

Transforming Islamic Higher Education Toward World-Class Universities: An Integrated Model of Islamization, Digitalization, and Internationalization

Nasrul Syakur Chaniago^{1*}, Amiruddin Siahaan², Abdurrahman³

Islamic Educational Management Department, Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara,
Medan, Indonesia

Email: nasrulsyakurchan@uinsu.ac.id¹, amiruddin.siahaan@uinsu.ac.id²,
abdurrahman@uinsu.ac.id³

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.33650/al-tanzim.v10i4.14811>

Received: 14 March 2026

Revised: 22 June 2026

Accepted: 07 August 2026

Abstract:

This study aims to analyze the process of institutional innovation in transforming an Islamic university into a world-class institution through the integration of Islamization, digitalization, and internationalization. A qualitative approach with a naturalistic case study design was employed at an Islamic university. Data were collected through observation, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis, and subsequently analyzed using an interactive model comprising data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. The findings indicate that institutional innovation is a continuous governance transformation process built upon three interacting pillars. Islamization, through the *Wahdatul 'Ulum* paradigm, strengthens epistemological integration and establishes academic and institutional identity. Digitalization drives governance modernization, enhances academic services, and facilitates data-driven decision-making. Meanwhile, internationalization bolsters institutional capacity through the development of networks and sustained global academic collaborations. These three dimensions operate synergistically, supported by transformational leadership, quality assurance systems, human resource development, and integrated governance. The study concludes that transforming into a world-class Islamic university requires balancing Islamic identity, technological innovation, and global engagement. It contributes an integrated institutional transformation model and offers strategic implications for enhancing the competitiveness and academic excellence of Islamic higher education institutions.

Keywords: *Digitalization, Innovation, Internationalization, Higher Education Transformation*

Abstrak:

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis proses inovasi institusional dalam transformasi sebuah universitas Islam menuju universitas kelas dunia melalui integrasi Islamisasi, digitalisasi, dan internasionalisasi. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain studi kasus naturalistik yang dilaksanakan pada sebuah universitas Islam. Data penelitian dikumpulkan melalui observasi, wawancara semi-terstruktur, dan analisis dokumen. Data dianalisis menggunakan model analisis interaktif yang meliputi kondensasi data, penyajian data, serta penarikan dan verifikasi kesimpulan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa inovasi institusional merupakan proses transformasi tata kelola berkelanjutan yang dibangun melalui tiga pilar utama yang saling berinteraksi. Islamisasi melalui paradigma *Wahdatul 'Ulum* berperan dalam memperkuat integrasi epistemologis serta membangun identitas akademik dan institusional. Digitalisasi

mendorong modernisasi tata kelola, peningkatan layanan akademik, serta pengambilan keputusan berbasis data. Sementara itu, internasionalisasi memperkuat kapasitas institusional melalui pengembangan jejaring dan kolaborasi akademik global yang berkelanjutan. Ketiga dimensi tersebut berjalan secara sinergis melalui kepemimpinan transformasional, sistem penjaminan mutu, pengembangan sumber daya manusia, dan tata kelola yang terintegrasi. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa transformasi universitas Islam kelas dunia memerlukan keseimbangan antara identitas keislaman, inovasi teknologi, dan keterlibatan global. Studi ini berkontribusi melalui model transformasi institusional terpadu serta memberikan implikasi strategis bagi peningkatan daya saing dan keunggulan akademik perguruan tinggi Islam.

Kata Kunci: *Digitalisasi, Inovasi, Internasionalisasi, Transformasi Pendidikan Tinggi*

Please cite this article in APA style as:

Chaniago, N. S., Siahaan, A., & Abdurrahman, A. (2026). Transforming Islamic Higher Education Toward World-Class Universities: An Integrated Model of Islamization, Digitalization, and Internationalization. *Al-Tanzim: Jurnal Manajemen Pendidikan Islam*, 10(4), 1324-1340ss.

