

The Experiential Leadership Ecosystem: A New Model for Student Leadership Development in Islamic Boarding Schools

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Abstract:

This study aims to analyze leadership development strategies among students in Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) and to conceptualize these strategies into an integrated model. This study uses a qualitative, single-case design. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with fifteen purposively selected informants, participant observation, and analysis of organizational documentation and activity reports. Data analysis was conducted through data condensation, data presentation, and conclusion drawing and verification. The results show that student leadership development is carried out through a four-level cyclical strategy: basic learning through daily routines and role models; active involvement in internal student organizations; delegation of roles to represent the pesantren in external forums; and devolution of authority to senior students for managing strategic affairs. The main finding of this study is the conceptualization of these strategies within the "Experiential Leadership Ecosystem" model, which maps the process of student leadership development into four hierarchical, iterative levels of authority. This model integrates modern leadership theory with typical Islamic boarding school leadership practices. The research indicates that effective leadership development requires authentic participatory structures, integrating leadership learning into daily activities, and strengthening a culture of trust and mentoring among caregivers, teachers, and students.

Keywords: *Leadership, Integrated Model, Cyclical Strategy, Experiential Leadership Ecosystem*

Abstrak:

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis strategi pengembangan kepemimpinan santri di lingkungan pesantren mahasiswa serta mengonseptualisasikan strategi tersebut ke dalam sebuah model terpadu. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain studi kasus tunggal. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam dengan lima belas informan yang dipilih secara purposive, observasi partisipatif, serta analisis dokumentasi organisasi dan laporan kegiatan. Analisis data dilakukan melalui kondensasi data, penyajian data, dan penarikan kesimpulan serta verifikasi. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa pengembangan kepemimpinan santri dilakukan melalui strategi siklikal empat tingkat, yaitu: pembelajaran dasar melalui rutinitas harian dan keteladanan; keterlibatan aktif dalam organisasi santri internal; pendelegasian peran untuk mewakili pesantren dalam forum eksternal; serta devolusi kewenangan kepada santri senior dalam pengelolaan urusan strategis. Temuan utama penelitian ini adalah konseptualisasi strategi tersebut dalam model "Experiential Leadership Ecosystem", yang memetakan proses pengembangan kepemimpinan santri ke dalam empat tingkat otoritas yang bersifat hierarkis dan berulang. Model ini mengintegrasikan teori kepemimpinan modern dengan

praktik kepemimpinan khas pesantren. Implikasi penelitian menunjukkan bahwa pengembangan kepemimpinan yang efektif memerlukan struktur partisipatif yang autentik, integrasi pembelajaran kepemimpinan dalam aktivitas keseharian, serta penguatan budaya kepercayaan dan pendampingan antara pengasuh, guru, dan santri.

Kata Kunci: *Kepemimpinan, Model Terpadu, Strategi Siklikal, Experiential Leadership Ecosystem*

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INTRODUCTION

Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) have long been fundamental institutions in Indonesia's educational landscape, serving not only as centers for Islamic scholarship but also as spaces for character formation and social leadership development (Adeoye & Baharun, 2025; Moslimany et al., 2024). In contemporary contexts, the role of *pesantren* has expanded beyond traditional religious instruction to prepare students to contribute actively to modern society. Within this transformation, cultivating a strong leadership spirit among students (*santri*) has become increasingly important. Leadership spirit in this study refers to an emergent identity characterized by self-efficacy, resilience, commitment to collective welfare, and the internalization of ethical values. This concept aligns with contemporary leadership development theories that view leadership as a process of identity construction shaped through experience and social interaction and emphasize the importance of moral and character-based leadership (Alavi, 2024; Crossan et al., 2024). In *pesantren* settings, such leadership development often occurs through daily practices, habituation, and participation in institutional life rather than through formal theoretical instruction alone.

