

Two Pathways to Competitiveness: Strategic Transformation of Islamic Universities under Capital Relocation

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ABSTRACT

Islamic higher education institutions (PTKI) in Indonesia face growing pressure to turn institutional change into competitiveness. This pressure is especially strong for universities near the new capital city (IKN) in East Kalimantan. This study analyzes how two such institutions formulate and implement development strategies and how these strategies shape their competitiveness. A qualitative multiple-case design compared Universitas Islam Negeri Sultan Aji Muhammad Idris Samarinda (UINSI Samarinda) as a state university with Universitas Muhammadiyah Kalimantan Timur (UMKT) as a private one. Data from interviews with sixteen informants, participant observation, and institutional documents were examined through thematic and cross-case analysis. The findings reveal four interdependent dimensions of transformation. Governance reform came first and laid the base for human capital development, academic differentiation, and regional partnership. UMKT moved along an accelerative pathway driven by digital systems and performance incentives. UINSI Samarinda followed a consolidative pathway built on post-conversion restructuring and knowledge integration. Both gained public recognition through partnership, although the reputation of UINSI Samarinda grew faster than its research output. These findings imply that PTKI leaders and the Ministry of Religious Affairs should assess state and private institutions by the pathway each follows rather than by a single benchmark. Investment in lecturers also needs a clear mechanism that turns higher qualifications into scholarly output.

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INTRODUCTION

Indonesian Islamic higher education institutions (*Perguruan Tinggi Keagamaan Islam*, PTKI) are now expected to turn institutional change into measurable competitiveness, and this expectation is particularly sharp in East Kalimantan. The pressure comes from two national agendas that meet in the province. Law No. 59 of 2024 on the National Long-Term Development Plan 2025–2045 places human resource quality at the center of the Golden Indonesia 2045 vision, while Law No. 3 of 2022 on the State Capital relocates the national capital to Ibu Kota Nusantara (IKN) in East Kalimantan (Republik Indonesia, 2022, 2024; Berawi, 2022). The Ministry of Religious Affairs has translated these agendas into demands for better quality, relevance, and governance in its 2025–2029 strategic plan (Kementerian



Agama Republik Indonesia, 2025; Sibawaihi et al., 2024; Sumiati et al., 2024). For universities in the IKN buffer region, these demands arrive together with rapid social and economic change, massive spatial interventions, new labor market needs, and closer public scrutiny (Berawi, 2022; Farida, 2021; Hackbarth & de Vries, 2021). PTKI in East Kalimantan therefore offer a revealing setting for examining how religious universities convert regional pressure into institutional strategy (Donati & Bellandi, 2025; Salomaa & Charles, 2021).

Research on PTKI transformation has developed along three themes. The first treats transformation as academic reform that follows a change of institutional status. Prior studies traced how state Islamic universities internationalized their study programs, opened new programs, and restructured postgraduate management, showing that the conversion of institutes into universities began as a global project but was reshaped locally by the political and moral literacy of university leaders (Muthohirin, 2025; Sibawaihi et al., 2024; Suyadi et al., 2022). The second theme concerns the limits of autonomy. Recent investigations found that restricted financial and institutional autonomy slowed state Islamic universities in their pursuit of world-class status, while institutional values were mobilized to soften the commercial side effects of internationalization (Sibawaihi et al., 2024; Sudirman et al., 2025; Sumiati et al., 2024). The third theme, drawn from general higher education research, asks how universities balance global excellence with regional engagement. Scholars have conceptualized the regional third mission and the system-based university, which combines research excellence with alignment to local socioeconomic needs (Donati & Bellandi, 2025; Salomaa & Charles, 2021). Together, these studies explain why PTKI transform, yet they rely mostly on single state institutions or on cross-national data that leave religious identity aside (Muthohirin, 2025; Sudirman et al., 2025; Suyadi et al., 2022).

This body of work leaves three questions open. First, existing PTKI studies focus almost entirely on large state universities, so little is known about how a state institution and a private, community-based institution pursue competitiveness differently under the same external pressure (Muthohirin, 2025; Sudirman et al., 2025; Suyadi et al., 2022). Second, governance, human resource development, academic and digital change, and external partnership are usually examined as separate topics. This separation hides how the four depend on one another and in what order institutions build them (Alenezi, 2023; Gkrimpizi et al., 2024; Mohamed Hashim et al., 2022). Third, no study has examined PTKI transformation in a region undergoing capital relocation, even though contemporary regional scholarship suggests that local embeddedness and spatial restructuring fundamentally shape how institutions position themselves (Donati & Bellandi, 2025; Farida, 2021; Hackbarth & de Vries, 2021). The present study addresses these gaps through a multiple-case comparison of a state PTKI and a private PTKI in the IKN buffer region. Its novelty lies in pairing this contrasting-case design with an integrated analysis of four transformation dimensions. This combination allows the study to identify both the sequence of transformation and the distinct pathways that different governance forms produce.

This study aims to analyze how PTKI formulate strategies for institutional development, how they implement those strategies, and what implications the strategies have for competitiveness. It does so by comparing Universitas Islam Negeri Sultan Aji Muhammad Idris Samarinda (UINSI Samarinda) with Universitas Muhammadiyah Kalimantan Timur (UMKT). UINSI Samarinda is a state Islamic university that converted from IAIN to UIN status in 2021, while UMKT is a Muhammadiyah university formed through a merger in 2017. The comparison extends earlier studies of single state institutions (Sibawaihi et al., 2024; Sudirman et al., 2025; Suyadi et al., 2022) by placing state bureaucratic governance and community-based governance side by side in one regional context. Academically, the study contributes to institutional and strategic management theory by examining how religious identity filters external pressure (Muthohirin, 2025; Sudirman et al., 2025; Sumiati et al., 2024). Practically, it offers PTKI leaders and the Ministry of Religious Affairs an empirically grounded reference for designing development roadmaps in regions where expectations are rising faster than institutional capacity.

