

THE ROLE OF PESANTREN EDUCATION IN PREPARING STUDENTS TO BE GLOBALLY COMPETITIVE AND HAVE NOBLE MORALS

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Abstract

This study analyzes the role of *Pondok Pesantren* Al Ulya Kendal in preparing *santri* (students) to achieve global competitiveness while maintaining noble character in the context of 21st-century technological advancement and globalization. Employing a qualitative case study approach, data were gathered through interviews, observations, and documentation at *Pondok Pesantren* Al Ulya Kendal. The findings reveal a comprehensive educational strategy encompassing three key dimensions: (1) curriculum integration that blends religious and general education using interactive methods such as *sorogan*, *bandongan*, group discussions, and collaborative projects; (2) character formation through habituation and role modeling, emphasizing daily discipline, independence, regular worship, and the exemplary conduct of *kyai* and *ustadz*; and (3) the cultivation of 21st-century competencies and leadership skills via programs such as *muhadharah* (speech training), student organizations (OPPM), and digital literacy initiatives. While challenges such as limited technological infrastructure and resource constraints persist, the *pesantren* leverages strong alumni networks and community support to sustain its mission. The study concludes that *Pondok Pesantren* Al Ulya effectively nurtures intellectually capable, morally grounded, and globally adaptable individuals, demonstrating that Islamic educational institutions can harmonize tradition with modernity to meet contemporary global demands.

Keywords: Islamic Boarding School; Global Competitiveness; Noble Morals; 21st-Century Skills; Character Education

INTRODUCTION

The world today has undergone highly dynamic and complex changes. These changes are characterized by significant acceleration and a continuous nature across various aspects of life, primarily driven by advances in information and communication technology and economic and social openness in the global order (Fonna, 2019). In the 21st century, technological innovation is growing exponentially, bringing radical transformations in various sectors, including education, which is now increasingly integrated through digital platforms without recognizing geographical or temporal boundaries (Prihatin & Sutangsa, 2025). This phenomenon reflects a new era in which global interconnectivity is not just a concept but a reality that massively accelerates the flow of knowledge and social interaction.

These changes have had far-reaching impacts, particularly in strengthening cross-border exchange mechanisms. The exchange of goods, services, information, and culture has become faster, easier, and more widespread thanks to the support of modern communications technology and increasingly efficient logistics systems (Adelia et al., 2023). This situation drives global economic integration and increases the complexity of interdependent relationships between countries. This high level of interdependence demonstrates that current global dynamics require intensive collaboration and coordination to address shared challenges while opening up significant opportunities for sustainable growth and development in various fields (Ahadiani et al., 2024).

Changes and the acceleration of globalization have demanded that human resources be skilled and adaptive (Schwab, 2017). Humanity faces complex challenges, from intense global competition to job disruption caused by automation and artificial intelligence. Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*), the oldest Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia, play a crucial role in character formation and strengthening the faith of their students (Ichsan et al., 2025). *Pesantren* prioritizes the learning process of the yellow books. *Pesantren* have powerful traditions and have become deeply rooted in shaping their identity as unique Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia (Ichsan et al., 2021). The traditions offered at Islamic

boarding schools reflect the noble values instilled in the *santri* (students) (Ferihana & Rahmatullah, 2023).

Pesantren have long served as the primary pillar and foundation of religious teachings for most Muslims in Indonesia, serving as centers of profound spiritual education and development. As times become increasingly rapid and complex, Islamic boarding schools must adapt to technological advances to remain relevant and meet the challenges of the modern era (Najib & Khauldi, 2025). The use of technology in the learning process at *pesantren* is a strategic need that cannot be ignored, because technology provides easy access to information, expands scientific networks, and supports the effectiveness of teaching methods (Muid et al., 2024). Therefore, *pesantren* must actively integrate technology into their curriculum and education system to ensure that the next generation of students can prepare themselves optimally to face social change and global developments that continue to move dynamically (Gustriani & Kholis, 2024). It means that education in *pesantren* maintains traditional religious values and equips students with relevant skills and insights to compete and contribute positively in the future (Rustam & Ichsan, 2020).

