

CHARACTER EDUCATION FOR CONTEMPORARY URBAN MUSLIM STUDENTS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY AT UII AND UMY STUDENT ISLAMIC BOARDING SCHOOLS

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Abstract

This study explores the implementation of character education in two urban-based student Islamic boarding schools affiliated with Islamic universities in Yogyakarta: The Islamic University of Indonesia (UII) and Ma'had Aly bin Abi Talib at Muhammadiyah University of Yogyakarta (UMY). While character education is a key feature in both classical and modern pesantren, this research investigates how these two institutions adapt their strategies to address the moral and social challenges faced by contemporary urban Muslim students in higher education contexts. Using a qualitative field approach, data were collected through interviews with caregivers, lecturers, and students, as well as observations and institutional document analysis during the 2022–2023 academic year. The findings reveal that UII emphasizes structured mentoring, leadership development, and integrative academic-religious programs, while UMY focuses on project-based learning through da'wah and tahfidz activities to shape students' religious, social, and leadership character. Unlike pesantren in rural or traditional contexts, these urban-based institutions integrate academic demands, digital technology, and modern social dynamics into their character education framework. This study contributes to a contextual understanding of character development for contemporary urban Muslim students in Islamic higher education institutions.

Keywords: Character Education; Moral Formation; Student Boarding Schools; & Urban Muslims.

A. Introduction

Character education has become the main focus in the education system in Indonesia, especially in forming individuals who are not only academically intelligent but also have noble character (Azhari, 2017). It is considered a fundamental foundation for building a society with integrity and strong ethical values (Yulianti et al., 2017).

However, despite its centrality in the education discourse, the implementation of character education in urban-based *pesantren mahasiswa* remains underexplored and challenged by the rapid transformations of the urban environment. Student Islamic boarding schools, as institutions that integrate academic and spiritual education, play an important role in achieving the goals of character development (Sujadi et al., 2022). Yet, the student Islamic boarding schools affiliated with the Islamic University of Indonesia (UII) and the Muhammadiyah University of Yogyakarta (UMY) face unique challenges not commonly encountered in classical or rural *pesantren* contexts.

Urban *pesantren* students, especially in Yogyakarta, live amid intense exposure to digital technology, pluralistic thought, academic competitiveness, and modern lifestyles, which influence their behaviors, values, and daily choices. These dynamics often lead to fragmentation in character formation, especially when institutional mentoring and values education are not contextually adapted (Putra et al., 2021). Therefore, the significance of this research lies in its attempt to answer: how do urban *pesantren mahasiswa* develop character education models that respond to these 21st-century urban realities while maintaining Islamic values? Without addressing this issue, character education risks becoming ceremonial and detached from students lived experiences.

Various studies have emphasized the role of *pesantren* in shaping students' character, both in traditional and modern frameworks. For instance, Fatmawati analyzed the curriculum and leadership strategies in *pesantren mahasiswa*, showing how they integrate religious and academic elements (Fatmawati, 2015). Shofa discussed the dynamics of curriculum changes in UII's *pesantren* (Shofa, 2016), while Fitri and Ondeng described *pesantren* as institutions that form character through kitab kuning learning and local values (Fitri & Ondeng, 2022). However, most of these works focus on structural or curriculum elements without analyzing the lived challenges of urban santri in higher education settings. Furthermore, few have offered comparative insights between different *pesantren mahasiswa* models in urban Islamic universities, particularly in Yogyakarta. A more recent study by Sujadi looked into anti-corruption values in education but did not examine the specific mechanisms of character-building at the student boarding school level (Sujadi et al., 2022). Similarly, Sumarni, Dardiri, and Zuchdi proposed a model of character education based on social capital reinforcement, but the study was not contextualized within *pesantren mahasiswa* (Sumarni et al., 2015). In contrast, this research focuses on two *pesantren mahasiswa* UII and UMY which represent distinct but comparable urban models. Through field-based comparative analysis, this study aims to fill a gap in the literature by highlighting how these two *pesantren* interpret and operationalize character education in the context of urban youth. Character education cannot be detached from its social and cultural context. One of the main assumptions underlying this study is that urban *pesantren mahasiswa* require different strategies than rural or classical *pesantren*, due to their students' exposure to fast-paced environments, digital media, and shifting value systems. These external influences demand a more dynamic, responsive, and multidimensional approach to character formation.