The study argues that competitiveness in PTKI does not come from academic quality alone. It emerges when governance reform, human capital development, academic and digital transformation, and ecosystem partnership are built in a deliberate order and reinforce one another (Alenezi, 2023; Gkrimpizi et al., 2024; Mohamed Hashim et al., 2022). The study further argues that the governance form of an institution, whether state or private, shapes the pace and direction of this process (Sibawaihi et al., 2024; Sudirman et al., 2025; Sumiati et al., 2024). As a qualitative inquiry, the study does not test these propositions statistically. Instead, it explores how leaders, unit heads, lecturers, and staff understand and carry out institutional strategy, and how planning documents and daily practice confirm or complicate their accounts. The goal is an in-depth understanding of the mechanisms through which two different PTKI turn strategic intent into recognized institutional standing. The following section describes the multiple-case design, the informants, and the procedures used to collect and analyze the data.

RESEARCH METHOD

Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles and Huberman, comprising three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing (Bingham, 2023; Byrne, 2022). Data reduction organized and focused the raw material from interviews, observation, and documentation around the study's guiding questions; data display arranged the reduced material so that patterns across sources could be compared; and conclusion drawing tested those patterns against the accumulated evidence. The data trustworthiness was secured through source and method triangulation together with peer examination, and the analysis proceeded iteratively during and after data collection to ensure the depth and accuracy of the findings (Adler, 2022; Ahmed, 2024; Van Cleave et al., 2025).

This study employed a qualitative approach with a multiple-case study design, chosen because the research sought to understand how Islamic higher education institutions formulate, implement, and experience strategic transformation, not to measure predefined variables (Hunziker & Blankenagel, 2024; Priya, 2021). The design followed an interpretive paradigm that treats institutional strategy as a reality constructed through the decisions, practices, and meanings of the actors who carry it out. Two cases were selected to provide theoretical contrast within a shared regional setting. Universitas Islam Negeri Sultan Aji Muhammad Idris Samarinda (UINSI Samarinda) represents a state Islamic university (*Perguruan Tinggi Keagamaan Islam Negeri*, PTKIN) operating under state bureaucratic governance. Universitas Muhammadiyah Kalimantan Timur (UMKT) represents a private Islamic university (*Perguruan Tinggi Keagamaan Islam Swasta*, PTKIS) operating with the organizational flexibility of a community-based institution. Both are located in East Kalimantan, the buffer region of the new capital city (*Ibu Kota Nusantara*, IKN), and both have recently undergone institutional transformation toward university status. This combination of a common external setting and contrasting governance models allowed the study to examine how governance form shapes strategic choices under similar regional pressures. Informants were selected purposively and, where relevant, through snowball referral (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022; Knott et al., 2022). Selection targeted individuals directly involved in formulating or implementing institutional strategy, from senior leadership to operational staff. The sixteen informants who provided the primary data are presented in **Table 1**.

Data were collected through three complementary techniques, and each was intended to capture a different layer of institutional strategy (Hunziker & Blankenagel, 2024; Priya, 2021). First, in-depth interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format with all sixteen informants (Knott et al., 2022; Ruslin et al., 2022). Follow-up conversations were held when an account required clarification or confirmation. The interview guide covered institutional development policy, organizational governance, quality assurance, human resource development, academic and digital innovation, research and publication, external

cooperation and internationalization, and competitiveness strategy in the context of IKN development. Second, participant observation was carried out in strategic units and service areas at both sites, including quality assurance offices, research and publication institutes, information technology centers, administrative bureaus, academic service units, faculties, and campus development areas. Observation followed a descriptive, focused, and selective sequence. It captured how governance procedures, digital systems, leadership patterns, and academic activities operate in practice rather than as described in policy. Third, document analysis examined institutional records to trace the consistency between formal strategy and its implementation (Bingham, 2023; Morgan, 2022). These records included the *Rencana Induk Pengembangan* (RIP, Master Development Plan), the *Rencana Strategis* (Renstra, Strategic Plan), statutes, accreditation reports, *Sistem Penjaminan Mutu Internal* (SPMI, Internal Quality Assurance System) documents, rector's decrees, risk management manuals, cooperation agreements, publication records, ranking reports, and official institutional publications. External documents included the 2025–2029 strategic plans of the Ministry of Religious Affairs and the Ministry of Higher Education, Science, and Technology.

Table 1. Informant Codes, Positions, and Organizational Levels

Code	Institution	Position	Organizational Level
U1	UMKT	Vice-Rector for Academic Affairs	Senior leadership
U2	UMKT	Vice-Rector for Development	Senior leadership
U3	UMKT	Head, Quality Assurance Institute (<i>Lembaga Penjaminan Mutu</i> , LPM)	Strategic unit
U4	UMKT	Head, Scientific Publication Development Institute (<i>Lembaga Pengembangan Publikasi Ilmiah</i> , LPPI)	Strategic unit
U5	UMKT	Head, Information Technology Center	Strategic unit
U6	UMKT	Dean, Faculty of Public Health	Faculty leadership
U7	UMKT	Lecturer, Management Program	Operational
U8	UMKT	Administrative Staff	Operational
S1	UINSI Samarinda	Vice-Rector for Academic Affairs	Senior leadership
S2	UINSI Samarinda	Vice-Rector for General Administration, Planning, and Finance	Senior leadership
S3	UINSI Samarinda	Head, Institute for Research and Community Service (<i>Lembaga Penelitian dan Pengabdian kepada Masyarakat</i> , LP2M)	Strategic unit
S4	UINSI Samarinda	Dean, Faculty of Ushuluddin	Faculty leadership
S5	UINSI Samarinda	Head, Personnel Division	Strategic unit
S6	UINSI Samarinda	Lecturer, Faculty of Tarbiyah and Teacher Training	Operational
S7	UINSI Samarinda	Vice-Rector for Student Affairs	Senior leadership
S8	UINSI Samarinda	Public Relations Staff	Operational

Data analysis proceeded in two stages. In the within-case stage, the data from each institution were analyzed using an interactive qualitative workflow moving iteratively through data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification (Bingham, 2023; Morgan, 2022). This model was combined with the six phases of reflexive thematic analysis: familiarization, initial coding, theme searching, theme review, theme definition, and reporting (Braun & Clarke, 2021, 2022; Byrne, 2022). Interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents were coded together, so that each emerging theme was grounded in more than one type of evidence. Each case produced a triangulation matrix linking every strategic focus to its supporting interview, observation, and documentary data. In the cross-case stage, the two case-level patterns were compared following multiple-case replication logic (Hunziker &

