than developing organic intellectual renewal.

This does not mean that centralization is necessarily harmful. In fact, it may be one of the reasons Malaysia has been able to institutionalize Islamic higher education more visibly than many other contexts. The issue is balance. Strong governance can provide direction, but Islamic higher education also needs academic trust, scholarly freedom, and institutional creativity. Without these, modernization risks becoming procedural rather than intellectual. The Malaysian experience shows that the state can be a powerful enabler of Islamic educational development, but it also shows that state power must be negotiated carefully. Otherwise, the same policy structure that strengthens Islamic higher education may also limit the plurality, critical inquiry, and epistemic openness that higher education requires.

#### *Federal-State Tensions, Institutional Autonomy, and Financial Sustainability*

Federal-state relations are central to the governance of Islamic education in Malaysia because Islamic affairs are not located within a simple administrative structure. Aroney and

Neoh (2026) explain that Malaysian federalism creates complex jurisdictional boundaries, especially in matters involving Islam, state authority, and law. Islamic education is affected by this arrangement because religious authority is historically and constitutionally connected to the states, while education policy, funding, and institutional regulation are often influenced by federal structures. This layered governance creates both cooperation and tension. It is not simply a legal matter. It shapes how institutions survive, how curricula are recognized, and how local religious traditions are positioned within national frameworks.

Kelantan provides an especially important case. Salleh (1999) shows that the state of Kelantan has long carried strong Islamic aspirations, including efforts to assert Islamic governance and preserve local religious identity. Tayeb and Annuar (2018) further demonstrate that the management of Islamic education in Kelantan reflects the tension between state autonomy and federal intervention. Independent Islamic schools and religious institutions may value local authority, traditional legitimacy, and community-based support. Yet they also face the practical realities of funding, recognition, staffing, and policy compliance. In many cases, autonomy is not lost through direct coercion. It is negotiated through administrative dependence and financial vulnerability.

Latief et al. (2021) capture this dilemma through the case of madrasahs that must choose between becoming state-funded institutions and retaining autonomy. This choice is not easy. State funding can provide stability, teacher salaries, infrastructure, and official recognition. However, it may also require curriculum alignment, administrative reporting, and acceptance of state oversight. Retaining autonomy allows institutions to preserve distinctive religious traditions, pedagogical priorities, and community-based governance. Yet autonomy without sustainable funding can become fragile. We might say that independence is meaningful only when institutions possess the resources needed to maintain it.

Financial sustainability is therefore not a secondary issue. It directly affects institutional identity and academic freedom. Don et al. (2025) discuss waqf-based higher education as an important model for strengthening institutional sustainability in Malaysia. Waqf, traditionally understood as an Islamic endowment dedicated to public benefit, offers a way to support education while preserving moral and communal ownership. In the context of Islamic higher education, waqf can reduce dependence on direct state funding and open space for institutional flexibility. However, Don et al. (2025) also show that waqf-based systems face governance, management, and scalability challenges. A noble financial idea still requires professional administration.

Sanusi et al. (2025) extend this discussion through their analysis of cash waqf engagement among Malaysian millennials. Their work suggests that digital platforms may transform generosity into a more accessible and participatory practice. This is relevant for Islamic higher education because digital fundraising can mobilize younger donors, alumni networks, and community supporters. The digitization of waqf and charitable giving may help institutions diversify resources without abandoning Islamic financial principles. Yet it also requires trust, transparency, digital literacy, and credible institutional governance. It would be naive to assume that digital fundraising automatically solves structural financial problems.

Zakat and community support also remain important. Although zakat is not always designed specifically as a higher education funding mechanism, its social welfare orientation can support students, scholarships, and community-linked educational programs. Hamdan, Kassim, Mustapha, and Seman (2023) show that Islamic microfinancing, social capital, and ICT usage can improve the performance of women micro-entrepreneurs in Malaysia. While their study is not limited to higher education, it is conceptually relevant because it highlights the role of Islamic financial instruments, community networks, and digital capacity in strengthening social development. Islamic higher education can learn from such models,

especially when thinking about student support, entrepreneurship, and community-based sustainability.

