THE ROLE OF ISLAMIC HIGHER EDUCATION IN DEVELOPING THE CHARACTER AND ETHICS OF MUSLIM STUDENTS

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Abstract:
The purpose of this study is to explore the contribution of Islamic higher education in shaping the character and ethics of Muslim students. The findings of this study indicate that character education from an Islamic perspective is based on akhlaqul karimah, which emphasizes the importance of moral integrity, a sense of responsibility, and good personality. Islamic higher education has a long tradition in preserving and developing knowledge and spiritual values. Its strategic role is seen in the effort to incorporate Islamic values into the curriculum, through courses related to Islam such as tafsir, hadith, and Sufism ethics, as well as the development of a curriculum that combines revelation and reason. Values such as honesty, empathy, social responsibility, and justice are taught so that students become intellectually superior and also care about society with moral integrity. With a comprehensive approach that includes academic and non-academic activities, Islamic higher education has an important role in producing a generation of Muslims who are characterful, ethical, and ready to become agents of change in society

Keywords: *Islamic Colleges, Character and Ethics Of Muslim Students*

INTRODUCTION

Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia are formally organized and have a clearly structured hierarchy, based on educational levels consisting of primary, secondary, and higher education. This is in line with Law No. 23 of 2003 concerning the National Education System. Typically, these institutions offer a combination of classical Islamic studies and modern academic disciplines. The aim is to provide a comprehensive education that integrates religious knowledge with secular knowledge. The role of Islamic higher education is highly significant in developing both the intellectual and spiritual potential of individuals within the Muslim community. It equips them with the skills and knowledge needed to face the challenges of the modern world without compromising their faith (Taofik, 2021).

Social change, technological advancement, and globalization have created serious challenges to the character and ethical values of the younger generation, including Muslim students. In this context, Islamic higher education institutions play an important role as learning environments that not only produce academically competent individuals but also serve as drivers of moral and spiritual transformation within the community (Firdaos R., 2024).

Islamic universities such as UIN, IAIN, and STAIN are tasked with providing education that combines general knowledge and Islamic teachings.

With curricula that integrate Islamic religious education, character formation, and ethical practices on campus, these institutions act as guardians in preserving and instilling Islamic values. Islamic higher education plays a vital role in fostering integrity, ethics, and good leadership among Muslim students by applying various disciplines and learning methods grounded in Qur'anic values. Character education focused on the oneness of God, faith, and courtesy serves as the foundation for shaping students' personalities (Firdaos R., 2024).

This equips them with the skills and knowledge required to address diverse challenges in the modern world while remaining faithful to their beliefs. One of the essential elements of Islamic higher education is its emphasis on critical thinking and the research process. This encourages students to question, analyze, and engage with diverse perspectives (Rif'ah, 2022). Such analytical engagement not only deepens their understanding of Islamic teachings but also prepares them to participate more meaningfully and constructively in society. By fostering a culture of open dialogue and respectful debate, Islamic higher education equips students with crucial skills to address contemporary issues from both an informed and ethical standpoint, thus serving as a bridge between tradition and modernity (Ibad, 2022).

The importance of character and integrity for Muslim students is paramount in the context of Islamic higher education. These qualities not only shape their personal and professional lives but also reflect Islamic teachings and values. By focusing on the development of strong moral character and ethical behavior, Islamic institutions aim to produce graduates who are not only academically competent but also compassionate, honest, and socially responsible members of society. In today's era, where ethical breaches and moral lapses are relatively common, strengthening students' character and integrity is crucial for upholding Islamic principles and making a positive impact in their communities. For instance, a business student in an Islamic institution will not only learn finance and marketing but also the importance of honesty and justice in business practices, fostering them into responsible business leaders aligned with Islamic values in their careers (Nasution, 2021).

Furthermore, instilling values such as compassion, empathy, and social responsibility can help students become more caring members of society. By integrating lessons on social justice and community service into the curriculum, Islamic institutions can equip students to contribute positively to their surroundings. This holistic educational approach not only prepares students for career success but also provides them with a moral compass essential for navigating the complexities of modern life. Ultimately, the goal is to produce graduates who are knowledgeable and skilled, yet also ethical individuals committed to making a positive contribution to society (Rohita, 2021).