INTRODUCTION

The pursuit of world-class university status has become a strategic priority for higher education institutions worldwide because universities are increasingly expected to generate scientific innovation, produce globally competitive graduates, strengthen international collaboration, and contribute to sustainable social development (Kinzelbach et al., 2022; Lin et al., 2025; Sudirman). These expectations extend beyond institutional prestige, reflecting the growing role of universities in addressing economic transformation, technological disruption, and complex societal challenges (Kotchegura et al., 2022). International frameworks emphasize that world-class universities are characterized not merely by high rankings but by the integration of academic excellence, effective governance, research productivity, international engagement, and institutional adaptability (Tian, 2023). Consequently, universities must continuously reinvent their organizational structures, academic cultures, and management systems to remain relevant within an increasingly competitive global environment (Lee & Song, 2026; Širec & Rožman, 2025). This transformation is particularly significant because institutional competitiveness has become inseparable from a university's capacity to balance local responsibilities with global academic standards and long-term societal impact.

Despite the widespread aspiration to achieve world-class university status, many higher education institutions in developing countries continue to experience structural and organizational constraints that hinder sustainable transformation (Yalley, 2022). Limited research capacity, fragmented governance systems, inadequate digital infrastructure, inconsistent international collaboration, and resistance to organizational change frequently reduce institutional competitiveness in the global academic landscape (Mahmoud et al., 2022; Oulamine et al., 2025). These challenges become more complex in universities that simultaneously carry national educational responsibilities while responding to global performance indicators emphasizing research quality, innovation, international visibility, and institutional reputation (Mahmoud et al., 2022; Oulamine et al., 2025; Sharon & Patricia, 2026). Consequently, organizational transformation cannot rely solely on administrative reforms or infrastructure expansion (Algazo et al., 2026; Sarrico, 2022). Instead, universities require

comprehensive institutional reinvention that aligns governance, academic culture, human resources, technological capability, and strategic leadership into an integrated system capable of responding effectively to rapidly evolving educational, technological, and societal demands.

These challenges become even more pronounced within Islamic higher education institutions, where modernization initiatives must be carefully balanced with the preservation of religious identity and educational philosophy (Cukierman, 2022; Gkrimpizi & Peristeras, 2022). Unlike conventional universities, Islamic universities are expected not only to expand scientific disciplines and strengthen research performance but also to maintain Islamic values as the ethical and epistemological foundation of institutional development (Aedi & Gorni, 2025; Pahrudin et al., 2026). The transition from specialized Islamic institutes to comprehensive universities therefore involves more than organizational restructuring; it requires integrating religious knowledge with contemporary sciences, digital governance, and international academic engagement without weakening institutional identity (Amran et al., 2025). Failure to achieve this balance may generate institutional fragmentation, weaken organizational coherence, and create tensions between modernization efforts and religious missions (Hanafi & Parker, 2023). Consequently, Islamic higher education requires a distinctive transformation model capable of harmonizing academic competitiveness with Islamic intellectual traditions in an increasingly globalized educational environment.

Previous studies have extensively examined the transformation of higher education from multiple perspectives, including world-class university development, organizational reinvention, digital transformation, internationalization, and the integration of Islamic knowledge (Burhanuddin, 2022; Khoir et al., 2025). Research on world-class universities has emphasized governance quality, research productivity, academic reputation, and international competitiveness as key determinants of institutional excellence. Other scholars have highlighted organizational reinvention as a process requiring strategic leadership, institutional adaptability, innovation, and cultural transformation rather than merely structural reform (Fauzi et al., 2025). Meanwhile, studies on Islamic higher education have primarily focused on the Islamization of knowledge and integrative educational paradigms, arguing that religious and scientific knowledge should be interconnected to strengthen both intellectual development and institutional identity (Ghufron & Sahid, 2024).