As the world develops rapidly, Islamic boarding schools must recognize their challenges. To maintain their existence, *pesantren* must equip their students with technology. In this era of quickly evolving technology, Islamic boarding schools must meet the needs of society. It requires developing human resources capable of competing by addressing current market needs. Therefore, *pesantren* needs to teach their students two things: equipping them with faith and developing human resources capable of using technology wisely (Karimah, 2023). The younger generation of *Santri* (students) must be guided and equipped with knowledge. Their skills must be honed so that when they become adults, or even after graduating from *pesantren*, they won't be overwhelmed by the competition in the workforce. *Pesantren* must innovate and help prepare its students for the nation's future (Haris, 2023).

Various studies highlight the role of *pesantren* as educational institutions that maintain religious traditions and adapt to current developments to remain relevant in the global era. Rahma Nanda Nur Azizah (2024) emphasized that traditional *pesantren* need to integrate religious education with technological skills to prepare students to face the challenges of globalization and rapid scientific development. It aligns with the findings of Ridwan Maulana Rifqi Muzakky et al. (2023), which states that using digital technology in the learning process in *pesantren* can increase teaching effectiveness and expand access to knowledge for students.

Furthermore, Nurfauzan Alfi et al. (2024) emphasize the importance of character development based on noble morals in maintaining the moral identity of *pesantren* students amidst the rapid flow of social and cultural change, which is seen as the main social capital in supporting the quality of human resources. Muhammad Ghoust Muslim, et al. (2025) also stated that morals such as integrity, tolerance, and empathy are fundamental aspects that must be developed to build harmonious intercultural relations in an increasingly plural and dynamic society.

A study by Hidayatussa'adah and Roihan Sadad (2024) added that developing a curriculum that integrates religious aspects and modern science in *pesantren* can create a generation of students who are spiritually strong, adaptive, and intellectually competent. Meanwhile, Kholid Junaidi et al. (2024) highlight the need for *pesantren* to transform significantly to meet the challenges of globalization while maintaining traditional values as a moral foundation. Therefore, these studies demonstrate that innovation in the *pesantren* education system is essential without sacrificing religious values and noble morals as the primary foundation for developing students' character.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach to provide a clear and in-depth description of the research focus. Qualitative research utilizes a naturalistic design, where data are collected in the real-life context without researcher manipulation (Abdussamad, 2021). This method seeks to interpret or depict phenomena or events holistically by employing various relevant data collection techniques. Qualitative research is inductive, descriptive, and focused on understanding phenomena' meanings from the research participants' perspective. The naturalistic approach is employed to authentically capture the conditions in the field, without any intervention or constraints that might affect the authenticity of the data (Sugiyono, 2016).

In data collection, the researchers utilize primary and secondary data as the main sources. Primary data are obtained directly by the researcher from sources, while secondary data are acquired indirectly through journals, books, social media, and intermediaries such as notes or third-party information (Komariah, 2013). The selection of data sources and collection techniques is adjusted according to the research focus and objectives. In qualitative research, data sources are chosen with an emphasis on the emic perspective, which prioritizes the informants' views and interpretations of the world based on their standpoint.

Consequently, the researchers must avoid imposing personal biases to ensure that the data accurately reflect the reality experienced by the research subjects (Kusumastuti & Khoiron, 2021).

Furthermore, the researchers also conduct interviews, observations, and documentation to complement the research data. Interviews are two-way communications between the interviewer and respondent to explore information relevant to the research focus. Observations involve systematically watching behaviors or phenomena occurring directly in the field and the objectives intended within the research context. The researchers engage directly in the field to collect data through systematically observing real conditions. Documentation is a method used to collect data in the form of notes, transcripts, books, newspapers, magazines, and other documents related to the research variables (Rosidah et al., 2023).

Subsequently, the researchers verify the validity of the data to ensure its accuracy, as grouping and validating data is essential to avoid errors and inaccuracies in data processing. The collected data were then analyzed using qualitative descriptive analysis, a non-statistical analytical technique focused on understanding the meaning embedded within the data. The analysis begins with reviewing all available data from various sources, including interview transcripts, field notes from observations, official documents, photographic records, and personal documents. This study was conducted at Pondok Pesantren Al Ulya, Jalan Soponyono 099, Kedungsuren, Kaliwungu Selatan, Kendal, Central Java, Indonesia.