However, there are cases where individuals educated in Islamic institutions have been involved in extremist activities, contradicting the assumption that such education automatically yields positive social outcomes. This reflects the complexity of human behavior and the limitations of education in shaping actions and beliefs. Despite the good intentions of educational institutions, there is no guarantee that individuals will always use their knowledge and abilities for social advancement. This raises important questions about the role of education in shaping values and behavior, as well as the ongoing need to promote ethical decision-making and social responsibility among graduates.

One crucial factor to consider is the influence of external elements on individual decision-making. Research indicates that social norms, cultural values, and peer pressure play a significant role in shaping behavior. Additionally, individuals may experience conflicts between their motivations and priorities, making it difficult to always act in the best interest of society. Therefore, education should not only focus on imparting knowledge and skills but also on cultivating critical thinking and ethical reasoning to help individuals navigate these moral dilemmas (In'Ratnasari, 2020).

By recognizing the external influences that affect decision-making, individuals can better evaluate their personal values and beliefs in the context of societal norms. Such awareness enables them to make more conscious and ethical decisions aligned with both personal principles and the common good. Moreover, by fostering a culture of open discussion and respectful debate, education can help individuals overcome conflicting motivations and prioritize actions that benefit society as a whole. The importance of education in shaping ethical and responsible behavior is strongly supported in academic discourse. One key source highlights that education plays a significant role in enhancing students' ability to engage in critical self-evaluation and to consider the broader consequences of their actions—an essential aspect of creating a more ethical and responsible society. For example, a study on education for sustainability emphasizes that innovative teaching methods encourage students to become agents of change, enhancing their critical thinking and problem-solving skills, which in turn lead to sustainable and ethical actions (Triansyah, 2024).

Therefore, Islamic higher education plays a crucial role in building Islamic character and ethics. Ethical and responsible behavior is not only encouraged but also cultivated through academic engagement. Education has a significant role in enhancing students' ability to conduct critical self-assessment and to consider broader consequences in their decision-making.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a literature review method, which is a qualitative approach used to collect, examine, and analyze written sources. The objective is to gain an in-depth understanding of the constructivist learning model and its impact on students' critical thinking abilities in developing Islamic character and ethics. This literature review serves as the foundation for analyzing relevant theories, models, and previous research findings.

Creswell explains that a literature review enables researchers to integrate various perspectives from existing books, journal articles, and educational policy documents. Thus, the researcher can construct a solid conceptual foundation and identify gaps in previous studies. The primary data used in this research include scholarly books and academic texts, peer-reviewed journals, and official educational documents and policies, as detailed below: Data Collection and Analysis Techniques. Data were obtained through a systematic analysis of various sources using content analysis techniques. The focus was on identifying key themes, patterns, and categories from books, journals, and documents related to constructivism and critical thinking. This process included coding data, grouping them according to research variables, and synthesizing thematic findings.

Source Triangulation, data obtained from different sources were compared and verified to enhance the validity of the research findings. For example, theoretical data from books were cross-referenced with empirical findings from journals and official policy documents.

Systematic and Critical Approach, the researcher selected literature that is credible, relevant, and up-to-date according to established inclusion criteria. Furthermore, each source was critically examined to assess its strengths and weaknesses, thereby enabling the construction of a balanced, objective, and comprehensive argument.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the literature review and studies conducted between 2020 and 2025 regarding the role of Islamic higher education institutions in fostering the character and ethics of Muslim students, several key findings have been identified as follows:

The Definition of Character and Ethics from an Islamic Perspective

According to the Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia (Great Dictionary of the Indonesian Language), character refers to an individual's disposition, temperament, and inherent traits. In essence, character is understood as one's personality, defined as the unique and intrinsic qualities that distinguish one person from another (Manaf, 2022).

In a broader sense, character education can be interpreted as an educational process aimed at developing cultural values and the nation's character within learners, so that they internalize these values in their personal lives as members of society and as citizens who are religious, nationalistic, productive, and creative. It can be concluded that character is closely related to a person's morality, values, and ethics. Therefore, character education is the process of instilling certain values while also nurturing learners' ability to develop their unique character as they navigate life (Siti Rahmah Diana, 2023).