Although these studies have generated valuable insights, they predominantly examine Islamization, digitalization, internationalization, and world-class university development as independent or loosely connected phenomena (Muthohirin et al., 2025). Research on digital transformation generally focuses on technological infrastructure, smart-campus initiatives, and administrative efficiency, whereas studies on internationalization emphasize student mobility, international partnerships, curriculum development, and global engagement (Chande, 2023). Conversely, investigations into Islamic higher education mainly address knowledge integration and the Islamization of science from philosophical or curricular perspectives (Husni et al., 2025; Toisuta et al.,

2024). Limited attention has been given to explaining how these three dimensions can be strategically integrated within a single organizational transformation framework (Mazlan et al., 2025). Consequently, the absence of an integrative perspective restricts theoretical understanding and practical guidance for Islamic universities seeking to achieve global competitiveness while preserving their distinctive institutional identity.

This study addresses the identified research gap by proposing an integrated perspective that conceptualizes Islamization, digitalization, and internationalization as three interdependent pillars of institutional reinvention rather than isolated strategic initiatives. Previous studies have generally examined these dimensions separately, emphasizing either knowledge integration, digital transformation, or global engagement without explaining how they interact to shape comprehensive institutional change. This study argues that sustainable transformation toward a world-class Islamic university requires the simultaneous alignment of organizational identity, governance capacity, and international engagement within a coherent institutional framework. Islamization provides the philosophical and ethical foundation that guides institutional development, digitalization strengthens organizational effectiveness through integrated governance and data-driven decision-making, and internationalization expands research collaboration, intercultural learning, academic reputation, and global competitiveness. Together, these dimensions constitute an integrated architecture for organizational transformation.

Based on this perspective, the study investigates how an Islamic university reinvents itself by integrating Islamization, digitalization, and internationalization as complementary dimensions of institutional transformation. Specifically, it examines how these three pillars are implemented, how university stakeholders interpret and experience the reinvention process, and how they can be synthesized into a strategic model for organizational development. The study advances the argument that organizational transformation in Islamic higher education cannot be achieved through fragmented reforms or incremental improvements alone. Instead, sustainable progress depends on an integrated institutional architecture in which Islamic values strengthen organizational identity, digital transformation enhances governance and academic quality, and internationalization expands global collaboration and institutional visibility. This integrated model contributes both theoretically to organizational transformation literature and practically to strategic planning, policy formulation, and institutional management in Islamic higher education.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach using a naturalistic case study design to investigate how an Islamic higher education institution reinvents itself toward becoming a world-class university through the integration of Islamization, digitalization, and internationalization. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the research aimed to understand participants' experiences, interpretations, and institutional practices within their natural setting rather than to measure predefined variables. The case study design facilitated an in-depth

exploration of organizational transformation as a contemporary phenomenon embedded in its real-life context, where leadership, governance, academic culture, technological innovation, and stakeholder interactions were closely interconnected. The naturalistic paradigm further enabled the researcher to capture multiple perspectives while preserving the contextual meanings underlying institutional change.

The research was conducted at UIN Sumatera Utara Medan, Indonesia, from October 2022 to June 2023. The university was purposively selected because it represents a State Islamic University that has undergone substantial organizational transformation following its transition from the State Institute for Islamic Studies (IAIN) into a comprehensive Islamic university. This transformation broadened its academic mandate by integrating Islamic studies with science, technology, health sciences, social sciences, and professional education while maintaining Islamic values as its institutional foundation. In addition, the university has implemented digital governance, smart-campus initiatives, curriculum integration, international academic cooperation, and quality assurance, providing an information-rich context for examining institutional reinvention within contemporary Islamic higher education.