Blankenagel, 2024; Priya, 2021). This comparison identified points of convergence and divergence and consolidated them into the four transformation dimensions reported in the Result section. Trustworthiness was established through source and method triangulation, peer debriefing with academic supervisors and colleagues, thick description of each institutional context to support transferability, iterative supervisory review to support dependability, and a documentary audit trail to support confirmability (Adler, 2022; Ahmed, 2024; Van Cleave et al., 2025). One member of the author team holds a leadership position at UINSI Samarinda and also served as an informant. To limit the effect of this dual role, reflexive bracketing was applied: interviews with this informant were conducted and coded by the first author, and statements from this source were retained only when corroborated by another informant, an observation record, or an institutional document (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023; Peddle, 2022).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Results

The findings draw on in-depth interviews with university leaders, unit heads, lecturers, and administrative staff, supported by field observation and institutional documents collected between October and November 2025. Quotations are translated from Indonesian and attributed using the informant codes listed in Table 1. Cross-case analysis produced four interrelated dimensions of strategic transformation: governance, human capital, academic and digital practice, and ecosystem partnership. For each dimension, the account traces three things: how the strategy was formulated in planning documents, how it was carried out in institutional practice, and what consequences informants and documents attribute to it. The two institutions differ sharply in governance structure and history. UMKT is a Muhammadiyah university formed through a merger in 2017 and has advanced quickly through digital acceleration. UINSI Samarinda converted from IAIN to UIN status in 2018 and has advanced gradually through structural consolidation. Both, however, describe their development as a deliberate response to the regional change brought about by the new capital city (IKN).

Governance Reform Precedes Expansion

At both institutions, governance was the first layer that leaders chose to rebuild, and the planning documents show that this sequence was intended. UMKT's *Rencana Induk Pengembangan* (RIP, Master Development Plan) 2017–2037 designates 2017–2022 as a consolidation stage. That stage covers lecturer qualification, campus infrastructure including information technology, and an asset management body for campus business units. All of these serve the vision of becoming “an Islamic, superior, and innovative university in East Kalimantan with global competitiveness.” UINSI Samarinda's RIP 2015–2039 divides institutional development into five periods. It opens with Good University Governance and Institutional Transformation before setting any target tied to international recognition. The two cases differ in the instrument chosen to carry governance reform. UMKT treats its digital systems as the governance structure itself. UINSI Samarinda treats reorganization after its change of status as the precondition for every later goal. This contrast matters for the research question because it reveals two different routes to building institutional capacity before competitiveness can credibly be claimed. The long-term sequence planned by UINSI Samarinda is presented in **Figure 1**.

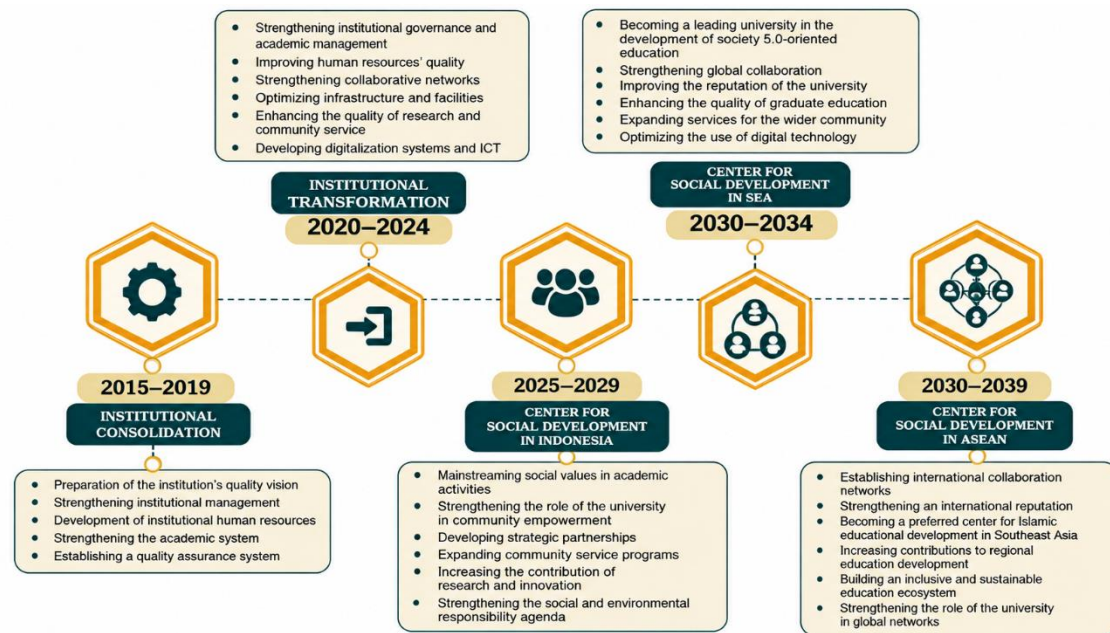


Figure 1. Development Roadmap of UINSI Samarinda, 2015–2039
(Source: *UINSI Samarinda Master Plan for Institutional Development [Rencana Induk Pengembangan]*, 2015–2039)

Figure 1 shows that the roadmap moves through five consecutive periods. It begins with Good University Governance (2016–2019) and Institutional Transformation (2020–2024), and it ends with the goal of becoming a Globally Recognized University (2034–2039). The third period (2025–2029) explicitly commits the university to serving as a model for developing a moderate society in the IKN region. Targets related to international accreditation, Webometrics, QS, and THE rankings appear only in the later periods, after governance and academic foundations are expected to be in place. The roadmap thus confirms that UINSI Samarinda planned competitiveness as the outcome of staged consolidation rather than as an immediate objective.