From an Islamic perspective, character refers to akhlaqul karimah—noble traits that emerge from religious belief and understanding. As an academic concept, character holds profound meaning and is a fundamental psychological process. According to the Ministry of National Education, particularly the Directorate of Higher Education, character can generally be defined as ideal personal values (both good and important) for an individual's existence and relationships with others (Marzuki, 2023).

Specifically, character encompasses virtuous values that have a positive impact on the environment and are manifested in an individual's behavior. Therefore, character can be understood as the distinctive qualities of a person or group, encompassing values, competencies, morality, and resilience in facing difficulties and challenges.

The relationship between character education and education in general can be interpreted as value education, moral education, and personality development, aimed at enhancing students' ability to make sound moral judgments, uphold goodness, and spread kindness wholeheartedly in everyday life. The primary goal of character education, when linked to the philosophy of the Republic of Indonesia, is to develop students' character so that they embody the noble values of Pancasila (Faturrahman & Tsaqofah, 2022).

The values of character education are derived from religion, Pancasila, culture, and the national education objectives, including: (1) Religiousness, (2) Honesty, (3) Tolerance, (4) Discipline, (5) Hard work, (6) Creativity, (7) Independence, (8) Democracy, (9) Curiosity, (10) National spirit, (11) Patriotism, (12) Appreciation of achievement, (13) Friendliness/communicativeness, (14) Love of peace, (15) Fondness for reading, (16) Environmental care, (17) Social

care, and (18) Responsibility (Anggreni, 2020).

The formation of character through the implementation of Islamic Religious Education (Pendidikan Agama Islam, PAI) is essential in shaping one's personality, especially when interacting in society. In today's era, many students tend to overlook the importance of social life, making it imperative for society to uphold good morals. PAI, in instilling character and ethics, teaches us to possess virtues that align with the example set by Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). As Allah the Almighty declares, "Indeed, you (Muhammad) are of a great moral character." This underscores the importance of character from an Islamic perspective, particularly in religious educational institutions. Therefore, issues related to morality should place character education—especially within the Islamic social context—as a form of concern for the well-being of others (Ernawati, 2023).

Islamic Higher Education

Historical Background of Islamic Higher Education; Islamic higher education has a long and rich tradition that traces back to the early centuries of Islam. These institutions have played a crucial role in preserving and disseminating knowledge, not only in the realm of religion but also in science, mathematics, and philosophy. Through the establishment of madrasahs—Islamic schools—spaces were created for exchanging ideas and engaging in scholarly debates, fostering a culture of critical thinking and inquiry. Over the centuries, Islamic higher education has evolved and adapted to address the shifting needs of society, while remaining grounded in principles of faith and morality. Today, Islamic universities and colleges continue to uphold academic excellence, community service, and social responsibility, equipping students with the skills to become ethical leaders and active members of society (Lopez-Morales, 2021). Islamic education has also played a vital role in transmitting knowledge across generations. Scholars in fields such as astronomy, medicine, and literature significantly contributed to the advancement of human understanding. The translation of classical Greek and Roman texts into Arabic, and subsequently into Latin, bridged the intellectual worlds of East and West, facilitating the exchange of ideas and shaping European thought. In this way, Islamic education enriched not only the Muslim world but also left an enduring legacy on global civilization (Radiansyah, 2023).

Intellectual Traditions and Moral Foundations in Islamic Higher Learning; One of the defining characteristics of Islamic education is its emphasis on critical thinking and inquiry. Students are encouraged to question, analyze, and interpret information to deepen their understanding of the world around them. This approach nurtures intellectual growth while promoting a lifelong culture of learning and curiosity. Furthermore, Islamic education places strong emphasis on moral and ethical values, urging students to embody principles such as justice, compassion, and integrity in their daily lives. The objective is not merely to produce knowledgeable individuals but also to develop responsible and ethical members of society. This moral formation is essential in producing graduates who are both intellectually capable and spiritually grounded (Musthofa, 2023). By integrating intellectual rigor with moral discipline, Islamic higher education strengthens the relationship between knowledge and action, ensuring that learning translates into positive contributions to society. Through classroom instruction, mentorship, and community involvement, students are exposed to a holistic educational experience that shapes their character as much

as their intellect. This balance of mind and morality is a hallmark of the enduring relevance of Islamic higher education, allowing it to address contemporary challenges without losing its foundational values.

