

Strategic Management and Institutional Capacity Building in Islamic Higher Education: Evidence from the Emergence of a Postgraduate Program

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Abstract

The development of postgraduate education represents a critical stage in the transformation of higher education institutions, particularly within emerging Islamic universities seeking to enhance their academic capacity and intellectual contribution. However, limited studies have examined how strategic management functions as a mechanism for institutional capacity building in the establishment of postgraduate programs, especially in the context of Islamic higher education. This study addresses this gap by analysing the role of strategic management in supporting institutional transformation toward a research-based science education ecosystem. This research employs a qualitative field research design using a case study approach conducted at an Islamic higher education institution in Indonesia. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, institutional observations, and document analysis, and analysed using thematic analysis to identify key patterns in leadership, planning, and organisational development processes. The findings reveal three main strategic foundations underpinning the successful establishment of the postgraduate program: visionary leadership, collaborative institutional planning, and academic resource mobilisation. These elements not only facilitated program implementation but also contributed to broader institutional capacity building through the strengthening of academic human resources, research culture, governance systems, and academic networks. Importantly, the study demonstrates that postgraduate education plays a transformative role in fostering a research-oriented academic environment, thereby supporting the development of a sustainable science education system.

Keywords: Strategic Management, Institutional Capacity Building, Islamic Higher Education

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INTRODUCTION

The rapid transformation of higher education in the twenty-first century has intensified the importance of strategic leadership and institutional governance within universities across the world. Higher education institutions are increasingly expected to operate within complex environments characterised by global competition, regulatory accountability, and expanding societal expectations (Altbach et al., 2019). These developments require universities not only to provide high-quality teaching and research but also to adopt effective strategic management practices that enable institutions to align long-term visions, organisational resources, and academic development (Dill, 1998). Strategic management in higher education has therefore become an essential framework for guiding institutional transformation, strengthening organisational capacity, and ensuring institutional sustainability in rapidly evolving educational landscapes (Akdon, 2006).

Within this broader transformation, the expansion of postgraduate education represents a critical dimension of institutional development. Postgraduate programs are widely recognised as an important indicator of academic maturity and research capability within higher education institutions. They contribute significantly to the production of advanced scholarship, the development of research culture, and the strengthening of intellectual leadership within academic communities (Altbach et al., 2019; Kaplan-Weinger & Marks, 2024; Blackman & Kennedy, 2009). Universities that successfully establish postgraduate programs often demonstrate strong governance systems, effective leadership, and the capacity to mobilise academic resources in support of research and graduate education (Shattock, 1999; Duhaime et al., 2021).

The relevance of strategic management becomes particularly significant in emerging higher education institutions that seek to develop postgraduate education for the first time (Zahiri & Sahal, 2025). Unlike established universities with long-standing traditions of graduate research and advanced scholarship, developing institutions often face structural constraints such as limited academic resources, evolving governance systems, and emerging research cultures (Zahiri & Sahal, 2025). The establishment of postgraduate programs in such contexts requires deliberate institutional planning, effective leadership, and sustained organisational commitment. Strategic management therefore becomes essential for guiding institutional transformation and strengthening academic capacity in support of postgraduate education (Waugh Jr., 2003).

These challenges are particularly visible within the context of Islamic higher education. Islamic higher education institutions occupy a unique position within the global academic landscape because they operate at the intersection of religious intellectual traditions and modern university systems. On one hand, these institutions are responsible for preserving Islamic scholarly traditions that emphasise ethical formation, religious knowledge, and intellectual continuity. On the other hand, they must adapt to contemporary academic expectations such as research productivity, institutional accreditation, and modern governance practices (Hefner, 2016; Salim & Azra, 2003).

Within this broader transformation, the development of postgraduate programs has become an important milestone for many Islamic higher education institutions (Nasir & Rijal, 2021). Postgraduate education provides a platform for advanced research, intellectual collaboration, and academic leadership that strengthens institutional credibility within national higher education systems. At the same time, the establishment of postgraduate programs requires substantial organisational preparation, including qualified academic staff, research infrastructure, and effective institutional governance (Sumiati et al., 2024; King, 2009). Without these elements, the sustainability and academic quality of postgraduate education may be difficult to maintain.