At UMKT, leaders described digital integration as the operating core of the university rather than an administrative supplement:

“Digitalization is not merely a support tool. It has become the main system of governance at UMKT. We want every service to run quickly, transparently, and accountably, and to be easily accessible to the whole academic community.” (U1, interview)

The head of the Information Technology Center described the technical basis of this claim: “All academic services at UMKT are now integrated into a digital system. We developed a centralized database so that every unit can work more effectively and in sync” (U5, interview).

Observation confirmed this account. Course registration, lecture management, online learning, and learning evaluation all run through a single integrated platform, and an Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) system links academic, financial, and personnel administration. Quality assurance follows the same logic. The head of LPM stated that

“quality culture at UMKT no longer takes the form of administrative documents alone; it has become a work culture. Every unit has quality indicators and is evaluated periodically” (U3, interview).

The Quality Assurance Timeline 2024/2025 and a training program on financial governance and risk mitigation for the finance bureau show that this monitoring reaches

non-academic units as well. UINSI Samarinda's account begins elsewhere. Its leaders described the conversion to university status as a demand to repair the organization before expanding it:

"The transformation into a UIN is not only a change of nomenclature. We had to repair the governance system so that the institution is ready to carry out the full functions of a university." (S2, interview)

The same informant emphasized sequence:

"Our roadmap is clear. We do not leap ahead. The stages run from governance restructuring to transformation and eventually to internationalization. Everything is based on data and the real condition of the campus" (S2, interview).

Observation at the administrative bureau and academic service units found revised standard operating procedures, a strengthened *Sistem Penjaminan Mutu Internal* (SPMI, Internal Quality Assurance System), and an academic information system (SIKAD) in routine use. The *Rencana Strategis* (Renstra, Strategic Plan) 2016–2024 lists four early agendas: organizational restructuring, basic facilities, academic leadership, and a quality assurance body. A Risk Management Manual now requires every unit to identify the external threats and internal weaknesses that could obstruct institutional goals. Digitalization at UINSI Samarinda is therefore present, but it serves as a foundation rather than a defining identity. Leaders nonetheless described the outcome plainly:

"Institutionally, we are far more orderly now. Administrative systems, governance, and work mechanisms are increasingly clear and directed" (S2, interview).

Taken together, the evidence indicates that governance reform at both sites did more than improve efficiency. It created the conditions under which later strategies could be measured and held to account. At UMKT, integrated data enabled leaders to monitor units continuously. At UINSI Samarinda, standardized procedures and risk mapping gave a newly converted institution a stable base for expansion. The difference in tempo reflects the governance form of each institution. A community-based private university could digitize its core processes within a single planning stage. A state university operating within ministerial bureaucracy chose to consolidate before accelerating.

Lecturers as Carriers of Institutional Reputation

Human capital strategy at UMKT is most visible in its personnel infrastructure. At the 2025 working meeting of the *Biro Sumber Daya Insani* (SDI, Human Resources Bureau), themed "Strengthening Strategy, Human Resource Quality, and Institutional Synergy," four priorities were set for 2025–2026: faster and competency-based recruitment, career development through training and certification, digitalization of personnel services, and a collaborative work culture. Formal decrees reinforce this agenda. One grants financial incentives for publication in accredited and reputable journals. Another sets minimum publication standards as part of lecturer performance assessment. A third establishes an intellectual property team. Leaders framed this apparatus as an investment rather than a control mechanism:

"We make sure every lecturer keeps developing, both academically and professionally. Human resources are the institution's main strength in building competitiveness" (U2, interview). The digital platform through which UMKT manages its personnel is shown in **Figure 2**.

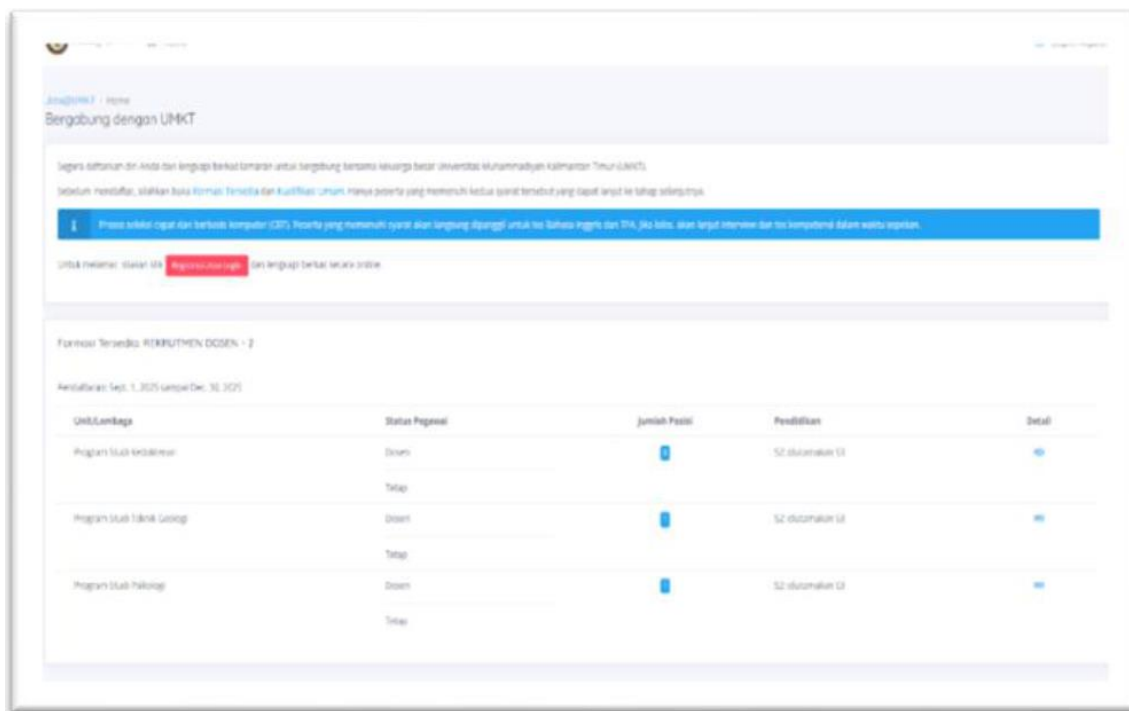


Figure 2. Digital Human Resource Portal of UMKT
(Source: www.sdiumkt.ac.id, accessed November 20, 2025)

Figure 2 shows that UMKT publishes its recruitment process openly through a dedicated human resources portal. The same system supports performance appraisal, workload reporting, attendance, and career planning. Lecturers and staff can therefore track their own achievements and development plans online rather than relying on manual reports. The portal illustrates how UMKT has turned human capital development into a measurable and transparent process that leaders can monitor directly.