RESULTS

The study conducted at Pondok Pesantren Al Ulya Kendal reveals that this pesantren holds a significant role and potential in equipping *santri* to be globally competitive while grounded in noble character. This *pesantren* not only successfully produces young generations competent in the fields of faith (*aqidah*) and academics, but also cultivates professionals in various fields according to the interests and expertise of the *santri*. The strategies implemented by the *pesantren* to prepare *santri* with global competitiveness and virtuous character emphasize the following approaches.

Comprehensive Curriculum Integration

Pesantren functions as a bridge that integrates religious knowledge and general knowledge. According to an interview with the foundation owner, Ustad Ahmad Supari, the

curriculum implemented at Pondok Pesantren Al Ulya has harmoniously integrated these two fields of knowledge. This *pesantren* has aligned a dual curriculum, wherein the teaching practice includes instruction of the classical religious texts known as *kitab kuning* (yellow books), alongside relevant general education. By equipping santri with both spiritual and general knowledge, the pesantren strongly expects that upon completing their education, *santri* will be able to adapt and integrate into the real workforce and broader society. Furthermore, the interview results emphasize that religious knowledge provides the afterlife, while general knowledge prepares for worldly life.

At Pondok Pesantren Al Ulya, the learning methods applied are not limited to lectures alone, but also involve a combination of traditional methods such as *sorogan* and *bandongan*. *Sorogan* is used for intensive, individual learning with a face-to-face approach between teacher and students. At the same time, *bandongan* is a collective learning method emphasizing collective understanding of Islamic texts. This approach allows students to deeply understand religious material while preserving the authentic traditions of *pesantren* scholarship.

In addition, teachers at this *pesantren* also implement modern learning methods such as group discussions, presentations, and collaborative projects. These methods train students' critical thinking skills, enhance analytical capacity, and develop problem-solving skills independently and in groups. This holistic learning approach emphasizes religious knowledge and prepares *santri* (students) to adapt effectively to the complex and dynamic demands of the contemporary world (Halimah et al., 2024).

Habits and Exemplary Behavior

Interviews and observations in this study show that the formation of noble character in Islamic boarding schools is achieved through a disciplined, strict, and consistent system of habituation and strong role models from educators. Teachers at Islamic boarding schools actively teach students the values of discipline and high independence through various daily activities and a structured curriculum. The routine includes waking up at 3:00 a.m. for *Tahajud* prayer, followed by Quran recitation, congregational dawn prayer, morning religious study, formal school learning, and afternoon and evening religious study activities. This pattern of activities serves not only as a form of religious ritual learning but also as a means of character building and continuous spiritual strengthening.

Furthermore, this *pesantren* school implements a practical habituation system by assigning various tasks and responsibilities to independent and collective students, such as environmental cleaning duties, managing the *pesantren's* minimarket, and assisting with kitchen operations. This approach is designed as a concrete effort to foster a sense of responsibility, independence, and a strong work ethic among the students. Through this habituation process and active involvement in daily activities, the students are equipped with religious and academic knowledge, honed social skills, and work ethics that encourage them to become individuals with noble character and are ready to face life's challenges independently.

The exemplary behavior of teachers, *Kiai*, and Islamic boarding school caretakers is a key figure who greatly influences the character and morals of students. *Kiai* and *ustadz/ustadzah* serve as teachers and as tangible reflections of the noble moral values taught in Islamic boarding schools. Direct interactions between students and *Kiai* and *ustadz/ustadzah* serve as concrete examples that are continuously instilled to shape students' mindsets and attitudes by religious and moral principles. Here, the behavior, speech, and attitudes that display the aura of goodness of these caretakers will naturally become examples that are internalized and absorbed by each student in their daily lives.

Furthermore, the *Kiai* and *ustadz/ustadzah* in this *pesantren* consistently instill the values of patience, sincerity, and universal kindness in their students. They teach these values verbally and demonstrate them through concrete actions as living examples for the students to follow. This exemplary approach to moral learning is highly effective in shaping the character of *santri* who not only conceptually understand religious values. But it can also be implemented in their daily lives. Therefore, the role of the *Kiai* and *ustadz/ustadzah* as moral role models is crucial in developing the souls of students with noble character and ready to spread these values to the broader social environment.