Despite the growing body of scholarship on Islamic higher education, much of the existing literature has focused on issues such as curriculum reform, religious authority, and the integration of Islamic and modern knowledge traditions (Desmaniar et al., 2022). While these studies provide valuable insights into the intellectual transformation of Islamic education, relatively limited attention has been given to the role of strategic management in shaping institutional development, particularly in the context of postgraduate education (Iskarim et al., 2024). Understanding how strategic management contributes to institutional capacity building is therefore essential for analysing the emergence and sustainability of postgraduate programs within Islamic higher education institutions.

This study addresses this gap by examining the role of strategic management in supporting institutional capacity building during the development of a postgraduate program in an Islamic higher education institution in Indonesia. By analysing the institutional processes that facilitated the emergence of the program, this research aims to explore how strategic leadership, organisational planning, and academic resource development interact in shaping postgraduate institutional

development. Through this analysis, the study contributes to broader discussions on higher education governance, institutional development, and strategic management in Islamic higher education contexts. More broadly, the findings of this study are expected to provide insights for scholars, policymakers, and educational leaders who are engaged in strengthening the governance and sustainability of Islamic higher education institutions.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative field research design using a case study approach to examine how strategic management contributes to institutional capacity building in the development of a postgraduate program within an Islamic higher education institution in Indonesia (Zakkie, 2021). The case study approach is particularly appropriate for exploring complex organisational processes within their real institutional contexts, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon under investigation and the institutional environment are closely interconnected (Mohamed et al., 2025; Bowen, 2011). Qualitative research methods are widely used in higher education studies to investigate institutional development, governance practices, and organisational transformation because they allow researchers to capture contextual dynamics, institutional experiences, and stakeholder perspectives (Creswell, 2013). The research was conducted at the postgraduate program IAI At-Taqwa. The institution represents an emerging postgraduate provider that has recently developed graduate-level academic programs as part of its broader institutional development strategy. The establishment of the postgraduate program reflects an important stage in the institutional transformation of the institution from a primarily undergraduate teaching institution into a more comprehensive academic environment that supports advanced scholarship and research activities.

Data for this study were collected through three primary techniques commonly used in qualitative field research: semi-structured interviews, institutional observation, and document analysis. The use of multiple data sources allows for methodological triangulation, which enhances the credibility and reliability of qualitative findings (Patton, 2002). First, semi-structured interviews were conducted with key institutional actors involved in the development and management of the postgraduate program. Second, institutional observation was conducted to understand organisational practices and academic activities within the postgraduate program. Observation enabled the researcher to examine how strategic decisions are implemented in everyday institutional practices, including academic meetings, program coordination, and administrative activities related to postgraduate governance. Third, document analysis was carried out to examine institutional policies and official records related to postgraduate program development.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, a qualitative analytical technique widely used in social science research to identify patterns and themes within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis involved several stages. First, the collected data from interviews, observations, and documents were organised and reviewed in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the institutional context. Second, the data were coded to identify recurring themes related to strategic management practices, leadership roles, organisational development, and institutional capacity building. Third, these themes were interpreted to explain how strategic management contributed to the development of the postgraduate program. To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the research findings, several validation strategies were employed. Data triangulation was achieved through the use of multiple data sources, including interviews, observations, and documents. In addition, the researcher maintained detailed field notes and carefully documented the research process to ensure transparency in data interpretation. These procedures are widely recommended in qualitative research to strengthen

the reliability and validity of research findings (Creswell, 2013).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Strategic Foundations in Establishing the Postgraduate Program

The establishment of a postgraduate program within an emerging Islamic higher education institution represents a major institutional transformation that goes beyond administrative expansion and reflects a broader process of organisational development. The findings of this study show that the development of the postgraduate program was the result of a deliberate and long-term process shaped by visionary leadership, institutional planning, academic mobilisation, and the collective involvement of the academic community. Institutional leaders viewed the postgraduate program as an important step to strengthen the academic identity of the institution and expand its contribution to Islamic scholarship. Interviews with institutional leaders revealed that the program was designed to provide opportunities for advanced study and research while also improving the institution's academic reputation and role within the wider landscape of Islamic higher education in Indonesia. The study also found that the development of the program was supported by strategic institutional planning through discussions and coordination involving academic staff, administrators, and program coordinators.