The publication institute explained how the incentive structure operates in practice:

“We help lecturers write for reputable national and international journals. We also manage several internal journals that are already SINTA-accredited and are moving toward international indexing. Writing assistance, publication clinics, and scientific writing training are our routine activities.” (U4, interview)

Observation showed LPPI running a program called *Tanya Kami LPPI*, in which the institute visits each faculty to address its publication problems directly. A Higher Course Design workshop trained lecturers in outcome-based course design and active learning methods. Leaders already read these efforts as producing results:

“In recent years, lecturer publications have increased quite significantly. This shows that the strategy we are running is beginning to affect UMKT’s academic reputation” (U1, interview).

UINSI Samarinda pursues the same goal through a different lever, namely academic qualification. Its RIP sets four human capital programs: more doctoral-qualified lecturers, stronger pedagogical and research competence, wider participation in scholarly conferences, and a merit system based on academic performance. The personnel division described doctoral study as the center of this strategy:

“The university keeps encouraging lecturers to pursue doctoral study and to be active in academic activities, because we understand that the quality of human resources is the main factor in building the university’s reputation” (S5, interview5).

Documentation shows a rise in the number of lecturers undertaking doctoral study and growing involvement in research grants, seminars, and community service. The data also

show where this strategy remains incomplete. Informants and observation at UINSI Samarinda agreed that the merit system is not yet integrated with lecturer performance records and that research culture and publication productivity remain weak. The contrast between the cases is therefore sharper than a difference in emphasis. UMKT links individual output directly to institutional reward through decrees, incentives, and digital monitoring. UINSI Samarinda invests in qualifications first and expects productivity to follow, yet it still lacks a mechanism that converts higher qualifications into measurable output. Both institutions regard lecturers as the bearers of institutional reputation, but UMKT has gone further in turning that principle into an operational system.

Two Routes to Academic Differentiation

“We do not want UINSI to be seen merely as a religious campus in the narrow sense. That is why developing general study programs is a strategic step, so that UINSI can answer the needs of modern society without losing its Islamic identity.” (S1, interview)

This statement captures the tension that shapes academic transformation at UINSI Samarinda. The university is broadening its disciplinary range while seeking to preserve the religious character that justifies its existence. The bridge between these aims is a knowledge integration model known as *Sarang Lebah Madu* (honeycomb), presented in **Figure 3**.



Figure 3. The *Sarang Lebah Madu* (Honeycomb) Knowledge Integration Model of UINSI Samarinda

(Source: UINSI Samarinda institutional documents)

Figure 3 depicts academic disciplines as interconnected cells within a single honeycomb structure. Each cell represents a field of knowledge that both draws strength from and contributes to the cells around it. The image of honey production signals that the model treats knowledge as an ecosystem oriented toward social benefit rather than as a set of isolated disciplines. The model thus serves as the epistemological identity through which UINSI Samarinda distinguishes itself from general universities.

The head of LP2M described the model as more than a symbol:

“Integration of knowledge is our academic identity. It is the reference point for curriculum, research, and community service” (S3, interview).

Observation in several faculties found lecturers combining Islamic perspectives with social science, education, and community development content, and religious moderation is now taught as a dedicated course. New general study programs in science, technology, and health are supported by new lecture buildings and laboratories. Lecturers reported a visible change in academic life:

“The academic atmosphere at UINSI is now much more alive. Scholarly activities are more frequent, lecturers have begun to write actively and join academic forums,

and students are getting used to a culture of discussion and research” (S6, interview). The same leadership, however, did not claim that this expansion had already produced competitive output:

“We realize that the biggest challenge now is not only opening new programs but improving the quality of research and publication so that it can compete nationally and internationally” (S3, interview).

UMKT’s academic transformation runs through technology rather than epistemology. Its Learning Management System and Open Learning System support online and blended instruction. An integrated academic portal handles registration, course planning, grading, and correspondence. A Student Experience Center provides academic and career guidance. The digital examination system SIONIK offers a clear view of how this transformation is experienced at different levels of the institution. Leaders described its purpose as follows:

“SIONIK was developed to make sure that examinations at UMKT are more orderly, transparent, and professional. We want students to have a comfortable examination experience with minimal technical problems, while lecturers can manage learning evaluation quickly and accurately.” (U1, interview)

A lecturer confirmed the change from the classroom side:

“With SIONIK, preparing questions, scheduling, and grading have become far more efficient. We can monitor the examination in real time, and the results come out faster” (U7, interview).

An administrative staff member described the effect on record keeping:

“All examination data are stored digitally and integrated. Recapitulating grades and documentation is now neater, faster, and easier to access when needed” (U8, interview).

Beyond technology, faculties run project-based learning and field practice. The Dean of Public Health described students taking part in community service and in collaborative research with lecturers (U6, interview).

Faculties also run flagship programs such as the Entrepreneurship Campus, the Innovation Fair, and Community-Based Learning in Samarinda and the IKN area. The two pathways show that academic transformation can serve institutional differentiation in quite different ways. UMKT differentiates itself through the quality and reliability of its learning services, and its account is corroborated by leaders, lecturers, and staff alike. UINSI Samarinda differentiates itself through an epistemological identity that general universities cannot easily replicate. The UINSI data also show that identity-based differentiation does not by itself generate research output, a gap that the institution’s own research leadership openly acknowledges.

Partnership as a Source of Regional Legitimacy

The establishment of IKN appears most directly in how both institutions build external networks. For UINSI Samarinda, the link is written into long-term planning: the 2025–2029 period of its RIP commits the university to becoming a model of moderate community development in IKN and to producing research on Islam, science, and local wisdom for community development. Partnerships are the means through which this commitment is pursued. LP2M records document research cooperation with local governments, lecturer and student exchanges, international research collaboration, and community service programs grounded in religious moderation. A dean explained the rationale in explicitly regional terms:

“We use partnerships as a bridge to expand the university’s role, especially in the context of IKN” (S4, interview).