The broader policy question is how institutions can comply with national standards while preserving meaningful autonomy. Tayeb and Annuar (2018) suggest that federal absorption or alignment may weaken local control, particularly in states with strong Islamic educational traditions. At the same time, fully fragmented systems may produce uneven quality and limited institutional capacity. This is where the tension becomes real. Centralization supports coherence, but autonomy supports diversity. Funding supports sustainability, but it may also shape institutional obedience. Community-based models support independence, but they may lack scale and stability.

For Malaysian Islamic higher education, financial sustainability should be understood as part of governance reform. It is not merely about finding money. It is about designing institutional arrangements that allow Islamic higher education to remain academically credible, religiously grounded, and socially responsive. Waqf, zakat, digital philanthropy, alumni contributions, and community financing may complement state support, but they require transparent governance and strategic planning. If this balance can be developed, Islamic higher education institutions may gain more room to innovate while still remaining connected to national educational goals. The Malaysian case therefore teaches a modest but important lesson. Autonomy is not only a legal status. It is also a financial, administrative, and moral capacity.

#### *Islamic Knowledge Integration from Islamization to Mainstreaming*

Islamic knowledge integration is the intellectual core of Malaysian Islamic higher education. Without this dimension, the discussion of governance and modernization would remain incomplete. Hanafi (2021) shows that the International Islamic University Malaysia has moved from the earlier project of Islamization of knowledge toward the mainstreaming of Islamic knowledge. This shift is significant because it reflects a change in how Islamic epistemology is positioned within the university. Islamization of knowledge often begins from a critique of modern secular disciplines and seeks to reconstruct them through Islamic worldview, values, and categories of meaning. Mainstreaming, by contrast, suggests that Islamic knowledge should not remain an external corrective or symbolic addition. It should become part of the ordinary structure of curriculum, research, pedagogy, and institutional culture.

This transition is not merely terminological. It affects how universities imagine the relationship between revealed knowledge and modern disciplines. Idris et al. (2019) describe Islamic-based higher education institutions as contributors to sustainable Islamic communities, which implies that knowledge integration must produce social, ethical, and civilizational outcomes. The goal is not only to make economics, law, medicine, education, or science appear Islamic through terminology. It is to orient these disciplines toward human well-being, moral responsibility, and the common good. Mohiuddin and Borham (2024) similarly argue that Islamic education in a globalized world must engage contemporary knowledge while preserving Islamic commitments. That balance is difficult, but it is exactly where the intellectual value of Islamic higher education lies.

The concepts of naqli and aqli knowledge are central to this integration. Naqli knowledge refers to revealed sources, including the Qur'an, hadith, and inherited Islamic scholarly traditions. Aqli knowledge refers to rational, empirical, and analytical inquiry. In practice, the challenge is not simply to place naqli and aqli courses within the same curriculum. Mazlan et al. (2025) show that integrated education in Malaysian Islamic higher education faces obstacles related to faculty training, curriculum structure, and institutional readiness. If lecturers are trained within separate epistemic traditions, integration may

remain superficial. A course may include Islamic references, but its underlying assumptions, assessment methods, and disciplinary logic may remain unchanged.

*Maqāṣid al-sharī'a* provides one possible framework for deeper integration. It links knowledge to the objectives of Islamic law and ethics, including the protection and flourishing of religion, life, intellect, lineage, property, and broader human welfare. Hanafi (2021) indicates that IIUM's movement toward mainstreaming Islamic knowledge is connected to a broader effort to embed Islamic ethical purpose into academic formation. Maqāṣid-based education allows Islamic higher education to move beyond the binary between religious and secular knowledge. It asks a more meaningful question. What kind of human being, society, and moral order should education help to form? This question is especially relevant in modern universities, where knowledge is often measured through productivity, employability, and market relevance.