Data were collected through observation, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. Observations were conducted throughout the fieldwork to examine academic activities, administrative services, digital platforms, organizational culture, leadership practices, and interactions among university members. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with purposively selected informants, including university leaders, deans, heads of academic units, quality assurance administrators, lecturers, administrative staff, and students directly involved in institutional transformation. Interview questions explored participants' experiences, implementation strategies, achievements, challenges, and future expectations concerning Islamization, digitalization, and internationalization. Documentary evidence, including strategic plans, university regulations, accreditation reports, cooperation agreements, annual reports, institutional statistics, websites, and archival records, was analyzed to triangulate findings from observations and interviews.

Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), consisting of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing with continuous verification. Data condensation involved selecting, simplifying, coding, categorizing, and organizing interview transcripts, observation notes, and documentary evidence according to the research objectives. The condensed data were then displayed through thematic matrices, conceptual tables, and narrative descriptions to facilitate comparisons across participants and data sources. Emerging themes concerning Islamization, digitalization, internationalization, governance, leadership, and organizational culture were interpreted iteratively by comparing evidence from multiple sources. Trustworthiness was ensured through source and method triangulation, prolonged engagement, member checking, and continuous verification to enhance the credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability of the findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Institutional Trajectory and the Meaning of Reinvention

Institutional reinvention in this study is operationally defined as a continuous organizational transformation through which an Islamic higher education institution reconstructs its vision, governance, academic structure, and institutional culture to respond to evolving societal, technological, and global demands while preserving its Islamic identity. Field findings indicate that reinvention is not perceived as a single administrative event marked by the institutional conversion from IAIN to UIN in 2014. Instead, participants consistently described it as a cumulative and strategic process involving the expansion of academic disciplines, the reorganization of institutional governance, the strengthening of quality assurance, and the alignment of Islamic values with contemporary higher education practices. Reinvention therefore represents an ongoing institutional journey in which organizational development is continuously negotiated across leadership, academic units, administrative systems, and stakeholder expectations. This operational meaning emerged consistently across interviews and observations, suggesting that reinvention functions as an integrated organizational strategy rather than a series of isolated structural reforms.

Interviews with university leaders indicate that reinvention is understood as a comprehensive cultural and strategic transformation rather than merely a change in institutional status. A vice rector emphasized that the transition from IAIN to UIN requires redesigning academic collaboration, organizational thinking, and the integration of Islamic values across expanding disciplines. At the same time, a dean stressed that rapid faculty growth demands stronger coordination to prevent organizational fragmentation. Together, these perspectives demonstrate that reinvention is fundamentally directed toward maintaining institutional coherence amid increasing academic complexity. The researcher interprets these findings as evidence that sustainable transformation depends on integrated governance, shared institutional vision, leadership coordination, and the preservation of Islamic identity throughout organizational development.

Table 1. Institutional Reinvention Trajectory of UIN Sumatera Utara Medan

Periode	Institutional Stage	Main Development	Implication for Reinvention
1960s–1973	Formation	Establishment and consolidation of Islamic higher-education faculties; formal establishment of IAIN Sumatera Utara in 1973.	Institutional identity centered on Islamic disciplines and preparation of religious professionals.
1990s–2013	Wider mandate	Development of postgraduate education, opening of broader study fields, and adoption of Public Service Agency financial management.	Increased academic breadth and organizational autonomy generated demand for new governance and resources.

2014 onward	Transformation into UIN	University status and expansion of religious, social, economic, health, science, and technology fields.	Need to preserve Islamic distinctiveness while coordinating a more complex comprehensive university.
Current direction	Smart Islamic University and global engagement	Digital services, integrated knowledge agenda, international cooperation, foreign students and lecturers, OBE, and global visibility initiatives.	Reinvention must integrate identity, technology, quality assurance, research, and internationalization.

Table 1 illustrates that institutional reinvention has evolved as a cumulative and continuous transformation rather than a single organizational event. The university's trajectory reflects a gradual shift from a specialized Islamic institution toward a comprehensive university integrating diverse disciplines, digital governance, and international engagement. Each developmental stage generated new demands in governance, academic quality, resource management, and institutional identity beyond structural expansion. The current phase emphasizes strategic integration, coordinating digital transformation, quality assurance, interdisciplinary knowledge, and global collaboration within a unified vision. These findings indicate that sustainable reinvention depends on aligning the university's historical Islamic mission with contemporary governance practices and international standards to strengthen organizational coherence and academic competitiveness.

