

Strategic Development of Ma'had Aly Nurul Jadid's Competitiveness Amidst Competition from Other Islamic Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract:

This study discusses the strategy for developing the competitiveness of Ma'had Aly Nurul Jadid in facing increasing competition among Islamic higher education institutions in Indonesia. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, the study examines various strategic aspects such as strengthening the curriculum based on turats and contemporary science, improving lecturer competency, developing a digital-based academic ecosystem, and optimizing collaboration with Islamic boarding schools, universities, and religious institutions. The results show that Ma'had Aly Nurul Jadid can increase its competitiveness through study program differentiation, strengthening institutional governance, academic branding, and expanding national and international partnership networks. In addition, integrating Islamic boarding school values with modern scientific needs is a key factor in maintaining the institution's relevance and quality. This study recommends strengthening academic innovation, improving the quality of educational services, and implementing a sustainable institutional marketing strategy to ensure the sustainability of Ma'had Aly's competitiveness amidst the dynamics of global change.

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INTRODUCTION

Theoretically, Islamic higher education institutions are designed to be centers for the development of superior, adaptive knowledge, capable of meeting the demands of modern society. However, in practice, there is a gap between this ideal concept and the social reality on the ground. The essence of this gap is that strategic management theory emphasizes the importance of innovation, modern governance, and competitive



advantage. In contrast, many Islamic boarding school-based institutions, including Ma'had Aly, still rely on traditional management. Contributing factors include limited resources, minimal digitalization, and a lack of curriculum integration with community needs. Data from Ministry of Religious Affairs reports and observations indicate that several Ma'had Aly face issues in governance, faculty quality, and quality documentation. This situation indicates a serious gap between institutional development theory, which demands competitive advantage, and the operational reality of institutions that still struggle to meet higher education standards. This crucial issue underpins the need for a strategic review of Ma'had Aly Nurul Jadid's competitiveness to meet modern academic demands.

In reality, Ma'had Aly Nurul Jadid operates amidst increasingly fierce competition among Islamic higher education institutions, requiring the institution to adapt strategically. The external environment of Ma'had Aly is very dynamic, with a growing number of Islamic Boarding Schools (PTKI) offering modern study programs, digital facilities, and innovative educational models. This is supported by the fact that public preference for higher education now focuses not only on mastery of religious knowledge, but also on professional competence and 21st-century skills. Observations show that Ma'had Aly Nurul Jadid has made various improvements, such as improving the quality of lecturers, developing academic administration, and expanding collaborations, but these changes have not fully met the needs of the education market. This phenomenon indicates the need for a more comprehensive strategic approach so that Ma'had Aly not only maintains its Islamic boarding school identity but is also able to compete effectively in the modern PTKI ecosystem, especially in digitalization, program differentiation, and institutional branding.

Previous research has shown that various studies on strategies for developing the competitiveness of Islamic educational institutions have been conducted, but most have focused on formal Islamic Higher Education Institutions (PTKI) such as UIN, IAIN, and STAI, rather than on Islamic boarding school-based Ma'had Aly (Islamic boarding school). In essence, the scope for research on the competitiveness of Ma'had Aly is still lacking in the academic literature. This is because Ma'had Aly is a relatively new institution in the formal higher education system, so it has not been widely studied from a strategic management perspective. Evidence from this research Chairudin and Widodo (2024) emphasizes the importance of curriculum innovation to improve the quality of PTKI, while Susanto, Phoek, and Tjilen (2025) Both highlight governance as a key to institutional excellence, but neither specifically addresses Ma'had Aly. Research on Islamic boarding schools focuses more on the heritage curriculum, scholarly traditions, or educational transformation, rather than competitive strategies. (Hakim and Hamdi 2025). In conclusion, this research has an important position as an effort to fill the gap in scientific knowledge by presenting a strategic analysis specifically for Ma'had Aly Nurul Jadid amidst increasingly tight competition between Islamic higher education institutions.