Curriculum integration, however, remains difficult. Ismail and Othman (2020) show that the content of Islamic education programs must be evaluated in relation to Islamic educational philosophy, while Hendek et al. (2022) show through comparison with Turkey that higher religious education is shaped by national structures and institutional expectations. Ismail et al. (2024) further indicate that undergraduate religious education curricula in Indonesia and Malaysia differ in structure, emphasis, and governance logic. These studies suggest that integration is never abstract. It is shaped by credit systems, accreditation, course distribution, teacher qualifications, and institutional policy. A beautiful epistemological vision may become heavy when translated into curriculum documents.

Curriculum overload is one of the most visible problems. Mazlan et al. (2025) note that integrated education requires students and lecturers to engage both Islamic and modern academic content, sometimes within already crowded program structures. Mohd Saad et al. (2025) show that tahfiz-integrated curriculum can strengthen higher-order thinking skills, but such integration requires careful design rather than mere accumulation. Abdullah et al. (2024), Abdullah et al. (2025), and Awang et al. (2025) suggest that tahfiz-academic integration can support intellectual, spiritual, and academic development. Yet these programs also illustrate the need for balance. When too many objectives are added without curricular coherence, students may experience integration as burden rather than formation.

Faculty preparedness is another major challenge. Zul et al. (2026) argue that integrating Islamic ethics into modern education curricula requires institutional support and pedagogical clarity. Umar et al. (2012) show that attempts to produce Islamic scholars through al-Azhar-oriented curricula in Malaysia face challenges related to recognition, adaptation, and system compatibility. Mujani, Abdullah, and Bakar (2012) highlight the historical role of al-Azhar in disseminating Islamic religious knowledge in Malaysia, which reminds us that transnational Islamic authority still influences local educational imagination. Yet importing or adapting traditional models into modern national systems is never simple. It requires legal recognition, academic equivalence, teacher preparation, and institutional negotiation.

Disciplinary separation also complicates knowledge integration. Essa, Hassan, and Ramlee (2020) show through the case of sharia law students that academic language proficiency is necessary for higher learning. This point may appear technical, but it is actually epistemologically significant. Students cannot integrate knowledge if they cannot move across languages, disciplines, and modes of reasoning. Rekan et al. (2025) similarly suggest that Arabic language curriculum can strengthen religious education in public higher education. Language, in this sense, is not only a communication tool. It is a gateway to tradition, interpretation, and scholarly authority.

The movement from Islamization to mainstreaming therefore requires more than institutional slogans. It requires curricular architecture, faculty development,

interdisciplinary literacy, language competence, and assessment reform. Jima'ain et al. (2024) show that higher-order thinking can be embedded in Islamic history education, and this offers a useful direction. Islamic knowledge integration should not produce passive memorization or symbolic religiosity. It should cultivate analytical reasoning, ethical judgment, historical awareness, and spiritual responsibility. In our view, this is the strongest promise of Malaysian Islamic higher education. It can show that Islamic knowledge is not an obstacle to modern academic life, but a source of moral depth and epistemic renewal. Yet that promise will remain incomplete unless integration is supported by serious institutional work.

#### *Academic Modernization, Digital Transformation, and Pedagogical Innovation*

Academic modernization has become unavoidable for Malaysian Islamic higher education. It appears in curriculum reform, digital learning, quality assurance, research expectations, internationalization, information technology governance, and pedagogical innovation. Sidhu and Kaur (2011) show that Malaysia has pursued global competence as part of higher education development, while Mustapha et al. (2021) explain that internationalization has become a major agenda in Malaysian higher education. Islamic higher education cannot stand outside this movement. It must demonstrate academic quality, institutional competitiveness, and global relevance while maintaining its Islamic mission. This double demand is not easy. It requires institutions to be modern without becoming spiritually empty, and to be Islamic without becoming intellectually closed.