The orientation of these networks toward government, religious bodies, and local communities sets UINSI Samarinda apart from UMKT. Partnership here serves primarily as a source of social and moral legitimacy rather than market position. Informants at UINSI Samarinda linked this engagement to a sense of public ownership:

“UINSI’s strength lies not only in its academics but also in the campus’s ability to build socio-religious relationships with society. That is what makes the community feel that UINSI belongs to them” (S7, interview).

External actors appear to be responding. One leader observed that

“trust from external partners has begun to increase. This can be seen from the widening opportunities for cooperation, research grants, and collaborative programs involving UINSI in recent years” (S2, interview).

Public communication is treated as part of this effort, as a member of the public relations team explained:

“For us, public relations is not just about taking photos or videos but about conveying the values, messages, and spirit of the campus in every piece of work” (S8, interview).

Institutional documents record several external markers. UINSI Samarinda ranked first among PTKIN in East Kalimantan for SDGs performance (UI GreenMetric, 2024), third among universities in East Kalimantan (Webometrics, 2024), and within the top ten in the province (SINTA, 2025). Its public relations unit was named Best PTKIN Public Relations in 2025, and it received second place for public communication campaigns among state universities at the 2025 *Anugerah Media Humas* (AMH) of the Ministry of Communication and Digital Affairs.

UMKT’s networks point in a different direction, toward government digital services, industry, and international institutions. A collaboration with the *Dinas Komunikasi dan Informatika* (Diskominfo, Office of Communication and Informatics) strengthens technology-based academic services. Internationally, UMKT took part in the “Indonesia: Education and Collaboration” forum in Thailand and admitted eight international students from Kenya, Sudan, and other parts of East Africa in the 2025/2026 academic year. Leaders saw these students as part of the university’s outward identity:

“We hope they adapt well, study seriously, and become ambassadors of UMKT when they return to their countries” (U1, interview).

A dedicated Ranking Unit manages reputation data. Documents record UMKT’s inclusion in the AppliedHE 2026 ranking and more than 280 student achievements in 2025 at local, national, and international levels. Leaders interpreted rising enrollment as a sign of public confidence:

“Public trust in UMKT keeps increasing, as can be seen from the growing number of students and their increasingly diverse backgrounds” (U2, interview).

Planning documents also tie new study programs to the needs of the labor market and the development of the IKN region. Across both cases, external networking has moved from the margins of institutional activity to the center of strategy. What differs is the kind of legitimacy each network produces. UMKT’s ties with industry, government services, and international partners build a reputation for capability and modernity. UINSI Samarinda’s ties with local government, religious organizations, and communities build a reputation for moral authority and social proximity. Both institutions treat the IKN setting as a reason to make these networks count. This dimension also provides the most concrete evidence of competitive outcomes, in the form of documented rankings, awards, enrollment growth, and student achievement. The cross-case comparison across the four dimensions is summarized in

Table 2.

Table 2. Cross-Case Synthesis of Strategic Transformation Dimensions

Dimension	UMKT Strategy	UINSI Samarinda Strategy	Documented Implication	Cross-Case Pattern
Governance	Digital governance as the core system: integrated database, ERP, and unit-level quality indicators (U1, U3, U5; RIP 2017–2037; observation)	Post-conversion consolidation: SOP, SPMI, SIAKAD, and Risk Management Manual (S2; Renstra 2016–2024; observation)	Data-based monitoring (UMKT); a more orderly and accountable organization (UINSI)	Governance built first as the base for later strategies; tempo shaped by governance form
Human Capital	Performance-based development: SDI digital portal, publication incentive and obligation decrees, and LPPI support (U2, U4; decree documents)	Qualification-based development: doctoral study, conference participation, and a planned merit system (S5; RIP)	Reported rise in publications (UMKT); more doctoral enrollment, merit system not yet integrated (UINSI)	Lecturers framed as carriers of reputation; only UMKT links output to reward
Academic and Digital	LMS, Open Learning System, SIONIK, Student Experience Center, and project-based learning (U1, U6, U7, U8; observation)	<i>Sarang Lebah Madu</i> integration, religious moderation course, and new science, technology, and health programs (S1, S3, S6; RIP; observation)	Improved learning services (UMKT); livelier academic atmosphere with limited research output (UINSI)	Differentiation through service quality versus epistemological identity
Ecosystem Partnership	Diskominfo, international forum, international students, and Ranking Unit (U1, U2; documents)	Local government, religious and community partners, moderation-based service, and IKN in RIP 2025–2029 (S2, S4, S7, S8; LP2M documents)	AppliedHE 2026, 280+ student achievements, enrollment growth (UMKT); SDGs, Webometrics, and SINTA rankings and public relations awards (UINSI)	Partnership as a central strategy for legitimacy and regional relevance in the IKN context

Table 2 shows that UMKT and UINSI Samarinda reach competitiveness through different mechanisms, with UMKT following an accelerated, technology-driven path and UINSI Samarinda a gradual, identity-based one. In both cases, the four dimensions depend on one another: governance reform makes human capital strategy measurable, and human capital determines whether academic transformation produces output. External partnership then converts these internal changes into public recognition, which explains why the most concrete competitive outcomes appear in the final dimension. The table also reveals an unresolved point at UINSI Samarinda, where a strong identity and expanding networks have not yet translated into research productivity, suggesting that competitiveness built on legitimacy and competitiveness built on output may develop at different speeds.