The originality of this research lies in its integrative approach that combines modern strategic management analysis with the distinctive characteristics of Islamic boarding schools as the main identity of Ma'had Aly. The aspect that forms the basis of

innovation is that so far, studies on Ma'had Aly have been more descriptive normative related to the tradition of studying yellow books, the quality of cultural heritage, or the revitalization of the Islamic boarding school system. The main difference of this research is because it integrates the concept of competitive advantage, internal-external environmental analysis, and differentiation strategies with local wisdom of Islamic boarding schools such as the sanad of knowledge, adab, and the depth of fiqh. (Widodo 2025). Supporting evidence for this novel contribution is the absence of previous studies that have examined Ma'had Aly within the framework of a competitive strategy based on institutional identity. Previous research tends to separate the traditional values of Islamic boarding schools from the demands of modernization, while this study combines both as a development model. The conclusion of this innovation is that this research offers a new paradigm for Ma'had Aly development: not merely technical modernization, but a strategic transformation that maintains its original character while strengthening its competitive advantage. (Kholifah et al. 2024).

This research aims to answer the main question of how Ma'had Aly Nurul Jadid can increase its competitiveness amidst the fierce competition between Islamic higher education institutions. The focus of this paragraph is to formulate research questions that serve as the main guide, because competitiveness development strategies must be based on clear research questions so that the analysis is directed and systematic. Supporting data shows that Ma'had Aly Nurul Jadid has great potential, such as the strength of the Islamic boarding school tradition, scientific legitimacy, and a broad community base. However, they face challenges in digitalization, governance, and mapping competitive strategies. Based on this, the research questions include: (1) how do internal and external conditions affect the competitiveness of Ma'had Aly? The initial conclusion is that Ma'had Aly's competitiveness can be increased through the integration of the strength of the Islamic boarding school tradition and modern strategies based on environmental analysis, thus producing a strong, relevant, and sustainable institutional development model.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research adopted a qualitative approach with a case study design, as the focus was on the contextual competitiveness development strategy of Ma'had Aly Nurul Jadid, which requires an in-depth understanding of the institution's internal phenomena. To support the findings, the research also included simple quantitative data through a survey, thus employing a limited mixed-methods approach. The research location was chosen at Ma'had Aly Nurul Jadid in Paiton, Probolinggo, based on the institution's active capacity development and competitiveness with other Islamic Higher Education Institutions (PTKI), and its unique characteristics relevant to the study. The location selection also took into account ease of data access, the availability of informants, and evolving management dynamics.

Research information sources included key informants such as Ma'had Aly leaders and academic administrators; respondents comprised of lecturers, students,

and alumni; and textual sources, including curriculum documents, institutional reports, government policies, scholarly manuscripts, and online news. The data collection process involved desk reviews of institutional documents, observations of academic and managerial activities, in-depth interviews using semi-structured guidelines, and focus group discussions (FGDs) with stakeholders to clarify and enrich the field data. This study also uses a survey questionnaire to obtain a quantitative picture of the perceptions and needs of the academic community. (Agus and Kholilurrohman 2025).

The data analysis process followed the Miles and Huberman model, which includes data condensation, data presentation, and drawing/verifying conclusions. Researchers used various methods, such as content analysis to examine documents, discourse analysis to understand institutional narratives, and interpretive analysis to interpret the meaning of strategies from the informants' perspectives. This combination of techniques and methods supported the research in gaining a comprehensive understanding of Ma'had Aly Nurul Jadid's competitive development strategy amidst the competition among Islamic higher education institutions.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

Strengthening Islamic Boarding School-Based Scientific Identity as a Core Competitive Resource

The results of the study indicate that the Islamic boarding school-based scholarly identity in the context of Ma'had Aly Nurul Jadid is understood as an academic character derived from the tradition of turats, the sanad of scholarly transmission, and the adab-oriented educational culture that has been embedded in the Islamic boarding school system. This identity is not only reflected in the mastery of classical literature, but also through the learning methods of halaqah, bahtsul masail, and the student-kiai relationship that emphasizes depth of understanding, moral discipline, and scholarly ethics. In practice, this concept is actualized through the academic routines of students that demonstrate the uniqueness of the Islamic boarding school and distinguish Ma'had Aly from other Islamic religious higher education institutions. This confirms that strengthening the Islamic boarding school's scholarly identity is a key pillar underlying the institutional competitiveness strategy and the basis for institutional differentiation amidst increasingly fierce competition.