To examine this phenomenon, the study adopts two major theoretical perspectives. The first is Thomas Lickona's character education model, which emphasizes the integration of moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action as essential components of character development (Lickona, 2012). This framework helps evaluate how *pesantren* structure their programs not only to teach values cognitively but also to internalize and practice them behaviorally. The second is Maragustam's Islamic character framework, which draws from tasawuf and Islamic philosophy,

outlining character formation in three stages: takhalli (eliminating bad traits), tahalli (adopting good traits), and tajalli (manifesting virtue in behavior) (Maragustam, 2015). This framework resonates with the spiritual foundations of *pesantren* and is particularly relevant in analyzing religious mentoring, recitation routines, and dakwah activities. Through these two lenses, this study assumes that effective character education in urban *pesantren mahasiswa* must be intentional, contextual, and spiritually anchored. Both UII and UMY offer a unique opportunity to explore how these principles are translated into practice in different institutional settings. Based on the contextual problems faced by urban *pesantren mahasiswa*, the existing literature gap, and the theoretical foundations mentioned above, this research is directed toward a more focused investigation of character education models implemented at UII and UMY.

The objectives of this study are as follows: (1) To analyze the concept and practice of character education in the student Islamic boarding schools at UII and UMY. (2) To explore the strategies and programs applied by both institutions in forming students' character within an urban context. (3) To formulate a contextual and ideal model of character education that can inform the development of urban *pesantren mahasiswa* more broadly. It is expected that this study will offer both theoretical insights into the contextualization of character education, and practical contributions for *pesantren* leaders and Islamic universities in designing adaptive and effective character-building programs for contemporary urban Muslim students.

B. Methods

This research employed a qualitative field approach with a descriptive-interpretative design, aiming to explore and understand the strategies and implementation of character education in two urban *pesantren mahasiswa*: UII and Ma'had Aly bin Abi Talib UMY. The study used a case study approach, focusing on these two institutions as representative models of urban Islamic boarding schools affiliated with Islamic universities.

The theoretical framework guiding the analysis includes Thomas Lickona's character education model emphasizing moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action and Maragustam's Islamic framework of takhalli, tahalli, and tajalli. These frameworks were used to interpret how character education was structured, internalized, and manifested within the daily practices of both *pesantren*. Primary data in this study were obtained through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis conducted from August 2022 to April 2023. The interviews involved 14 informants selected through purposive sampling based on their involvement and knowledge of the character education programs in each *pesantren*. These informants consisted of four caregivers (*mudabbir/mudabbirah*), four teaching staff and curriculum developers, four active santri, and two alumni from each institution. In-depth interviews enabled the researcher to gather rich narratives and perspectives regarding how character values were transmitted, cultivated, and internalized in the daily life of the students. Secondary data included curriculum documents, student handbooks, institutional guidelines, and relevant journal articles.

Data analysis followed Miles and Huberman's interactive model, which involves data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. The analysis was conducted both textually (content of curriculum and interviews) and contextually (interpretation of practices and interactions in the *pesantren* setting). The validity of data was ensured through triangulation of sources and methods, and regular cross-checking with institutional documents and multiple informants.

C. Findings and Discussion

1. Findings

Comparison of Character Education Approaches in UII and UMY Student Boarding Schools

Based on the field data from both UII and Ma'had Aly UMY, it becomes clear that the two pesantren adopt distinct approaches to character education, shaped by their respective visions, institutional cultures, and learning strategies. UII tends to use a structured mentoring model, while UMY emphasizes project-based character formation rooted in experiential learning and da'wah. The comparison of both institutions is summarized below:

Table 1. The comparison of both institutions

Aspects	UII Islamic Boarding School	Ma'had Aly bin Abi Thalib UMY
Main Approach	Integrative and structured mentoring-based approach (Suyanto, personal communication, November 1, 2022) (F. Hasanuddin, personal communication, October 31, 2022)	Project-based and experiential character building (Y. Hidayat, personal communication, December 29, 2022) (F. Irfanuddin, personal communication, November 10, 2022)
Curriculum Focus	Leadership, integrity, critical thinking (UII Islamic Boarding School Curriculum Team, 2021)	Global Islamic insight, da'wah, social responsibility (Ma'had Ali bin Abi Talib UMY Website Manager, 2023)
Core Activities	Leadership seminars, public speaking, mentoring, structured halaqah (F. Hasanuddin, personal communication, October 31, 2022) (Suyanto, personal communication, December 29, 2022)	Tahfidz programs, da'wah practice, community service (F. Irfanuddin, personal communication, November 10, 2022)
Spiritual Emphasis	Weekly religious mentoring, collective prayer, Islamic literacy (M. Annas, personal communication, January 15, 2024)	Practice-based da'wah, regular dhikr, public lectures (Y. Hidayat, personal communication, January 17, 2023)
Academic Integration	GPA requirement (≥ 3.00), alignment with campus ethics and curriculum (F. Hasanuddin, personal communication, October 31, 2022)	Integration through da'wah reflection and real-life leadership training (F. Irfanuddin, personal communication, November 10, 2022)
Monitoring System	Individual mentor-mentee system (M. Annas, personal communication, July 5, 2022)	Group-based evaluation with activity reflection (Y. Hidayat, personal communication, September 20, 2023)