Discussion

The findings show that the two institutions did not respond to shared regional pressure by becoming alike. This outcome departs from the classical isomorphism thesis in institutional theory, which predicts that organizations within the same field converge on a common structural model under regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive pressures (Cai & Mountford, 2022; George et al., 2023). UMKT and UINSI Samarinda faced the same national accreditation regime, the same global and regional ranking culture, and the same

developmental demands created by IKN, yet they followed distinctly different routes (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2024; Kementerian Agama Republik Indonesia, 2025; Kementerian Pendidikan Tinggi, Sains, dan Teknologi Republik Indonesia, 2025). What they shared was a sequence and a set of interdependent dimensions, not a template. This pattern is better described as selective adaptation. Both institutions modernized governance, personnel systems, and academic services while preserving the religious identity that grounds their legitimacy. Compared with earlier studies of PTKI development, which proposed strategic models at a largely conceptual level or framed competitiveness mainly as a uniform response to global competition (Muthohirin, 2025; Sibawaihi et al., 2024; Sumiati et al., 2024), this study offers empirical evidence from two contrasting governance forms operating in the same strategically transforming region. The comparison also qualifies the assumption that Islamic institutions modernize by adopting general university models wholesale (Altbach & de Wit, 2021; Sudirman et al., 2025; Suyadi et al., 2022). Both cases show that modernization was filtered through institutional identity and governance form rather than imported intact.

The finding that governance reform precedes expansion corroborates contemporary Strategic Management Theory in higher education, which holds that organizational success depends on the capacity to set strategic direction and to build the digital and administrative structures that carry strategy into practice (Alenezi, 2023; Mohamed Hashim et al., 2022). It is also consistent with recent empirical scholarship arguing that effective governance directly shapes educational quality and institutional legitimacy (Gkrimpizi et al., 2024; Hussen & Onia, 2024). The present study extends this argument by showing that the form of governance determines the tempo of reform. UMKT digitized its core processes within a single planning stage, whereas UINSI Samarinda consolidated its organization before setting any international target. Contemporary world-class university scholarship identifies favorable governance as one of three core conditions for building strong universities, alongside concentrated talent and abundant resources (Altbach & de Wit, 2021; Hazelkorn, 2021; Sudirman et al., 2025). The cases suggest that for PTKI with limited resources, governance is not one condition among three but the precondition that makes the other two attainable. A comparison with recent studies on national higher education initiatives sharpens this point, as those investigations found ranking gains driven largely by state-led programs that channel resources from the top down (Candilasa & Onahon, 2025; Guo et al., 2023; QS Quacquarelli Symonds, 2024). The gains recorded at UMKT and UINSI Samarinda, by contrast, emerged from internal governance sequencing in the absence of comparable national investment. This pattern reflects the planned, iterative, and staged institutional change emphasized in modern organizational development and transformation frameworks (Gkrimpizi et al., 2024; Hussen & Onia, 2024; Mohamed Hashim et al., 2022).

The human capital findings support contemporary applications of Human Capital Theory in higher education, which treat strategic investment in academic personnel as a principal driver of organizational productivity and national educational progress (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2024; Iqbal et al., 2024; Suyadi et al., 2022). They also reveal a condition the theory leaves implicit. UMKT linked individual output to institutional reward through incentives, publication obligations, and digital performance monitoring, and its leaders reported rising publication output. UINSI Samarinda invested heavily in doctoral qualification but had not yet built a mechanism that converts higher qualifications into measurable output, and its own leaders identified research productivity as the main weakness. Human capital investment, in other words, becomes a competitive asset only when it is connected to a conversion mechanism within the institution. This finding parallels recent total quality management investigations showing that accreditation improves higher education performance only through the mediating role of quality culture, and that quality systems confined to formal documentation rarely change organizational behavior (Iqbal et al., 2024; Jasti et al., 2022). In both lines of research, as in the present cases, the presence of an input does not guarantee an outcome without an intervening system. The study also adds

a dimension specific to religious higher education: lecturers at both institutions were positioned as carriers of institutional religious identity as well as of academic reputation, a dual role that conventional human capital frameworks do not capture (Muthohirin, 2025; Sibawaihi et al., 2024; Sudirman et al., 2025).

The academic findings show two routes to differentiation. UMKT's technology-driven learning services reflect the innovation culture and organizational flexibility associated with the entrepreneurial university, whereas UINSI Samarinda's *Sarang Lebah Madu* model resonates with the integralistic unification of religious and general knowledge within a single epistemological framework (Abreu & Grinevich, 2024; Muthohirin, 2025; Suyadi et al., 2022). Recent scholarship emphasizes that entrepreneurial universities must continuously balance competing institutional goals, strategies, and processes (Abreu & Grinevich, 2024; Donati & Bellandi, 2025). The present cases show that PTKI face a comparable tension between building market relevance and preserving epistemological identity, and that each institution resolved it in a different direction. The comparison with *pesantren*-based studies is instructive, as recent works locate the competitive advantage of Islamic institutions primarily in their religious distinctiveness (Sumiati et al., 2024). The UINSI case supports this view up to a point: identity-based differentiation produced a livelier academic atmosphere and a recognizable institutional profile. It did not, however, translate into research output on its own, a gap that the institution's research leadership openly acknowledged. Religious distinctiveness therefore appears to be a necessary but insufficient basis for competitiveness, unless it is paired with quality systems that turn distinctiveness into scholarly production (Iqbal et al., 2024; Jasti et al., 2022).

The partnership findings are consistent with contemporary extensions of Resource Dependence Theory and regional engagement frameworks, which hold that organizations rely on external networks for resources, legitimacy, and social support (Donati & Bellandi, 2025; George et al., 2023; Salomaa & Charles, 2021). They also show that the two institutions accumulated different forms of institutional legitimacy and capital (Cai & Mountford, 2022; George et al., 2023). UMKT's ties with industry, government digital services, and international partners generated pragmatic legitimacy, grounded in demonstrated capability. UINSI Samarinda's ties with local government, religious organizations, and communities generated moral legitimacy, grounded in social proximity and shared values, which functions as symbolic capital that can later be converted into other resources, such as grants and partnerships, as UINSI informants reported (Cai & Mountford, 2022; Sudirman et al., 2025). The ranking literature tends to treat institutional competitiveness and reputation primarily as a product of research performance (Candilasa & Onahon, 2025; Hazelkorn, 2021; QS Quacquarelli Symonds, 2024). Compared with that view, UINSI Samarinda's documented gains in SDGs, Webometrics, and SINTA rankings, together with its public relations awards, show that reputation can grow ahead of research output when moral legitimacy and public communication are strong. This supports recent literature reviews identifying trust, stakeholder engagement, and brand communication as core elements of university branding (Candilasa & Onahon, 2025; Yaping et al., 2023). The IKN context intensified this dynamic by giving both institutions a regional development agenda through which to justify and expand their external networks (Berawi, 2022; Farida, 2021; Hackbarth & de Vries, 2021). The synthesis of these findings is presented in **Figure 4**.