Interviews with informants indicate that Ma'had Aly's primary strength lies in its in-depth study of Islamic heritage (turats) and the continuity of its scientific chain of transmission, a distinction rarely found in other institutions. Academic supervisors stated that student development focuses not only on intellectual aspects but also on instilling good manners as a crucial part of the learning process. A senior lecturer added that the uniqueness of Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) is actually attractive to students from outside the region because it is perceived to offer a depth of scholarship not found in modern religious campuses. Researchers interpret these two views as

reflecting the collective awareness of educators that Islamic boarding school identity is not merely tradition but also strategic academic legitimacy. The interviews demonstrate a consensus that *turats* and *sanad* are foundational to strengthening competitiveness. The data patterns suggest that strengthening Islamic boarding school identity is a top priority for maintaining the institution's character and broadening its appeal.

The researchers' observations corroborate the findings from the interviews, which show that learning activities such as yellow book studies, *bahtsul masail* discussions, and *halaqah* (Islamic circle) learning occur consistently and constitute a core culture within Ma'had Aly. The interaction between the *ustadz* and the students demonstrates a relationship based on good manners, reflected through respect, perseverance, and a deepening understanding of the text in every academic activity. The learning atmosphere seems to emphasize conceptual depth over simply completing the material, indicating that the academic culture of the Islamic boarding school profoundly shapes the mindset of the students. The researcher's interpretation of this data is that the Islamic boarding school's scholarly identity is evident not only in the curriculum but also in the entire learning ecosystem. The data shows that the *pesantren*'s continuously maintained traditions are a competitive strength that is difficult for other educational institutions to imitate.

Limitations of Digitalization and Modern Management Hinder the Expansion and Attractiveness of Institutions

The research results indicate that the limitations of digitalization and modern management at Ma'had Aly Nurul Jadid are reflected in the low use of information technology in academic services, administration, documentation, and publications, as well as the suboptimal implementation of a quality standards-based management system. Operationally, this is evident in the manual administrative processes, the lack of an integrated academic information system, and the minimal use of digital media for promotion and scientific publications. Furthermore, the institutional planning, monitoring, and evaluation patterns do not align with data-driven management principles, resulting in obstacles in expanding services, increasing efficiency, and strengthening academic appeal. Therefore, digitalization and management modernization are crucial aspects influencing Ma'had Aly's competitiveness with other, more technology-adaptive Islamic Higher Education Institutions (PTKI).

Interviews with two informants reinforced this picture. The first informant, an academic administration staff member, stated that many student service processes, such as registration and grade archiving, are still performed manually, often leading to delays and data inconsistencies. He added, "We actually need a digital system, but the human resources managing it are not yet ready." The second informant, a lecturer and quality manager, argued that limited digitalization makes it difficult for the institution to present itself professionally in the academic public sphere. He emphasized that, "The website, activity publications, and academic documentation are not yet organized, making it difficult for prospective students to see the institution's strengths." The

researcher interpreted that both informants viewed limited digitalization not only as a technical issue but also as directly impacting the institution's image and accessibility. The data showed that digital barriers resulted in weak service transparency and low external appeal. Interview patterns revealed that digitalization issues were closely related to human resource capacity, a lack of modern management planning, and minimal system support.

Field observations further confirmed that digitalization has not been optimal. The researcher found that the process of preparing class schedules, documenting academic activities, and administrative reporting was carried out through physical files and informal messages, rather than through a structured digital system. The institution's website does not display regular information updates, and social media is rarely used to disseminate academic activities. In some academic activities, researchers also observed that documentation of implementation was not properly digitized, making it difficult to access for analysis or publication. The researchers' interpretation of these observations suggests that the institution lacks a modern management system that supports efficiency, monitoring, and data-driven decision-making. A restatement of the observation results shows that minimal digitalization results in a lack of institutional visibility, slow service processes, and hampered academic expansion. A description of the data patterns indicates that issues with digitalization and modern management are systematic, consistently occurring across various work units, and significantly limiting Ma'had Aly's ability to compete with more progressive institutions.

Human Resource Readiness and Partnership Networks Are Determining Factors in the Sustainability of Competitiveness Strategies

The results of the study indicate that the readiness of human resources (HR) and partnership networks are understood as the internal capabilities of the institution including lecturer competency, alumni involvement, and the role of management as well as external capabilities in the form of relationships with other institutions to support the sustainability of Ma'had Aly Nurul Jadid's competitive strategy. Operationally in the field, these sub-findings are apparent in the quality of teaching, managerial capacity, academic productivity, and the extent to which the institution is able to collaborate with universities, research institutions, professional organizations, and Islamic boarding school networks. The readiness of HR and the strength of these networks become social and institutional capital that can expand influence, improve reputation, and accelerate academic transformation. Thus, the readiness of human resources and partnership networks function as determinants of the sustainability of competitive strategies, especially when institutions are faced with competitive dynamics among Islamic religious higher education institutions.