Despite the centrality of leadership formation in *pesantren*, a critical question arises: how is leadership systematically cultivated within the student community? While leadership development theories highlight experiential learning, mentoring, and progressive responsibility as key mechanisms for leadership formation, many *pesantrens* still rely on informal traditions rather than clearly structured frameworks. This creates a gap between theoretical expectations of leadership development and practical implementation in educational institutions. The issue becomes particularly relevant in *pesantren* environments where students are expected to assume organizational roles, lead communal activities, and embody ethical leadership in daily life. Therefore, understanding how leadership cultivation can be organized into a coherent, sustainable system is a crucial challenge for the management of Islamic education institutions.

A substantial body of research has examined leadership within the *pesantren* context from various perspectives. The first cluster of studies focuses on the charismatic, centralized leadership of the Kyai, emphasizing authority, moral influence, and the traditional governance structure of the *pesantren* (Nu'man, 2025; Rofiqi et al., 2026). These studies highlight how the Kyai serves as the central figure in shaping institutional values and guiding the *pesantren* community. A second group of studies explores the adoption of modern leadership and management approaches, including the application of transformational leadership models in *pesantren* management (Basri et al., 2024; Umar et al., 2024). These works examine

how visionary leadership can improve institutional performance and educational quality within Islamic boarding schools.

More recent research has begun to shift attention toward student leadership development through structured programs and organizational activities. Studies by Sari and Putra (2021) and Hasanah and Susanto (2024) investigate how student organizations and extracurricular programs function as platforms for developing leadership skills among santri. Additionally, emerging scholarship has explored the unique role of student Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren mahasiswa*) in preparing university students for leadership in complex social contexts (Kurniawan & Masykuri, 2022; Ahyar & Nurhakim, 2023; Rahman & Munir, 2024). While these studies contribute valuable insights, they often focus on specific activities or programs rather than examining how leadership development operates as an integrated institutional system.

Consequently, a significant research gap remains. Existing studies tend to emphasize individual leaders or programs rather than analyzing a comprehensive strategy that systematically cultivates leadership within the student body. Furthermore, the distinctive context of *pesantren mahasiswa* where students possess diverse academic backgrounds, greater autonomy, and stronger critical thinking capacities requires a different pedagogical and managerial approach compared with traditional secondary level *pesantren*. This dimension remains relatively underexplored in current literature. From a managerial perspective, the absence of a structured leadership development system may hinder organizational sustainability, weaken cadre regeneration, and potentially create leadership gaps within *pesantren* governance.

Based on these considerations, this study seeks to investigate how student leadership is systematically cultivated within a *pesantren mahasiswa* context and how such practices can be conceptualized into a coherent leadership development model. Specifically, this research addresses the following questions: What strategies are implemented to foster student leadership within the *pesantren* environment, and how can these strategies be conceptualized into an integrated leadership development model? The study advances the argument that leadership development in *pesantren* can be strengthened through a structured and experiential system that gradually grants students increasing levels of responsibility and authority. Through this process, leadership formation becomes embedded in the daily institutional ecosystem, enabling sustainable leadership regeneration within the *pesantren* community.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research is grounded in a qualitative paradigm using a single-case study design (Danford, 2023; Takona, 2024) to explore in depth the leadership development system within a student Islamic boarding school environment. The unit of analysis in this study is the santri leadership cadre system, particularly the mechanisms by which leadership responsibilities are organized and carried out through the student organization (OSPAM) and its delegation structures. The study was conducted at *Pesantren Mahasiswa Al-Hikam Malang*, East Java, an institution founded in 1992 with the institutional vision of integrating spiritual

devotion, academic achievement, and life readiness. This location was selected purposively because it represents an established example of a student *pesantren* with a structured leadership culture. The case is considered revelatory as it provides access to an institutionalized system of student leadership development embedded in daily routines, organizational practices, and delegated responsibilities within the *pesantren* governance structure.

The sources of information in this study consisted of primary and secondary data. Primary data were obtained from key informants who were directly involved in the leadership development process within the *pesantren*. Informants were selected using purposive and criterion sampling, with the criteria of having at least 1 year of involvement in the *pesantren* leadership structure and occupying roles as caretakers, mentors, or student leaders. A total of 15 informants participated in the study, comprising 1 *pesantren* caretaker, 5 ustadz (mentors), and 9 santri holding leadership positions ranging from room leaders to the chairman of OSPAM. Secondary data were collected through document analysis, including the *pesantren* institutional profile and strategic plan; OSPAM organizational structures and standard operating procedures for cadre development; activity programs and post-event evaluation reports from the last two years; and minutes of the Annual Meeting of OSPAM. These documents were used to complement and validate the primary data obtained from interviews and observations.