Character Evaluation	Attitude rubric, participation, academic performance (S. Yusuf, personal communication, 2022)	Observation in social leadership and community work (Suparta, 2024)
Educational Values Emphasized	Integrity, leadership, discipline, responsibility (Suyanto, personal communication, December 29, 2022)	Honesty, initiative, commitment, social empathy (Y. Hidayat, personal communication, December 29, 2022)
Supporting Factors	Clear SOPs, structured mentoring, administrative support (F. Hasanuddin, personal communication, October 31, 2022)	Student motivation, real-world application, institutional openness (F. Irfanuddin, personal communication, November 10, 2022) (Suparta, 2024)
Inhibiting Factors	Conflicts with university schedule, mentor dependency, varied engagement (S. Yusuf, personal communication, 2022)	Uneven implementation, limited staff, internal motivation gaps (F. Irfanuddin, personal communication, November 10, 2022)

The comparative analysis above demonstrates that while both *pesantren* aim to develop morally grounded, academically capable, and socially responsible Muslim students, they achieve this through different operational logics. UII's emphasis on structured mentoring, GPA-linked accountability, and leadership training is consistent with its vision of forming intellectual leaders (UII Islamic Boarding School Curriculum Team, 2021). On the other hand, UMY's focus on da'wah, community-based projects, and tahfidz practice reflects its orientation toward producing globally minded da'i with strong social sensitivity (Y. Hidayat, personal communication, January 17, 2023).

These differences are not only pedagogical but also contextual. UII students are trained with tighter academic-regulatory expectations, while UMY students are immersed in dynamic, real-world religious practice. These models reveal that character education in urban *pesantren* cannot be monolithic, it must be contextual, responsive, and flexible, particularly in facing the social complexities of contemporary urban Muslim youth.

The findings also confirm that supporting and inhibiting factors vary between the two. UII benefits from institutional structure and mentor consistency but is challenged by academic overload. UMY benefits from student initiative and real-world engagement, but struggles with uneven program implementation due to limited staff and varied student motivation (F. Irfanuddin, personal communication, November 10, 2022) (Suparta, 2024). Therefore, both models represent viable but distinct approaches to character education in *pesantren mahasiswa* and can serve as references for designing contextual character formation frameworks in other urban Islamic educational settings.

2. Discussion

The findings presented above describe how character education is implemented at UII and UMY Islamic boarding schools through vision-based, activity-based, and institutional approaches. However, to gain a deeper understanding, these findings need to be analyzed within broader academic and theoretical frameworks. This section

discusses the results by drawing connections to key character education theories, including those by Lickona and Maragustam, and by situating the study within relevant national and international research. The discussion will also examine the specific strategies, institutional approaches, and contextual challenges faced by each *pesantren*, and what these mean for the development of urban-based character education in contemporary Islamic higher education.

Character Education Approaches at UII and UMY Islamic Boarding Schools

The character education approaches at the UII Islamic Boarding School and Ma'had Aly bin Abi Thalib UMY illustrate two different educational logics, both shaped by institutional values, urban sociocultural contexts, and student profiles. Although both aim to produce students with strong religious commitment and civic responsibility, the ways they pursue these goals are structurally and pedagogically distinct.

At UII, the character education model is integrative and mentor-based, combining structured academic mentoring with extracurricular activities and Islamic rituals. This approach aligns with Lickona's theory of moral education, which emphasizes the need to integrate moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action (Lickona, 2012). Through daily mentoring, leadership seminars, GPA-linked expectations, and public speaking programs, students are trained to internalize values and develop self-awareness and responsibility (F. Hasanuddin, personal communication, October 31, 2022) (Suyanto, personal communication, December 29, 2022).