Interviews with informants reinforced this picture. The first informant, a lecturer and curriculum manager, stated that the competency of lecturers at Ma'had Aly is quite strong because most have extensive Islamic boarding school experience and relevant higher education backgrounds. However, he added that capacity building through

training and academic collaboration still needs to be expanded. The second informant, an alumnus currently working in a religious institution, emphasized that the Islamic boarding school network has great potential but has not been fully utilized for academic collaboration, research, and career development. He stated, "If this network is structured, the Islamic boarding school can develop more rapidly." The researcher interpreted that both informants see the importance of integrating internal human resource strengths and external networks to strengthen institutional strategy. Data restatement indicates that human resource competencies are available but have not been systematically promoted through partnership networks. Descriptions or patterns from the interviews indicate that human resources are strong but not yet connected to a planned collaboration ecosystem.

The researcher's observations also showed a similar trend. The academic activities carried out by lecturers demonstrate good quality, particularly in mastery of Islamic material based on Islamic boarding school traditions. However, researchers observed that academic forums such as seminars, scientific discussions, or research collaborations were rarely conducted in a structured manner. Activity documentation also showed that partnerships with external institutions existed, but were incidental and not yet part of the long-term institutional development strategy. In some activities, alumni were heavily involved informally, but formal institutional partnerships were not yet well developed. Researchers argued that despite strong human resources capacity, their utilization to build strategic networks was not optimal. This observation confirms that strong human resources do not automatically increase competitiveness without a robust partnership network. Data patterns indicate that the success of a competitiveness strategy is highly dependent on the relationship between qualified human resources and a planned, structured, and sustainable institutional network.

The research findings confirm that the main factors influencing Ma'had Aly Nurul Jadid's competitiveness include strengthening its Islamic boarding school-based scientific identity, limitations in digitalization and modern management, and the readiness of human resources and collaborative networks. Overall, these results support the Islamic education management literature, which highlights the importance of core competencies based on scientific traditions in creating a unique position. However, there is an important difference: while traditional Islamic boarding schools typically rely on charisma and a chain of knowledge, this research shows that a scholarly identity alone is not enough, especially when institutions must compete in an increasingly digital and standardized ecosystem of religious higher education.

On the other hand, obstacles in digital transformation and modern management in the field reinforce previous findings that Islamic educational institutions often lag behind in administrative and technological innovation. What's noteworthy about these findings is that digital lag is not just a technical issue, but also impacts an institution's image, access, and ability to reach prospective students. This is due to a reliance on traditional management models and a lack of investment in technology and modern

human resources. As a result, institutions become less responsive to the demands of the higher education market.

Meanwhile, findings regarding human resource readiness and partnership networks confirm the dynamic capabilities theory's view that organizations cannot survive solely on internal resources but require the ability to integrate strategic networks. The research findings indicate that Ma'had Aly's various collaborations with Islamic boarding schools, other universities, and community organizations are driving factors in the program's sustainability. However, these partnership patterns are still not professionally structured, so their benefits are not yet optimal. The "so-what": the partnership network is a potential strength, but it cannot yet function as a stable competitive advantage. The "why": limitations in the management system and the absence of a dedicated unit for developing partnerships.

These three sub-findings demonstrate a clear causal structure. Scholarly identity provides a key advantage, but limitations in digitalization and management hinder development, while human resource readiness and networks serve as a counterbalance that enables the institution to survive. In other words, Ma'had Aly's competitiveness depends on the trade-off between the power of tradition and the demands of modernization. This context aligns with the literature on the transformation of Islamic boarding schools into higher education institutions, which often experiences tensions between preserving tradition and the need for structural innovation.

The theoretical implications of this research emphasize the importance of developing a more contextual competitiveness model for Islamic boarding school-based higher education institutions. This model must combine traditional scholarly capital, such as sanad (Islamic chain of clerics), traditional books, and the academic culture of Islamic boarding schools (pesantren), with modern capabilities such as digitalization, governance, and strategic partnerships. Practically, Ma'had Aly needs to restructure its management, strengthen its human resources' digital literacy, and establish formal partnership units. Without such structural changes, its scholarly identity will remain merely symbolic, not a competitive advantage capable of addressing the challenges and dynamics of competition among Islamic higher education institutions.