The Role of Islamic Higher Education in Character and Ethical Development; Teaching values such as honesty and responsibility is a fundamental aspect of Islamic higher education that helps build personal integrity. By instilling these values in students, institutions can cultivate a sense of accountability and ethical conduct among young Muslim leaders. Moreover, Islamic higher education significantly contributes to promoting social justice and equality, as these principles are deeply rooted in Islamic teachings. Through comprehensive teaching methods that go beyond academic knowledge to include moral and ethical formation, these institutions empower students to become agents of positive change within their communities (Firdaos R. &., 2024). This role is especially important in an era marked by global inequality and social unrest, where higher education must respond not only with technical skills but also with ethical leadership. The cultivation of moral awareness is achieved through both curricular and extracurricular activities, reinforcing the idea that character development is as crucial as intellectual achievement. By aligning the educational mission with social responsibility, Islamic universities ensure that their graduates contribute meaningfully to the betterment of society. This synthesis of academic and moral education offers a framework for producing leaders who are principled, compassionate, and committed to justice.

Social Responsibility and Community Engagement; Islamic higher education also places strong emphasis on serving others and giving back to the community. This focus on social responsibility helps students understand the interconnectedness of individuals and the importance of striving for the common good. By fostering compassion and empathy, institutions contribute to creating a more just and inclusive society. In addition, Islamic higher education promotes continuous learning and personal growth, encouraging students to pursue knowledge and self-improvement throughout their lives (Firdaos R. &., 2024). This dedication to self-betterment not only benefits students individually but also contributes to the progress of the Muslim community as a whole. By cultivating a culture of lifelong learning and ethical engagement, Islamic higher education nurtures individuals who are knowledgeable, empathetic, and community-oriented. These values are essential for fostering unity and cooperation within the Muslim ummah, while also building positive relationships with people from diverse backgrounds. Ultimately, the purpose of Islamic higher education is to empower students to become leaders committed to serving their communities and advancing social justice (Mustofa, 2020). This mission aligns moral responsibility with academic excellence, ensuring that graduates are both competent and compassionate contributors to society.

Integrating Islamic Values into Higher Education Curriculum; The integration of Islamic values in higher education is achieved by strengthening courses related to Islamic studies, such as Islamic Religious Education, Ethics and Sufism, as well as Qur'anic and Hadith Studies. This approach goes beyond theoretical instruction, aiming to embed spiritual, ethical, and moral values in ways that are relevant to contemporary life. Islamic character education seeks to shape students' morality through value-based curricula, emphasizing honesty, responsibility, and trustworthiness as part of the learning process. Qur'anic exegesis (tafsir) and Hadith studies are crucial in linking divine values with the current social realities faced by students. The curriculum is designed to produce

graduates who excel both intellectually and spiritually. Recent research indicates that such integration effectively builds religious identity and strengthens academic ethics among students. Therefore, Islamic studies courses serve as a primary vehicle for merging scientific knowledge with the prophetic values of Islam (Ibrahim, 2022). This method ensures that Islamic universities are not merely institutions for knowledge transfer, but also spaces for moral and spiritual formation. Through this integration, higher education becomes a bridge between traditional Islamic wisdom and modern academic disciplines.