Digital transformation is one of the clearest signs of this modernization. Zahari et al. (2018) propose a conceptual digital transformation design for IIUM as a university of the future, showing that Islamic universities are expected to reimagine governance, learning, and institutional services through digital systems. Abbas, Naz'ri Mahrin, and Maarop (2023) show that the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated digital transformation in Malaysian higher education institutions. Huda and Hussin (2010) had earlier identified ICT implementation barriers and organizational issues in Islamic-based higher education, and their work remains relevant because many digital challenges are institutional rather than merely technical. Digital learning depends on infrastructure, leadership, training, governance, and organizational culture.

Bujang, Othman, and Musa (2022) emphasize the importance of information technology governance in higher education institutions. This point matters because digital transformation cannot be reduced to purchasing platforms or moving lectures online. It requires alignment between technology, institutional mission, data management, academic quality, and user needs. Bin Md Ajis et al. (2020) also show that information security is a critical issue in Malaysian higher learning institutions. For Islamic higher education, this has ethical implications as well. Protecting data, ensuring digital trust, and managing online learning environments are not only administrative responsibilities. They are part of institutional amanah, or moral trust.

The use of digital platforms also changes the way Islamic knowledge is accessed and experienced. Hishamudin et al. (2025) show that intention to use digital platforms for Islamic financial education in Malaysia can be analyzed through structural factors, suggesting that users' engagement depends on perceived usefulness, accessibility, and trust. Yasin et al. (2025) discuss innovative learning models that improve spirituality among higher education students in Indonesia and Malaysia. Widodo (2025) further proposes an AI-gamification-religiosity learning model to enhance critical literacy in private Islamic universities. These studies suggest that digital tools can support not only academic delivery but also religious engagement, motivation, and critical thinking. Still, one should be careful. Technology may assist spiritual learning, but it cannot replace the moral presence of teachers.

Pedagogical innovation is therefore essential. Mohd Saad et al. (2025) show that higher-order thinking skills can be embedded in tahfiz-integrated curriculum through

qualitative document analysis. Jima'ain et al. (2024) similarly indicate that Islamic history education can be designed to cultivate higher-order thinking. These findings challenge the stereotype that Islamic education is mainly memorization-based. Memorization may remain important, especially in Qur'anic education, but it should not prevent analysis, reflection, argumentation, and ethical reasoning. Abdullah et al. (2024), Abdullah et al. (2025), and Awang et al. (2025) show that tahfiz-academic integration can strengthen both Qur'anic memorization and academic performance when it is managed carefully. This is a promising direction, though not without practical difficulty.

Curriculum reform must also respond to student diversity and professional needs. Nugraha et al. (2025) show that learning achievement in Islamic education is influenced by students' perceptions, attitudes, and classroom management. This means that modernization cannot be limited to curriculum content. It must also consider how students experience learning. Setiowati and Handayani (2025), through their study of Islamic integration in clinical nursing education, demonstrate that students' perceptions matter when Islamic values are integrated into professional curricula. Their work is valuable because it shows that integration must be meaningful in practice. Students should be able to see how Islamic values relate to professional ethics, not merely encounter them as decorative additions.

Digital transformation also affects spiritual formation. Siregar and Susilawati (2026) explore Sufism education among millennials, showing that spirituality in the twenty-first century is being reconfigured through new generational experiences. Wedi, Mardiana, and Umiarso (2025) discuss digital transformation in Islamic religious education in the AI era, while Rashed et al. (2025) examine Islamic education in the context of the Industrial Revolution 4.0. These studies indicate that Islamic education must now address algorithmic environments, online religious content, digital distraction, and changing patterns of authority. The question is not whether Islamic higher education should use technology. It already must. The more serious question is how technology can be used without weakening adab, discipline, depth, and intellectual responsibility.

Academic modernization also includes accreditation and quality assurance. Ismail and Othman (2020) show that Islamic education curriculum must be evaluated in relation to educational philosophy. This is important because quality assurance should not become a merely bureaucratic exercise. If accreditation pushes institutions to add competencies, learning outcomes, and assessment indicators without philosophical coherence, modernization may produce curriculum overload. Mazlan et al. (2025) warn that integrated education can be constrained by faculty readiness and institutional capacity. Sukor and Ibrahim (2011), although writing about decentralization in the Malaysian secondary school English language curriculum, offer a useful reminder that greater autonomy in curriculum design can support responsiveness and innovation.