The data collection process employed several qualitative techniques to obtain comprehensive and triangulated information. In-depth semi-structured interviews served as the primary data collection method, enabling informants to describe their experiences and perspectives on leadership formation within the *pesantren*. Participant observation was also conducted to capture the dynamics of leadership practices in daily activities, including routine *pesantren* programs, weekly meetings (*Syawir*), monthly evaluation forums (*Tanbihul Am*), and major organizational events. Detailed field notes were recorded during these observations to document interactions, leadership practices, and institutional routines. In addition, documentation studies were conducted to examine formal institutional records and organizational archives relevant to the leadership cadre system. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was reached, indicated by the absence of new themes emerging from subsequent interviews.

Data analysis in this study followed the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, which comprises three interconnected stages: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Data condensation involved selecting, simplifying, and organizing information from interview transcripts, field notes, and documents through initial coding procedures (Nurfajriani et al., 2024; Salmona & Kaczynski, 2024). The coded data were then organized using matrices and thematic tables to identify patterns and relationships among categories. Finally, conclusions were drawn through an iterative interpretation process and continuously verified by comparing findings across different data sources. To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, several validation strategies were implemented, including data triangulation across interviews, observations, and documents, prolonged Engagement in the field for six months, member checking with key informants to confirm the accuracy of

interpretations, and peer debriefing with fellow researchers to critically review and refine the analytical process. Ethical considerations were maintained throughout the research process by obtaining informed consent from all participants and ensuring anonymity and confidentiality in the reporting of the findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The analysis revealed a highly structured and intentional approach to leadership development, conceptualized as the “Experiential Leadership Ecosystem.” This ecosystem comprises four core, cyclical strategies. Table 1 provides a comprehensive overview of these strategies, their key activities, and the leadership competencies developed.

Table 1. The Experiential Leadership Ecosystem Model at Al-Hikam Malang

Core Strategy	Key Activities & Implementation	Leadership Competencies Developed
Learning (Building Foundation)	Daily routines (<i>piket, jaga malam</i>); Weekly meetings (<i>Syawir, kerja bakti</i>); Monthly evaluation (<i>Tanbihul Am</i>); Annual planning (RTO); Event committee work; Role-modeling (<i>Uswah</i>) by <i>asatidz</i> .	Discipline & responsibility; Teamwork & communication; Critical reflection; Strategic planning; Project management; Value internalization.
Involvement (Active Participation)	Active role in OSPAM organization; Management of religious, academic, and social activities; Philosophy of <i>Khidmah</i> (service); Scaffolded mentoring by <i>asatidz</i> .	Organizational management; Decision-making & accountability; Sense of ownership & commitment; Collaborative problem-solving; Leadership self-efficacy.
Delegation (External Representation)	Representation at external workshops/competitions; Participation in inter-institutional meetings (RMI, MUI); Competence-based assignment to external roles.	Self-confidence & diplomatic skills; Networking & professional representation; Specialized competence; Autonomy & responsibility; Sense of relatedness to community.
Devolution of Authority (Full Ownership)	Clear <i>Tupoksi</i> for senior positions (e.g., <i>Ketua OSPAM</i>); Real authority over budgets and programs; OSPAM as an extension of leadership; Santri as subjects of education.	Strategic innovation & creativity; Final accountability; Psychological empowerment & self-actualization; Change management; Holistic leadership maturity.

The development of student leadership within the pesantren environment is implemented through an integrated system referred to in this study as the Experiential Leadership Ecosystem. This system operates through four interrelated strategies that collectively create a continuous cycle of leadership formation: learning through immersive experience, active involvement in organizational governance, delegation in external representation, and the devolution of authority to senior students. Rather than functioning as isolated stages, these strategies interact dynamically and reinforce one another, allowing leadership competencies to grow gradually through real experiences, reflection, and increasing responsibility.