Islamization as Epistemological Integration and Institutional Identity

Islamization, as understood in this study, is operationally defined as the systematic integration of Islamic values, ethical principles, and epistemological perspectives into the university's academic, managerial, and institutional practices without reducing the scientific autonomy of individual disciplines. Rather than representing the dominance of religious studies over other fields, Islamization is interpreted by participants as an integrative framework that connects Islamic teachings with science, technology, social sciences, health, economics, and professional education through the Wahdatul 'Ulum paradigm. Field data indicate that this paradigm functions as the university's institutional identity by guiding curriculum development, research orientation, community engagement, organizational governance, and academic culture. Participants consistently emphasized that Islamization is reflected not merely in the existence of Islamic courses but in the way knowledge is produced, interpreted, and applied to address contemporary societal challenges. Consequently, Islamization operates simultaneously as an epistemological foundation, an ethical framework, and a strategic institutional identity that distinguishes the university from conventional higher education institutions while supporting its aspiration toward world-class university status.

Interviews with university leaders indicate that Islamization is understood as an integrative epistemological framework rather than a separation between religious and modern sciences. A vice rector explained that the Wahdatul 'Ulum

paradigm encourages every discipline to advance scientific knowledge while remaining grounded in Islamic ethical values, whereas a dean emphasized its application in teaching, research, community service, governance, and administration. These perspectives demonstrate that Islamization functions as an institutional philosophy guiding interdisciplinary collaboration and organizational culture. The researcher interprets these findings as evidence that Islamization has evolved into a comprehensive governance framework integrating academic excellence, ethical responsibility, institutional identity, and sustainable global competitiveness.

Table 2. Informants' Perspectives on Islamization as Epistemological Integration and Institutional Identity

Informant Position	Interview Excerpt	Indicator
Vice Rector for Academic Affairs	"Islamization does not replace modern science with religious doctrine. Every discipline develops according to its scientific methodology while remaining guided by Islamic ethical values through the Wahdatul 'Ulum paradigm."	Epistemological integration of Islamic and scientific knowledge
Dean	"Academic excellence and Islamic values are inseparable. Every faculty is responsible for integrating integrity, moderation, and moral responsibility into teaching, research, and community service."	Integration of Islamic values into the Tri Dharma of higher education
Head of Quality Assurance Unit	"Quality standards are developed not only to achieve accreditation but also to ensure that the Wahdatul 'Ulum philosophy is reflected in curriculum, learning outcomes, and institutional performance."	Islamization in quality assurance and institutional governance
Head of Study Program	"Curriculum revision requires every course to demonstrate how disciplinary knowledge contributes to Islamic ethics, social welfare, and professional responsibility."	Curriculum integration based on Wahdatul 'Ulum
Lecturer	"Students are encouraged to solve contemporary problems by combining scientific evidence with Islamic ethical considerations, rather than relying solely on technical knowledge."	Integration of ethical reasoning into academic learning

Table 2 demonstrates strong convergence among informants regarding the implementation of Islamization within institutional transformation. Despite representing different organizational roles, participants consistently defined Islamization as an integrative epistemological framework rather than the expansion of religious instruction. University leaders emphasized the strategic function of the Wahdatul 'Ulum paradigm in connecting diverse disciplines, while faculty administrators highlighted its integration into curriculum, learning outcomes, and quality assurance. Academic staff further explained that Islamic values strengthen ethical reasoning and professional responsibility without diminishing disciplinary rigor. These findings indicate that Islamization has evolved from a philosophical concept into an institutional framework guiding governance, academic decision-making, and sustainable organizational development.