The UII system is also supported by measurable targets such as a minimum GPA of 3.00 and active participation in structured halaqah (group study circles), which serve not only as academic checkpoints but as character accountability mechanisms. These practices resonate with Sumarni, Dardiri, and Zuchdi's concept of character education as a value-building process within structured learning frameworks. In UII, the moral dimension is not detached from academic rigor; rather, it is embedded into the student's total formation (Sumarni et al., 2015).

Furthermore, the presence of personal mentors who monitor not just academic, but also behavioral and spiritual growth, reflects the Islamic framework of *takhalli* (eliminating negative traits), *tahalli* (internalizing virtues), and *tajalli* (manifesting noble behavior) (Maragustam, 2015). Hasanuddin and Annas explain that this mentoring system allows students to evaluate themselves, identify inner challenges, and receive targeted moral guidance a process that mirrors reflective moral education models advocated by Narvaez and Bock (2014) (A. Hidayat & Agustang, 2023).

On the other hand, Ma'had Aly bin Abi Thalib UMY adopts a project-based, experiential approach rooted in social and da'wah engagement. The emphasis here is not on structural mentoring, but on collaborative, student-driven programs such as *tahfidz*, community service, and da'wah activities. According to Irfanuddin, these projects allow students to learn by doing, cultivate leadership, and strengthen empathy and communication key components of what Lapsley and Narvaez (2006) call "moral participation" in context. UMY's model is less rigid but highly contextual. Students are encouraged to take initiative, collaborate in designing religious and social programs, and reflect upon their participation in real time. This is in line with Vygotsky's sociocultural learning theory, where character formation is mediated by social interaction and community engagement. Hidayat notes that students are not just recipients of values but co-creators of moral meaning, especially through their da'wah practices in the community (Y. Hidayat, personal communication, December 29, 2022).

From a comparative lens, UII's approach could be described as structured internalization, while UMY's reflects dynamic moral application. Both are effective but serve different learner profiles and institutional cultures. UII is strong in academic integration, while UMY excels in contextual relevance and student engagement. In both models, character values such as honesty, discipline, leadership, and social responsibility are delivered not only through formal instruction but embedded in daily routines and lived experiences. This supports the position of Nucci and Narvaez that character formation must be developmentally responsive, institutionally supported, and socially mediated (F. Hasanuddin, personal communication, October 31, 2022) and Narvaez, 2008). Therefore, the character education approaches at UII and UMY show that while Islamic boarding schools share foundational values, their expressions and strategies are diverse, adaptive, and contextually responsive, especially within contemporary urban Muslim youth communities.

Challenges and Flexibility in Implementing Character Education

While both UII and UMY Islamic boarding schools have demonstrated commitment and innovation in implementing character education, the field data and literature review reveal several critical challenges as well as flexibility strategies that are essential to sustaining and strengthening their programs.

a. Maintaining Consistency Across Domains

One of the primary challenges in character education is ensuring consistency in value internalization across academic, spiritual, and social domains. At UII, despite having a structured mentoring system and curriculum, students sometimes experience tension between their academic obligations and Islamic boarding school routines. Hasanuddin noted that overlapping schedules between campus and *pesantren* programs can reduce student focus and participation (F. Hasanuddin, personal communication, October 31, 2022).

This challenge reflects findings from Fatmawati and Sumarni etc who observed that *pesantren mahasiswa* often struggle to integrate formal and non-formal learning spaces consistently (Fatmawati, 2015) (Sumarni et al., 2015). Similarly, at UMY, the flexibility of the project-based model demands high levels of student self-discipline, which may not always be evenly distributed. Ustadz Irfanuddin highlighted how variations in student motivation and leadership can impact program outcomes (F. Irfanuddin, personal communication, November 10, 2022). To address these issues, both institutions have institutional coordination mechanisms between *pesantren* and campus, as also advocated by Lapsley and Narvaez, who stress the need for institutional synergy to support moral development in higher education (Lapsley & Narvaez, 2004).

b. Adaptive Curriculum and Continuous Evaluation

UII and UMY have shown commitment to adjusting their curriculum and coaching models to meet evolving student needs. At UMY, for example, regular evaluations of the *da'wah* and *tahfidz* programs are conducted to assess student engagement and spiritual development (Y. Hidayat, personal communication, January 17, 2023).