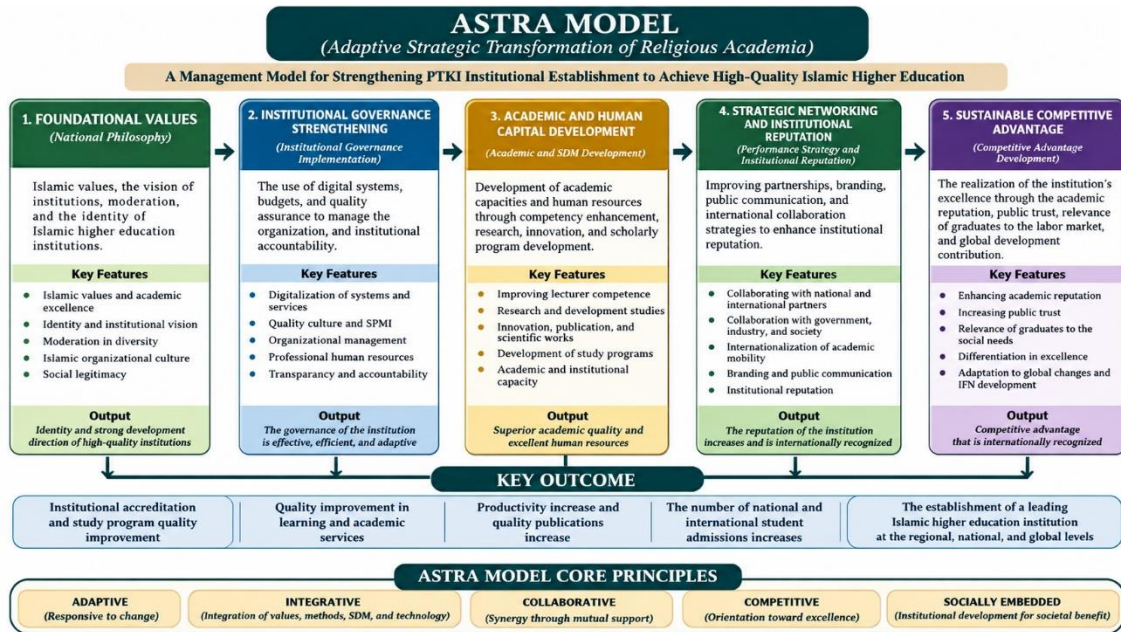


Figure 4. Strategic Transformation Model for Islamic Higher Education

Figure 4 shows that the model places governance reform at the base as the foundation from which the other components are built, rather than presenting the four components as parallel levers. Human capital development functions as the conversion layer that determines whether investment in people produces output, and academic and digital innovation branches into two differentiation routes: service quality and epistemological identity. Regional engagement then converts internal change into external recognition through two forms of legitimacy, pragmatic and moral, both directed toward the developmental needs of the IKN region. The two arrows running through the model represent the accelerative pathway observed at UMKT and the consolidative pathway observed at UINSI Samarinda, while Islamic identity frames the whole structure as the element that is preserved rather than replaced during transformation.

The novelty of this study lies in three contributions that distinguish it from general models of university transformation, which tend to privilege technological or managerial efficiency (Abreu & Grinevich, 2024; Guo et al., 2023). First, it establishes sequence as a strategic variable. Competitiveness in PTIK emerges not from the simultaneous activation of all strategic levers but from a staged order in which governance reform comes first and its pace depends on governance form (Hussen & Onia, 2024; Mohamed Hashim et al., 2022). Second, it identifies two legitimate pathways to competitiveness: an accelerative, technology-driven pathway typical of community-based private institutions and a consolidative, identity-driven pathway typical of state institutions. National higher education policy should therefore stop assessing both against a single uniform benchmark (Kementerian Agama Republik Indonesia, 2025; Kementerian Pendidikan Tinggi, Sains, dan Teknologi Republik Indonesia, 2025). Third, it reveals a legitimacy–output gap. Moral legitimacy and public reputation can advance faster than research productivity, a pattern that may give a misleading picture of institutional strength if rankings and awards are read in isolation (Candilasa & Onahon, 2025; Hazelkorn, 2021; Yaping et al., 2023). Theoretically, these contributions extend Institutional Theory and Strategic Management Theory to religious higher education by showing how identity filters isomorphic pressure and how legitimacy and output develop at different speeds (Cai & Mountford, 2022; George et al., 2023; Sudirman et al., 2025). Practically, the model gives PTIK leaders and the Ministry of Religious Affairs a diagnostic reference. It helps them determine which pathway an institution is following, whether its human capital investment has a conversion mechanism, and whether its reputation rests on output or on

legitimacy alone. This diagnostic value is particularly relevant for institutions in strategically transforming regions such as the IKN buffer area, where external expectations are rising faster than institutional capacity.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to analyze how Islamic higher education institutions formulate, implement, and experience strategic transformation in strengthening competitiveness, using UMKT and UINSI Samarinda as contrasting cases in the IKN buffer region. The findings show that competitiveness in both institutions was built through four interdependent dimensions, namely governance reform, human capital development, academic differentiation, and regional partnership, pursued through an accelerative pathway at UMKT and a consolidative pathway at UINSI Samarinda. This study has several limitations. It covers only two institutions in one province, relies mainly on the perspectives of leaders and staff, and draws on data collected within a single period, so the long-term effects of each strategy could not be observed. Future research should extend the model to a wider range of PTKI across regions and governance types, include the views of students, alumni, and external partners, and follow institutions longitudinally. Quantitative or mixed-methods designs are also recommended to test the relationships among the four dimensions and to examine whether the gap between legitimacy and research output narrows over time.

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