Furthermore, the table reveals that Wahdatul 'Ulum functions as the principal mechanism linking institutional identity with organizational transformation. Rather than treating Islamization as an independent religious agenda, participants consistently associated it with interconnected institutional processes involving curriculum design, research orientation, quality assurance, leadership, and community engagement. The recurrence of indicators related to ethical integration, interdisciplinary collaboration, and institutional governance suggests that Islamization has become embedded within the university's strategic management system. Consequently, the findings indicate that the university's distinctive identity is maintained not through symbolic religious representation but through the systematic integration of Islamic values into academic standards, organizational policies, and professional practices. This institutionalized approach enables the university to strengthen its Islamic character while simultaneously supporting innovation, academic excellence, and international competitiveness as a comprehensive Islamic university.

Digitalization as Governance Modernization and Academic Infrastructure

Digitalization, as identified in this study, is operationally defined as the comprehensive transformation of institutional governance, academic services, and organizational management through the integration of digital technologies, information systems, and data-driven decision-making processes. Field findings indicate that digitalization extends beyond the adoption of online platforms or electronic administrative services. Instead, participants consistently described it as a strategic institutional effort to redesign governance processes, improve service quality, strengthen organizational transparency, and enhance academic effectiveness. Digital transformation encompasses the integration of academic information systems, e-learning platforms, institutional repositories, online administrative services, digital communication channels, and centralized data management that collectively support teaching, research, community engagement, and university administration. Accordingly, digitalization functions as both an organizational infrastructure and a governance strategy that enables the university to improve operational efficiency, institutional accountability, and responsiveness to the demands of contemporary higher education while supporting its long-term aspiration to become a world-class Islamic university.

Table 3. Digital Transformation Priorities Emerging from the Findings

Dimension	Current Evidence	Priority for the Next Phase
Academic services	Academic information portal, e-learning, repository, online registration and information services.	Integrate learning, student, curriculum, research, and quality-assurance data within a common architecture.
Governance and data	Growing use of centralized academic and administrative information.	Establish One Data UINSU, data ownership, common definitions, dashboards, and evidence-based decision routines.
Human resources	Students and many lecturers are adaptive; administrative capability remains uneven.	Provide role-based, recurrent, assessed training and local support in every faculty and unit.
Infrastructure and	Digital infrastructure and web	Strengthen interoperability, resilience,

security	services support daily operations.	cloud services, privacy, cybersecurity, and incident-response capacity.
Innovation	Interest in advanced analytics and AI-supported services.	Pilot AI in advising, administration, research support, and learning with ethical and quality controls.

Table 3 demonstrates that the university's digital transformation has progressed from technology adoption toward comprehensive institutional modernization. Advances in academic services, centralized governance, digital infrastructure, and technology-supported learning provide a solid foundation for future development. Nevertheless, digital maturity remains uneven across organizational dimensions. The next phase requires integrating fragmented systems through One Data UINSU, interoperable platforms, evidence-based governance, strengthened cybersecurity, cloud-based infrastructure, and continuous digital competency development. The growing interest in artificial intelligence further reflects a shift toward innovation-driven governance and academic services. Overall, sustainable digital transformation depends on integrating technology, governance, human resources, infrastructure, and institutional innovation within a unified ecosystem.

Internationalization as Networked Capacity Building

Internationalization, as identified in this study, is operationally defined as the strategic development of global academic networks that strengthen institutional capacity through international collaboration in education, research, community engagement, and governance. Rather than being limited to the number of international partnerships or foreign students, participants consistently described internationalization as a multidimensional process that enhances academic quality, research productivity, intercultural competence, institutional reputation, and global competitiveness. Field findings indicate that internationalization is manifested through collaborative research, student and lecturer mobility, international seminars, visiting professors, joint publications, Outcome-Based Education (OBE), curriculum internationalization, and cooperation with universities and organizations across Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and the United States. Participants emphasized that sustainable internationalization depends on transforming institutional partnerships into long-term academic collaboration capable of generating measurable outcomes. Consequently, internationalization functions as a networked capacity-building strategy that enables the university to strengthen its institutional performance while maintaining its Islamic identity and responding to the demands of global higher education.