This echoes findings from Narvaez & Bock who argue that moral formation must be assessed periodically with context-sensitive instruments (Narvaez & Bock, 2002). At UII, internal evaluations also serve as feedback loops to improve the structure and content of leadership mentoring. Such responsiveness aligns with Marzano's concept of adaptive leadership in educational institutions, where effectiveness is based not on static standards, but on continuous contextual adjustment (Marzano, 2003).

c. Flexibility During Crisis: Learning from the Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic became a stress test for character education systems. Pesantren adapted their coaching programs to online platforms. At UII, virtual mentoring, online recitation, and remote halaqah were conducted to maintain spiritual routines (Suyanto, personal communication, July 1, 2022) Similarly, UMY encouraged da'wah reflections and online learning groups.

This experience aligns with Watson (2019), who noted that with intentional design, technology can preserve moral continuity in education. However, the challenge remains: how to ensure that the depth of value transmission is not diluted in virtual formats? Ustadz Suyanto admitted that while connection was maintained, the emotional and behavioral modeling aspects were harder to preserve remotely.

d. Individualization of Coaching Models

Another challenge is the need to individualize character coaching based on students' diverse backgrounds and personalities. At UMY, personalized interventions were implemented for students with unique needs, especially those struggling with adaptation (F. Irfanuddin, personal communication, November 10, 2022). This corresponds to Nucci and Narvaez who recommend developmentally responsive moral education, adapted to students' cognitive and emotional stages (Y. Hidayat, personal communication, December 29, 2022) & Narvaez 2008). At UII, the mentoring model allowed some room for individual guidance, but time and mentor-student ratio limited full personalization. These limitations demand innovative strategies to balance structure and individual care.

e. Stakeholder Collaboration and Moral Ecosystem

Effective character education requires the involvement of all stakeholders, including caregivers, lecturers, administrative staff, and families. At UMY, parents are invited to periodic evaluations and are informed of their children's character progress (Y. Hidayat, personal communication, January 17, 2023) This is consistent with the moral ecosystem model proposed by Narvaez and Bock where character is shaped not only by teachers but by a web of consistent value transmission at home and school (Narvaez & Bock, 2002). At UII, collaboration between pesantren staff and university faculty ensures integration between curricular and spiritual goals (F. Hasanuddin, personal communication, October 31, 2022), but this coordination also demands regular communication and shared vision.

f. Strategic Solutions

Despite the challenges, both institutions have demonstrated key strategies to sustain character formation: UII uses structured integration between academics and religion, supported by technology during crisis; UMY emphasizes experiential da'wah, project-based learning, and community service to ground values in lived experiences. Both models support the argument that character education in urban Islamic boarding schools must be flexible, culturally relevant, and systemically supported.

D. Conclusion

This study has shown that character education in urban student Islamic boarding schools is not a static process, but a dynamic interaction between institutional vision, pedagogical strategies, and contextual realities. Through a comparative analysis of the UII and UMY Islamic boarding schools in Yogyakarta, it becomes clear that effective character education requires different operational models depending on institutional orientation and student needs. UII applies an integrative, mentor-based approach with structured activities that align academic achievement with spiritual formation. UMY, on the other hand, implements a project-based, experiential model rooted in da'wah

and social engagement. Both institutions embody the principles of character education as theorized by Lickona and Maragustam, albeit in different expressions. The study also identified several challenges: ensuring consistency, adapting to crises, individualizing coaching, and maintaining stakeholder synergy. Yet, each institution demonstrated flexibility and innovation in responding to these challenges, such as utilizing technology during the pandemic and involving parents in character-building programs. In conclusion, both UII and UMY demonstrate that there is no single model for character education in pesantren mahasiswa. Instead, adaptive, value-driven, and community-supported models are key to forming Muslim students who are not only academically excellent, but also morally grounded and socially engaged.

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F. Author Contributions Statement

The research was conceptualized and designed by Syaifulloh Yusuf, who also took primary responsibility for conducting fieldwork, data collection, initial analysis, and data interpretation. Marhumah and Aziz Muslim served as principal supervisors throughout the research process, providing methodological guidance, assisting in identifying and formulating key findings, and actively contributing to the conceptual and theoretical analysis of the data. They also offered substantial input in developing the theoretical framework and discussing the research findings. Nurkhamimi Zainuddin made significant contributions to the preparation of the final manuscript, particularly in reviewing, editing, and enhancing the quality of the writing, the structure of the presentation, and the accuracy of academic language.

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