Harmonizing Revelation and Reason in Academic Disciplines; In many Islamic universities, values are integrated into the educational process through curricula that combine revelation and reason. This involves systematically merging general and specialized subjects with Islamic teachings in terms of content, method, and educational objectives. For example, mathematics, economics, and technology are taught using approaches that incorporate Qur'anic verses or ethical principles from Hadith as moral and spiritual guidance (Wahyuni, 2020). Through this integration, science is not treated as value-neutral, but as a tool for strengthening faith and shaping Islamic character. This model is also reflected in curricula aligned with the Indonesian National Qualifications Framework (KKNI), where learning outcomes extend beyond academic competencies to include spiritual and social dimensions. Students are encouraged to internalize Islamic values in their research, community service, and campus organizational activities. In this context, ethics is not merely a subject to be studied but serves as a benchmark for overall curricular achievement (Suhaili, 2022). Such integration ensures that graduates are not only academically competent but also morally grounded, capable of applying Islamic principles in their professional and social engagements.

Spiritual and Moral Formation through Specialized Courses; Courses such as Ethics and Sufism focus on cultivating moral consciousness and spiritual awareness among students. These classes not only provide theoretical instruction on Islamic ethics but also offer opportunities for reflection and practical application, such as daily journal writing, mentorship, and guided worship training. The goal is to ensure that students not only understand but also experience and practice Islamic values in their daily lives (Muslih, 2021). Qur'anic exegesis and Hadith studies are also reinforced to enable students to grasp not only the literal meanings of texts but also their social relevance. For instance, in thematic tafsir classes, students explore concepts of justice, work ethics, and leadership based on the Qur'an and Hadith. These courses aim to make Islamic teachings a practical solution to contemporary student life challenges, rather than abstract theories. Beyond the academic sphere, Islamic values are also instilled through extracurricular activities such as study circles (halaqah), Islamic leadership training, campus preaching, and weekly discussion forums (Astuti, 2022). These initiatives help establish a religious culture on campus, fostering honesty, discipline, and responsibility among students.

Faculty Leadership and the Future of Islamic Higher Education; The success of integrating Islamic values depends greatly on the expertise and commitment of educators. Lecturers serve not only as instructors but also as role models of moral conduct and spiritual guidance. For this reason, many Islamic educational institutions implement training programs to enhance teachers' abilities to deliver value-based instruction using Islamic andragogical methods (Lubis, 2019). In the current era of globalization and modern challenges, integrating Islamic values into the curriculum is a strategic means of reinforcing

Muslim students' identity. With the rise of secular and hedonistic influences in digital and social spheres, students require moral guidance to navigate contemporary life. An integrated Islamic curriculum addresses this need by producing graduates who are religiously observant, professionally competent, and ethically upright. More importantly, this integration strengthens the primary mission of Islamic higher education—to produce leaders of the ummah, agents of change, and guardians of morality in society. These graduates are expected to carry Islamic values into various professional fields—whether as educators, bureaucrats, entrepreneurs, or scientists—and to contribute toward ethical transformation in the wider community (Ibad, 2022).

CONCLUSION

Islamic higher education institutions play a vital role in developing the character and ethics of Muslim students through an integrated approach grounded in Islamic values. In the Islamic perspective, character is defined as akhlaqul karimah (noble morals), which represent an individual's personality in the form of values, morals, and virtuous behavior. Character education in the Islamic context emphasizes the creation of individuals who possess a sound heart, a thoughtful mind, and positive actions, while being able to distinguish cultural practices that are inconsistent with the values of Pancasila and the teachings of Islam.

Since their inception, Islamic higher education institutions have served as centers for the development of both scientific knowledge and spiritual values. This role has continued to evolve to the present day by integrating academic and moral education within a curriculum that harmonizes science and divine revelation. Through various Islamic studies courses—such as Islamic Religious Education, Ethics and Sufism, Qur'anic Exegesis (Tafsir), and Hadith—as well as extracurricular activities such as halaqah (study circles) and Islamic leadership training, students are encouraged to excel not only academically but also in spiritual, social, and ethical dimensions.

Islamic higher education institutions also serve as agents of social change by instilling values such as honesty, responsibility, compassion, empathy, and social awareness in students. Faculty members play a crucial role as moral exemplars and spiritual mentors, supporting the delivery of value-based education that extends beyond the classroom.

Through this comprehensive approach, Islamic higher education institutions are expected to produce a generation of Muslims who are morally upright, professionally competent, and ready to become just and visionary leaders of the ummah—committed to social justice and the advancement of the community.

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