The first strategy focuses on learning through immersive experience, which serves as the foundational stage for leadership development. In this stage, the pesantren creates a comprehensive learning environment where leadership values are internalized through a pervasive non-formal curriculum embedded in daily life. Every santri is entrusted with concrete responsibilities from the moment they enter the institution, beginning at the micro level, such as serving as a room leader. These roles carry real accountability for maintaining order, discipline, and social harmony within their living units. A structured hierarchy of routine activities further strengthens this process. Daily responsibilities such as piket kebersihan and jaga malam cultivate discipline and responsibility; weekly forums such as Syawir provide opportunities for problem-solving and collective decision-making; while monthly evaluations such as Tanbihul Am foster a culture of reflection and constructive feedback. Participation in committees for major institutional events also provides experiential training in coordination and project management. Within this process, the role of the asatidz as moral exemplars (uswah hasana) becomes central, demonstrating integrity, empathy, and leadership conduct in everyday interactions. This practice reflects the principles of Social Learning Theory, which explains that individuals acquire behaviors through observation and imitation of credible models. At the same time, these daily experiences represent the “concrete experience” stage in Kolb’s experiential learning cycle, where learning begins through direct engagement with real situations.

Building upon this foundational learning environment, the second strategy emphasizes active involvement in internal governance. Leadership capacity is further strengthened by entrusting students with the management of the pesantren’s internal affairs through the Organisasi Santri Pesantren Al-Hikam Malang (OSPAM). As an organizational platform, OSPAM functions as a structured system in which students plan, implement, and evaluate various religious, academic, and social programs within the pesantren community. Through this mechanism, students experience leadership not merely as theoretical knowledge but as practical responsibility in managing collective activities. In the pesantren context, such participation is grounded in the traditional value of khidmah, which frames leadership as sincere service to the community. During this stage, the asatidz function as mentors who guide and supervise student leaders through a process resembling “scaffolding,” in which support is gradually reduced as competence develops. Through repeated participation and guided autonomy, students gradually develop confidence in their leadership abilities, reinforcing the formation of leadership self-efficacy.

The third strategy involves delegation through external representation, where students are entrusted to represent the pesantren in broader social and institutional forums. This stage extends leadership learning beyond the internal environment by exposing students to more complex interactions with external stakeholders. Students may participate in inter-pesantren workshops, academic competitions, leadership forums, or official meetings with institutions such as the Indonesian Ulema Council, Majelis Ulama Indonesia. Delegation in these contexts is strategic, matching individual competencies with appropriate opportunities to maximize learning and success. Through these experiences, students develop

communication skills, self-confidence, and diplomatic competence while strengthening their institutional identity as representatives of the pesantren community.

The most advanced stage of the system is the devolution of authority, in which senior students are granted substantial responsibility in managing strategic organizational functions. In this stage, students occupying key leadership roles, such as the chairperson of OSPAM, are provided with clearly defined duties and authorities, including managing program implementation, supervising organizational members, overseeing budgets, and enforcing institutional discipline. This transfer of authority creates a clear structure of accountability and managerial responsibility. Through this process, students transition from simply executing assigned tasks to assuming ownership of organizational processes and outcomes. Such a transformation reflects the concept of psychological empowerment, in which individuals experience increased meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact in their organizational roles. In educational terms, this stage embodies the principles of student-centered learning, where students actively participate as co-creators of their educational experiences rather than passive recipients of instruction.

Discussion

The strength of the Experiential Leadership Ecosystem model lies in its integration of several complementary theoretical perspectives. Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory provides the conceptual foundation by explaining how leadership competencies emerge through cycles of experience, reflection, conceptualization, and experimentation. By incorporating real-life experiences through daily routines, involvement in organizational governance, external representation, and the devolution of authority, the pesantren's leadership development model aligns with Kolb's framework. This experiential approach ensures that leadership skills are not merely theoretical but are developed through direct engagement, reflection, and progressively increasing responsibility (Cheng et al., 2025; Haritha & Rao, 2024).