Table 4. Internationalization as Networked Capacity Building

Informant Position	Interview Excerpt	Indicator
Vice Rector for Cooperation and International Affairs	"Internationalization is not measured by how many MoUs we sign but by how many joint activities, publications, student exchanges, and research collaborations are successfully implemented. Partnerships must create measurable academic	International collaboration beyond formal agreements

	impact."	
Head of International Office	"Our priority is to expand international networks while improving institutional readiness, including English proficiency, administrative services, and support for international students and visiting scholars."	Institutional readiness for international engagement
Dean	"International cooperation enriches curriculum development and research because lecturers and students are exposed to different academic perspectives and global standards."	Academic quality improvement through global collaboration
Lecturer	"Collaborative research with overseas partners provides opportunities to publish internationally and develop interdisciplinary knowledge that is relevant beyond the national context."	Research collaboration and international publication
Student	"Interactions with international students and guest lecturers broaden our perspectives and improve intercultural communication skills that are difficult to obtain through classroom learning alone."	Intercultural learning and global competence

Table 4 demonstrates that university stakeholders consistently perceive internationalization as a strategic mechanism for strengthening institutional capacity rather than merely enhancing international visibility. Across organizational levels, participants emphasized sustained academic collaboration through joint research, international publications, curriculum development, mobility programs, and intercultural learning. Senior leaders highlighted the importance of translating formal partnerships into measurable institutional outcomes, while academic staff emphasized research quality, innovation, and scholarly productivity. Students valued interactions with international lecturers and peers for developing intercultural competence and global perspectives. These findings indicate that internationalization has evolved into an institutional strategy for advancing academic excellence, organizational learning, and sustainable global competitiveness.

The findings indicate that internationalization is fundamentally a process of institutional capacity building rather than simply expanding international partnerships. Participants emphasized that formal agreements should generate sustainable activities, including joint research, co-authored publications, curriculum development, mobility programs, and externally funded collaborations. They also identified challenges related to English proficiency, limited experience in managing international programs, and reliance on individual academic networks. Field observations confirmed increasing integration of internationalization through seminars, Outcome-Based Education, guest lecturers, and international students. Overall, internationalization emerged as a university-wide strategy for strengthening academic quality, organizational innovation, global visibility, and long-term institutional competitiveness through sustainable collaboration.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that institutional reinvention in Islamic higher education is an integrative governance process in which Islamization, digitalization, and internationalization function as mutually reinforcing

dimensions rather than independent programs (Fauzi et al., 2025; Setiawan et al., 2025). Extending previous studies, the findings show that governance, research productivity, and international visibility alone are insufficient for achieving world-class status unless supported by a coherent normative foundation (Sudirman et al., 2025). Thus, organizational transformation depends on the integration of institutional identity, strategic alignment, and shared values that guide academic and administrative decision-making (Kamil et al., 2025).

The findings are consistent with organizational change theory, particularly Kezar's (2018) proposition that sustainable transformation requires the internalization of institutional vision across all organizational levels rather than isolated policy implementation (Davis et al., 2024). Participants viewed reinvention as a long-term cultural process involving leadership, governance, curriculum, and organizational behavior instead of a single administrative reform (Walid et al., 2025; Warisno et al., 2026). These findings also reinforce Fullan's (2007) argument that educational change becomes sustainable when new values and practices are embedded in everyday routines (Beroíza-Valenzuela, 2026). This study extends these perspectives by demonstrating that the Wahdatul 'Ulum paradigm integrates religious identity with organizational transformation, creating a distinctive epistemological and ethical foundation for sustainable institutional change in Islamic higher education (Kawaid et al., 2025; Muthohar et al., 2023).