The habituation of religious observances and spiritual activities, such as the five daily congregational prayers, the *Tahajjud* prayer, reading the Quran, including the memorization program, and regular recitation of the yellow texts, is at the heart of the spiritual development of students in this *pesantren*. According to Islamic teachings, these activities are systematically designed to instill the values of faith, piety, patience, and deep gratitude, which are the main foundations for developing noble character. By consistently carrying out these religious observances and activities, it is hoped that students will not only understand the formal aspects of the ritual but also internalize the spiritual values that serve as the moral foundation

in their daily lives, thereby fostering a strong religious character and behaving by Islamic ethical principles (King, 2003).

This *pesantren* also plays a crucial role in instilling the values of Islamic brotherhood and solidarity among students as an integral part of their social character development. Daily life at *pesantren* creates a conducive climate for strengthening the strong bonds of Islamic brotherhood, where students are taught to help one another, share, respect differences, and resolve conflicts through wise deliberation. This learning process is not merely theoretical but is realized through concrete social interactions, such as the tradition of visiting sick students, helping friends with their work, and various other forms of social support. Field observations confirm that these practices have become an essential part of life at Pondok Pesantren Al Ulya, fostering a strong sense of caring, empathy, and social responsibility among students as a concrete implementation of the values of Islamic brotherhood and social solidarity.

Instilling noble morals in *pesantren* is not merely a matter of theoretical instruction, but rather a deep internalization through concrete practices and consistent practice in the students' daily lives. The *pesantren* system provides a highly conducive environment for intensive social supervision and comprehensive character development. Through ongoing interaction between students and educators, moral values are taught conceptually and directly practiced in various ritual and social activities within the *pesantren* environment. This systematic practice effectively shapes positive behaviors deeply embedded in students throughout their education and beyond (Ichsan, 2019).

The exemplary behavior practiced by educators is a key factor in determining the success of developing students' morality. Fundamental values such as discipline, honesty, responsibility, and empathy are the foundation for creating consistent, mature student attitudes and behaviors. These moral values are crucial in navigating the complexities of the modern global world, where integrity and strong character are often key determinants of long-term success in various areas of life (Mardiyanto et al., 2023). *Pesantren* are not just institutions that produce intellectuals, but also institutions that shape young generations with strong character and noble morals, ready to make positive and sustainable contributions to society and civilization.

DISCUSSIONS

Developing 21st Century Skills and Leadership through Practical Experience

In addition to mastering knowledge and cultivating noble character, this *pesantren* proactively equips santri with various skills relevant to the demands of the 21st century while fostering leadership qualities. A key skill developed is communication and public speaking ability. Regular muhadharah sessions (speech training) conducted in Arabic, English, and Indonesian serve as the primary platform for santri to practice public speaking in a structured, logical, and persuasive manner. An interview with a santri revealed, "I used to be very shy, but after frequently participating in muhadharah, I became more confident in speaking." This santri is now actively involved in student organizations. Furthermore, class discussions and presentations significantly enhance verbal and non-verbal communication skills, better preparing santri to navigate the complexities of modern communication.

Critical thinking and problem-solving skills are key aspects emphasized in the *pesantren* curriculum, particularly through in-depth studies of the *kitab kuning*. This comprehensive engagement encourages santri to critically analyze various perspectives and interpretations while developing their ability to seek appropriate solutions to contemporary issues grounded in Islamic principles and jurisprudence. This process not only enriches the religious knowledge of the santri but also trains them to think rationally and systematically when facing complex life challenges.

Furthermore, the *pesantren* implements practical activities such as debate exercises and deliberations within santri organizations to sharpen critical thinking and problem-solving abilities. During debates, santri are encouraged to present logical and persuasive arguments, while deliberations train them to manage discussions and make collective decisions by considering multiple viewpoints. These activities equip santri with essential intellectual skills to adapt and contribute effectively in future social and professional contexts.