DISCUSSION

The research findings indicate that Ma'had Aly Nurul Jadid's competitiveness development strategy rests on strengthening the curriculum, improving the competency of lecturers and asatidz (teacher-teacher association), and expanding its partnership network. This finding aligns with the literature on strategic management in Islamic higher education, as explained by Hamid (2019) and Mujiburrahman (2020), who argue that the competitiveness of religious institutions is largely determined by curriculum innovation and scientific relevance. However, this study found that Ma'had Aly Nurul Jadid emphasizes turats-contemporary integration more than similar

institutions. This difference indicates that academic differentiation based on Islamic boarding school traditions is a unique competitive advantage that is difficult for other institutions to replicate.

Contrary to Supriadi's (2021) findings regarding the stagnation of Islamic educational institutions due to technological limitations, this study demonstrates that Ma'had Aly Nurul Jadid is quite adaptive to digitalization, for example through digital libraries, online learning platforms, and open-access scientific publications. The implication of this finding is that technological readiness depends not only on funding but also on an academic culture that supports innovation. Thus, technological adaptation serves to expand student reach, strengthen the institution's scientific reputation, and enhance Ma'had Aly's bargaining position amidst inter-institutional competition.

Functionally, the implemented development strategy has resulted in increased public trust, growing interest among prospective students, and increasing student participation in national scientific forums. However, dysfunctionally, the intensification of quality improvement programs has also increased the workload of lecturers and institutional administrators. The implications of this situation indicate that a competitive strategy not only brings performative benefits but also requires more structured work management to prevent institutional fatigue. Therefore, the strategy's success needs to be balanced with strengthened internal governance to maintain a balance between quality and sustainability.

Causally, the development strategy is effective because it is supported by the pesantren's collaborative institutional structure and a relatively flexible hierarchy, enabling rapid decision-making. The pesantren's scholarly culture particularly the tradition of reading the holy book serves as a cultural structure that underpins the successful integration of heritage and contemporary traditions. The correlation between an adaptive structure and strategy implementation demonstrates that innovation is more readily accepted when the social structure supports change. This aligns with Parsons' structure-function theory, which states that an institution's sustainability is largely determined by the alignment between its basic structure and its functions.

Overall, the results of this study reinforce existing literature and demonstrate the uniqueness of Ma'had Aly Nurul Jadid in combining Islamic boarding school traditions with management modernization. The strategic implication is that institutional identity can serve as a differentiating factor in the increasingly fierce competition among Islamic religious higher education institutions. These findings also emphasize the importance of strengthening human resources, expanding academic networks, and optimizing digitalization in maintaining sustainable competitiveness. Meanwhile, the success of this strategy is strongly influenced by the social and cultural structure of the Islamic boarding school, which is responsive to innovation. Therefore, Ma'had Aly Nurul Jadid has great potential to become a model for developing the competitiveness of Islamic boarding school-based higher education institutions in Indonesia.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that the competitiveness of Ma'had Aly Nurul Jadid is influenced by three main factors: strengthening its Islamic boarding school-based scholarly identity as the basis of its core competencies, limitations in digitalization and modern management that hinder the expansion of the institution's influence, and the readiness of human resources and partnership networks that support the sustainability of its competitive strategy. The lessons learned from this study demonstrate that Islamic boarding school-based religious higher education institutions must be able to balance the preservation of intellectual traditions with modern managerial adaptations to remain relevant in a constantly changing competitive ecosystem. This paper's contribution lies in updating the perspective on the competitive strategy of Islamic boarding school higher education institutions. Scientifically, this study enriches the discourse by incorporating a dynamic capabilities approach in the context of Islamic boarding schools, broadening understanding of how scholarly traditions, managerial factors, and collaborative networks interact. Methodologically, this study offers a structure of questions and variables that position Islamic boarding school identity as both cultural capital and a strategic asset, thus providing a new analytical foundation for similar research.

A limitation of this study lies in its limited scope within Ma'had Aly Nurul Jadid, making the findings not generally applicable to other institutions with different circumstances. Furthermore, informant variation is still limited to specific gender, age, and experience backgrounds, and the methods used are still qualitative, thus not reflecting a broader quantitative picture. Therefore, further research involving diverse genders and ages, increasing case diversity, and implementing survey or mixed-method approaches is needed to obtain a more comprehensive picture and support more targeted and effective policymaking.

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