Regarding digital transformation, the findings corroborate Brennen and Kreiss (2016), who argue that digitalization reshapes organizational processes beyond technological substitution (Zare & Persaud, 2025). They also support Bates (2019) and Daniel (2019), who emphasize that digital maturity requires the integration of infrastructure, governance, human resources, and institutional policies (Ajani, 2024). However, this study extends existing literature by demonstrating that digitalization in Islamic higher education functions as a governance modernization mechanism that enhances institutional accountability, organizational integration, and evidence-based decision-making. Sustainable digital transformation therefore depends on interoperable systems, digital competence, leadership commitment, cybersecurity, and effective data governance operating within a unified institutional ecosystem (Sabău-Popa et al., 2026).

The findings on internationalization reinforce Knight's (2012) argument that meaningful internationalization cannot be measured solely by the number of partnerships or international students (Marginson, 2023). They also support de Wit (2020) and Beelen and Jones (2015), who emphasize integrating curriculum, research, institutional strategy, and intercultural learning (de Wit & Wang, 2025). However, this study extends the literature by conceptualizing internationalization as a mechanism for networked capacity building, through which global partnerships strengthen institutional learning, governance, research collaboration, and academic innovation while remaining grounded in Islamic values (Kamil et al., 2025; Sibawaihi et al., 2025; Susilawati et al., 2025).

Theoretically, this study contributes a novel conceptual framework by integrating Islamization, digitalization, and internationalization into a unified institutional reinvention model for Islamic higher education. Unlike previous studies that examined these dimensions separately, the findings demonstrate their dynamic interdependence in driving organizational transformation (Wang & Zhang, 2025). Islamization provides the normative and epistemological foundation, digitalization strengthens governance and organizational capability, while internationalization enhances institutional learning and global engagement. This integrated framework extends organizational change theory by explaining how religious identity, technological modernization, and international collaboration collectively reinforce institutional capacity, thereby offering a distinctive Islamic perspective on achieving sustainable transformation and global academic competitiveness.

Practically, the findings offer strategic implications for university leaders and policymakers seeking to enhance institutional competitiveness while preserving Islamic identity. Universities should integrate Islamization, digital transformation, and internationalization within a unified governance framework supported by quality assurance, human resource development, and evidence-based decision-making. Digital initiatives should prioritize interoperable systems, cybersecurity, and organizational capability, whereas international partnerships should focus on measurable outcomes, including joint research, curriculum development, and scholarly publications rather than ceremonial agreements (Kamil et al., 2025; Setiawan et al., 2025; Susilawati et al., 2025). This integrated model provides a practical framework for sustainable organizational transformation in Islamic higher education.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the reinvention of an Islamic university toward world-class status is achieved not through isolated institutional reforms but through the strategic integration of Islamization, digitalization, and internationalization as mutually reinforcing pillars of organizational transformation. The principal lesson is that sustainable institutional excellence emerges when Islamic identity provides the normative foundation, digitalization strengthens governance and organizational capability, and internationalization expands global academic engagement within a coherent institutional framework. The study contributes to the scholarship on higher education by proposing an integrated reinvention model that connects epistemological identity, governance modernization, and international collaboration, thereby extending existing theories of organizational change in Islamic higher education. Nevertheless, the findings are limited by their reliance on a single qualitative case, restricting statistical generalization. Future research should employ comparative and longitudinal designs incorporating bibliometric indicators, institutional performance data, graduate outcomes, and cross-university analyses to validate and refine the proposed reinvention model across diverse Islamic higher education contexts.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The author gratefully acknowledges the Research and Community Service Institute (LPPM) and the leadership of UIN Sumatera Utara for granting permission and facilitating this research. Sincere appreciation is also extended to all participants whose cooperation, openness, and valuable contributions made this study possible through their support during the data collection process.

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