Collaboration and leadership are cultivated through the santri organizational structures, such as the Organisasi Pelajar Pondok Pesantren Modern (OPPM) or similar bodies, which provide a platform for santri to learn managerial skills, teamwork, and leadership. Through these organizations, santri are responsible for planning and executing various activities within the *pesantren*, ranging from religious events to sports competitions. One *santri* stated, "We learn how to delegate tasks, resolve conflicts, and motivate peers to achieve shared goals." This process directly fosters the development of managerial and leadership skills essential for personal and professional growth.

Several modern *pesantren* have begun to systematically integrate information and communication technology (ICT) learning into their curricula to address the challenges of the evolving digital era. This integration includes teaching computer fundamentals, including hardware and software usage, graphic design concepts, and other technical skills relevant to today's needs. This approach provides theoretical understanding and trains students in practical skills, enabling them to use technology effectively in various contexts, including in the learning process and daily activities inside and outside the *pesantren*.

Digital literacy is crucial given the pervasive impact of digital transformation across almost all facets of social, economic, and educational life. By acquiring digital competencies, *santri* are prepared to compete locally and globally while applying technology prudently by Islamic values and principles. Variations in technological mastery and implementation among *pesantrens* reflect diverse adaptations to technological advancements, necessitating contextual and sustainable strategies so that each can optimize its digital literacy potential according to its capacity and resources (Setiawan, 2024).

Pondok Pesantren Al Ulya has demonstrated its ability to adapt to contemporary demands by proactively developing critical non-academic skills. Effective communication, critical thinking, collaboration, and leadership are strategic assets for individuals aiming to be globally competitive. Graduates of this *pesantren* are expected to be proficient religious scholars and capable, innovative community leaders responsive to social and technological change dynamics. This underscores that the *pesantren* not only preserves and sustains scholarly traditions but also actively prepares *santri* to face the challenges of a dynamic and complex future.

Pesantren face several significant challenges, including limited funding, technological facilities, and educators qualified in religious and general sciences. Furthermore, the rapid pace of technological advancement presents its difficulties. Another crucial challenge lies in maintaining a balance between preserving the strong *pesantren* traditions and meeting the demands of modernity. One teacher stated, "The greatest challenge is to remain relevant without losing the *pesantren*'s identity." On the other hand, several essential factors serve as strengths, including a broad and solid alumni network, strong community support for *pesantren* education, and growing awareness of the importance of character education amid the global moral decline. Numerous *pesantren* alumni have succeeded in various fields, domestically and internationally, and can serve as mentors and facilitators for the next generation of *santri*.

In facing these challenges, Pondok Pesantren Al Ulya must actively pursue innovation and establish strategic partnerships with various stakeholders. Limitations in funding and facilities, which pose major obstacles, can be overcome through collaboration with government agencies, private institutions, and a strong alumni network. This collaborative approach will provide additional resources and open opportunities for developing more modern and high-quality educational infrastructure. Furthermore, the *pesantren* should leverage the significant social capital embedded in its alumni network and community support to strengthen its position as a center for nurturing and producing outstanding generations (Sutomo et al., 2024).

Moreover, maintaining consistency in balancing traditional pesantren values with adaptation to the demands of modernity is essential for the sustainability of the pesantren's role in future education. This process requires well-formulated policies and effective implementation to ensure the pesantren remains relevant while preserving its strong Islamic identity. Consequently, Pondok Pesantren Al Ulya can continue to contribute to the formation of cadres who are not only academically and spiritually competent but also prepared to face the complex and rapidly evolving socio-economic dynamics of the global era.

CONCLUSION

This study comprehensively confirms that Pondok Pesantren Al Ulya plays a strategic and pivotal role in preparing *santri* who are globally competitive while embodying noble character. Through a balanced integration of religious and general curricula, deep internalization of moral values fostered by habituation and exemplary leadership, as well as the development of 21st-century skills such as communication, critical thinking, collaboration, and leadership, the *pesantren* successfully produces young generations capable of holistic intellectual and moral growth. Consequently, the *santri* of this *pesantren* demonstrate high adaptability to global challenges while maintaining a strong Islamic identity as a fundamental foundation in both personal and social life.

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