Modernization in Islamic higher education must therefore remain ethically directed. Digital platforms, AI-supported learning, internationalization, and accreditation are useful only when they serve a larger educational purpose. Islamic higher education should not reject modernization, but neither should it imitate it uncritically. The Malaysian case shows that the more institutions modernize, the more they need clear Islamic educational aims. Otherwise, modernization may become a race toward technical sophistication without moral depth. A genuinely Islamic academic modernization should cultivate professional competence, critical literacy, spiritual formation, ethical responsibility, and social contribution together. That may sound demanding, but perhaps Islamic higher education has always carried precisely this kind of demanding mission.

#### *Comparative and Policy Implications for Islamic Higher Education Reform*

The Malaysian model becomes clearer when placed in comparative perspective. Tayeb (2018) shows that Islamic education in Malaysia and Indonesia shares a common concern

with shaping Muslim identity, but the two countries differ significantly in governance structure, ideological management, and institutional diversity. Malaysia's model is more centralized, with stronger state involvement in defining religious orthodoxy and coordinating educational direction. Indonesia, by contrast, is more decentralized and plural, partly because of its broader institutional diversity, civil society traditions, and dual governance structures in religious and national education. Thoha et al. (2023) add that education technology governance in Muslim countries also reflects different degrees of decentralization, policy coordination, and institutional adaptation.

Malaysia's centralized model has clear strengths. It can provide national coherence, policy consistency, institutional accountability, and a shared direction for Islamic educational reform. Hosen and Shukri (2024) show that Islamic governance in Malaysia has been strategically organized, and this organization allows Islamic education to be integrated into broader national development. Tayeb (2017) also suggests that state orthodoxy helps produce religious uniformity, which the state may regard as necessary for social cohesion. In a multiethnic and multireligious society, the state may see centralized Islamic education as a way to manage religious authority and avoid fragmentation. Whether one agrees fully or not, this rationale cannot be ignored.

However, centralization also has limitations. It may reduce institutional autonomy, constrain local interpretation, and limit intellectual experimentation. Tayeb and Annuar (2018) show through Kelantan that federal-state relations can create tensions in Islamic education management. Salleh (1999) had already demonstrated that local Islamic aspirations in Kelantan could differ from federal political and administrative priorities. The policy implication is clear. Centralized governance may strengthen order, but it must leave enough room for local educational traditions, scholarly debate, and institutional creativity. Without such room, Islamic higher education may become coherent but less dynamic.

Indonesia provides a useful contrast, not because it is ideal, but because it shows another way of organizing Islamic education. Thoha et al. (2023) suggest that decentralized governance can allow more flexible responses to technological and institutional change. Ismail et al. (2024) compare undergraduate religious education curricula in Indonesia and Malaysia and show that the two systems differ in program structure and educational emphasis. Faishal et al. (2026) also show that Indonesian master's programs in *aqidah* and Islamic philosophy negotiate tradition and modernity through institutional pathways that differ from Malaysia's more centralized model. This comparative evidence suggests that decentralization can support diversity and local adaptation. Yet it also brings challenges, including uneven quality, fragmented regulation, and bureaucratic complexity.

For policy reform, the real lesson is not that Malaysia should simply become more like Indonesia, or that Indonesia should copy Malaysia. The more useful lesson is that Islamic higher education requires a carefully calibrated governance model. Centralization is valuable when it supports quality, coherence, funding, and public accountability. Decentralization is valuable when it supports innovation, academic autonomy, contextual relevance, and intellectual plurality. Malaysian Islamic higher education may benefit from preserving the strengths of state coordination while expanding institutional discretion in curriculum development, research agenda setting, and pedagogical experimentation. This would not weaken Islamic education. It may actually make it more resilient.