These planning processes were not merely bureaucratic procedures but served as forums for collective deliberation regarding the academic direction of the institution. Lecturers who participated in these discussions described the planning stage as an important moment for aligning institutional aspirations with academic capacity. One lecturer involved in the early planning process noted: "The establishment of the postgraduate program required serious academic preparation. We discussed the academic strengths of the institution, the availability of lecturers who could supervise research, and the types of academic programs that would be relevant for our intellectual environment. These discussions helped us ensure that the program was not only administratively feasible but also academically meaningful."

Several lecturers noted that the establishment of the postgraduate program encouraged greater academic engagement among faculty members. The presence of graduate students created new opportunities for research collaboration and intellectual exchange within the institution. As one lecturer explained: "The postgraduate program has changed the academic atmosphere within the institution. Lecturers are now more actively involved in research discussions, academic seminars, and scholarly collaboration. Graduate students also bring new perspectives that enrich our academic environment." This observation illustrates how postgraduate education can function as a catalyst for strengthening academic culture within higher education institutions. Research-oriented academic environments are widely recognised as essential for sustaining postgraduate education, as they create intellectual spaces where knowledge production and scholarly dialogue can flourish.

Equally important are the perspectives of postgraduate students, who viewed the emergence of the program as an important opportunity for intellectual and academic advancement. Interviews with students revealed that the availability of postgraduate education within the institution allowed them to pursue advanced studies while remaining connected to their academic and social communities. One student noted: "Before this program existed, students who wanted to continue their studies often had to move to other universities in larger cities. Now we have the opportunity to pursue postgraduate education here while maintaining our connection with the academic environment that we value." Another student emphasised the intellectual significance of postgraduate education: "The postgraduate program allows us to explore ideas more deeply. We are encouraged to read more critically, engage with different perspectives, and contribute to academic discussions about Islamic scholarship and contemporary issues." These student

perspectives highlight how postgraduate programs contribute not only to institutional development but also to the expansion of intellectual opportunities for students and local academic communities. The presence of graduate-level education creates spaces for critical inquiry, scholarly debate, and intellectual growth that are essential for the development of higher education institutions.

The establishment of postgraduate programs is often associated with institutional maturity, research capacity, and stronger participation in scholarly networks (Altbach et al., 2019). In higher education governance, leadership is considered a key factor in guiding institutional transformation and strengthening organisational capacity (Rafik & Priyono, 2018). Postgraduate education also functions as a platform for strengthening research culture, enhancing institutional reputation, and producing advanced scholars who contribute to intellectual and social development (Waardenburg, 1965). Furthermore, strategic planning provides institutions with a systematic framework to identify priorities, allocate resources, and coordinate organisational activities to achieve long-term goals (Sahrodi & Karim, 2024). Collaborative planning processes in higher education also reflect participatory governance practices that involve dialogue among academic communities in institutional decision-making (Sarnoto & Rahmawati, 2022; Abdullah, 2017; Suyadi et al., 2022).

This collaborative planning process reflects the participatory nature of academic governance in universities, where institutional decisions are shaped through discussions among academic communities (Hambali & Idris, 2020; Hamid, 2017; Syahlarriyadi, 2023). This approach is especially important in emerging institutions, where organisational structures are still developing and strategic decisions must match institutional capacity. The study also found that strengthening postgraduate education requires the mobilisation of academic resources and institutional capacity building, including the development of academic staff, research culture, and governance structures (Juhaidi, 2024; Sappayani, 2025; Walid et al., 2025). Institutional leaders recognised the need to prepare academic staff for postgraduate responsibilities, particularly in research supervision, scholarly publication, and curriculum development (Akrim et al., 2022; Kartika et al., 2022).