Social Learning Theory, as applied in this model, suggests that leadership behaviors are learned by observing and imitating credible role models, namely the *asatidz* in the case of the pesantren. This dynamic facilitates the internalization of leadership values such as integrity, discipline, and service, while reinforcing the development of leadership competencies through continuous observation of skilled mentors. The concept of role modeling in the pesantren environment is central to this process, in which students acquire leadership skills by following the example set by their mentors (Wasim et al., 2026; Atoillah & Herlina, 2025).

The participative leadership model used in the pesantren's governance system provides students with opportunities to practice decision-making and accountability. This collaborative approach strengthens the students' commitment to the institution while encouraging a sense of ownership over their roles. The mentoring process also builds leadership self-efficacy by providing students with the tools and confidence to manage projects and activities effectively (Emmanuel & Onesmo, 2025; Villafane, 2025).

Self-Determination Theory underpins the motivational aspects of the ecosystem, demonstrating that leadership development is most effective when students' psychological needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness are satisfied. Delegating leadership roles to students in external contexts and allowing them to take responsibility for managing organizational functions satisfies these needs, thereby enhancing intrinsic motivation and fostering a sense of empowerment (Islam et al., 2024; Islam & Asad, 2024).

Finally, the student-centered learning approach emphasizes that leadership development is most impactful when students are active participants in shaping their educational experiences. By involving students at every stage of leadership development, from foundational learning to full devolution of authority, the model encourages ownership of learning, promotes independence, and ensures that leadership qualities are developed holistically and meaningfully. This comprehensive approach to leadership development not only benefits individual students but also contributes to the overall sustainability and continuity of the *pesantren*'s leadership culture (Hasanah & Susanto, 2024; Rahman & Munir, 2024).

Within the context of Islamic education management, this ecosystem provides a practical framework for sustainable leadership regeneration and institutional continuity. By systematically cultivating a generation of competent and ethically grounded leaders, the model supports the long-term success and resilience of the *pesantren*, ensuring that leadership is continuously nurtured and passed on through the generations of *santri* (Mubarak et al., 2026; White et al., 2024).

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that student leadership development within a student Islamic boarding school can be systematically cultivated through an integrated model conceptualized as the "Experiential Leadership Ecosystem." The most important finding and key lesson derived from this research is that leadership formation becomes effective when it is embedded in a continuous cycle of real experiences and progressive responsibility. This ecosystem operates through four synergistic and tiered strategies Learning, Involvement, Delegation, and Devolution of Authority which collectively create a sustainable leadership development process. Through these stages, students are gradually guided from foundational experiential learning in daily routines to active participation in internal governance, to representing the institution in external forums, and finally to managing organizational responsibilities with substantial autonomy. This approach demonstrates that leadership education in the *pesantren* context is most effective when students are positioned as active subjects of their own development, enabling the simultaneous development of managerial competencies, ethical awareness, social responsibility, and character formation.

The main scholarly contribution of this study lies in its conceptualization of a leadership development ecosystem grounded in empirical findings from a student Islamic boarding school context. The study renews existing perspectives on leadership formation in *pesantren* by integrating traditional *pesantren* values with contemporary leadership frameworks such as Experiential Learning, Social

Learning, Empowerment, and Self-Determination theories, thereby offering a comprehensive framework for leadership cultivation within Islamic education institutions. This framework may serve as a practical reference for educational organizations seeking to develop holistic, character-driven leaders through experiential and participatory systems. However, this research also has limitations. As a single case qualitative study conducted in a single institutional setting, the findings remain context-specific and cannot be generalized to all *pesantren* types or educational environments. In addition, the study focuses primarily on organizational structures and leadership practices, without examining variations by gender, age, or educational background. Therefore, future research is needed to conduct comparative multi-site studies across diverse *pesantren* models, incorporate broader participant variations, and employ quantitative or mixed-method approaches such as surveys or longitudinal studies to obtain more comprehensive evidence regarding the long-term impact of leadership ecosystems on students' leadership competencies and post-graduation trajectories.

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