Internationalization adds another policy layer. Sidhu and Kaur (2011), Mustapha et al. (2021), and Yean (2012) show that Malaysian higher education is shaped by global competitiveness, domestic regulation, and the need to engage international standards. For Islamic higher education, internationalization should not mean merely increasing foreign students, publishing in indexed journals, or using English-medium instruction. It should also involve intercultural Islamic scholarship, comparative curriculum development, ethical global citizenship, and research collaboration across Muslim-majority and minority contexts.

Essa et al. (2020) show that academic language proficiency is important for sharia law students, and this reminds us that internationalization requires linguistic and intellectual preparation, not only institutional branding.

The comparative implications also extend to curriculum and pedagogy. Hendek et al. (2022) show that higher religious education in Malaysia and Turkey differs according to national systems, while Rekan et al. (2025) and Jima'ain et al. (2024) indicate that Arabic language and Islamic history education can support religious literacy and higher-order thinking. These studies suggest that Islamic higher education reform must connect tradition with analytical capacity. Muslim-majority societies do not need to choose between inherited Islamic scholarship and modern academic standards. The more difficult but more meaningful task is to redesign institutions so that both can speak to each other.

The Malaysian case therefore contributes to broader debates on Islamic higher education reform. It shows that state policy can institutionalize Islamic knowledge, but it also reveals the risks of excessive bureaucratization. It shows that knowledge integration can deepen academic purpose, but only when supported by faculty development and curricular coherence. It shows that digital transformation can expand learning, but only when guided by Islamic ethical principles and sound governance. Perhaps the most important implication is that Islamic higher education reform should not be framed as a simple opposition between tradition and modernity. The Malaysian experience suggests a more complex reality. Reform is a negotiated process involving state authority, religious legitimacy, institutional autonomy, financial sustainability, technological change, and epistemological imagination. This negotiation is imperfect, but it is precisely where the future of Islamic higher education is being shaped.

## Conclusion

Malaysian Islamic higher education demonstrates that the relationship between religion, state policy, and academic modernization is never simple or linear. It is neither a mere continuation of inherited Islamic learning nor a direct adoption of secular models of higher education. Rather, it reflects a negotiated transformation in which religious authority, national governance, institutional autonomy, curriculum reform, and global academic expectations interact in complex ways. State policy has given Islamic higher education in Malaysia coherence, regulatory direction, and public legitimacy. Yet, at the same time, centralized governance also raises important questions about academic freedom, intellectual plurality, local initiative, and the space needed for institutional creativity.

The article has argued that Islamic knowledge integration stands at the center of this transformation. The movement from Islamization of knowledge toward the mainstreaming of Islamic knowledge suggests that Malaysian Islamic higher education is seeking a more embedded and institutionally sustainable model of epistemological reform. Naqli-aqli integration, *Maqāṣid al-sharī'a*-based education, tahfiz-academic models, and value-based pedagogy all indicate that modernization does not have to weaken Islamic identity. Still, such integration requires more than formal curriculum statements. It depends on faculty readiness, coherent curriculum design, language competence, assessment reform, digital capacity, and a clear understanding of the ethical purposes of education. Without these supports, integration may remain symbolic rather than transformative.

The main contribution of this article lies in offering an integrated framework for understanding how state policy and Islamic knowledge integration shape academic modernization in Malaysian Islamic higher education. By bringing governance, epistemology, curriculum, digital transformation, financial sustainability, and internationalization into one analytical frame, the article shows that reform in Islamic higher education must be read as a multidimensional process. Future research may strengthen this discussion through empirical studies involving university leaders, lecturers, students,

policymakers, and curriculum designers. Comparative studies across Muslim-majority contexts would also be valuable, especially to examine how different governance models influence autonomy, innovation, knowledge integration, and the long-term future of Islamic higher education.

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The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest to disclose. We further confirm that this manuscript is original and is not currently under consideration for publication by any other publisher.

### Ethical Considerations

All sources used in this study, including journal articles, books, research papers, and proceedings from scientific forums, were obtained and utilized in accordance with copyright regulations and are free from any copyright infringement.

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