Institutional Capacity Building and Organisational Consolidation in Islamic Higher Education

The establishment of the postgraduate program not only reflected strategic leadership and institutional planning but also initiated a broader process of institutional capacity building within the institution. The development of postgraduate education required the strengthening of organisational resources, academic structures, and governance systems to support long-term academic growth. In the context of Islamic higher education, this process also involved balancing Islamic intellectual traditions with the demands of modern higher education systems. The findings indicate that the institution sought to strengthen its academic contribution by improving the quality of academic staff, developing research activities, and creating a stronger academic environment. The emergence of the postgraduate program encouraged the institution to improve faculty qualifications, support research supervision, develop advanced curricula, and increase scholarly productivity. Institutional efforts also included encouraging lecturers to pursue higher academic qualifications, participate in academic conferences, and engage in research collaboration. These developments gradually shifted the institutional culture from being mainly teaching-oriented toward becoming more research-oriented, which is essential for supporting postgraduate education and graduate research activities.

Higher education governance literature emphasises that effective organisational management is essential for ensuring the sustainability of academic programs. Universities that lack clear governance structures may struggle to manage postgraduate education effectively, particularly when dealing with issues related to academic supervision, curriculum development, and program accreditation. Consequently, the development of postgraduate education frequently encourages

institutions to strengthen their internal governance mechanisms, including the establishment of academic committees, research supervision guidelines, and systematic evaluation processes.

The strengthening of governance systems is closely connected to the broader process of organisational professionalisation within universities. As institutions develop postgraduate programs, administrative practices often become more structured and standardised in order to comply with national higher education regulations and quality assurance frameworks. These developments contribute to institutional stability by ensuring that academic activities are supported by transparent governance structures and coordinated administrative procedures.

The development of postgraduate education often encourages institutions to establish partnerships with external scholars and academic institutions. Such collaborations may take the form of joint research projects, guest lectures, academic conferences, or collaborative publications. Through these networks, institutions are able to access broader intellectual resources and expose students to diverse scholarly perspectives. These interactions not only strengthen the academic quality of postgraduate programs but also contribute to the institutional visibility of emerging universities within national and international academic communities. The multidimensional nature of institutional capacity building observed in this study can be summarised in the following Table 1.

Table 1. Contrasting Logics of Knowledge Legitimacy in Islamic Education

Dimension of Institutional Capacity Building	Institutional Transformation	Contribution to Postgraduate Development
Academic Human Resource Development	Improvement of lecturer qualifications and research engagement	Strengthens research supervision and academic expertise
Research Culture Formation	Development of seminars, research collaboration, and scholarly dialogue	Supports graduate research and intellectual exchange
Governance and Institutional Management	Establishment of clearer academic regulations and administrative procedures	Ensures program sustainability and regulatory compliance
Academic Networking	Expansion of collaboration with scholars and institutions	Enhances intellectual resources and academic visibility

The institutional capacity building within Islamic higher education should be understood not only as an administrative process but also as an intellectual transformation that integrates traditional Islamic scholarship with contemporary academic practices. The development of postgraduate education therefore represents an important stage in the maturation of Islamic higher education institutions, enabling them to participate more actively in global academic conversations while preserving their distinctive intellectual traditions.

Institutional capacity building in higher education refers to the strengthening of organisational resources, academic structures, and governance mechanisms that support institutional transformation and sustainable academic development (Alsya'bani et al., 2024; Tia et al., 2022; Yakin et al., 2025). Postgraduate education is widely recognised as an important driver of institutional capacity building because it integrates research culture, advanced teaching practices, and effective academic governance (Altbach et al., 2019). In Islamic higher education, institutions are expected to preserve Islamic intellectual traditions while also responding to contemporary academic systems that emphasise research productivity, accountability, and competitiveness (Makruf, 2017; Mulyono & Wekke, 2018). The development of postgraduate programs also depends on qualified academic staff who can supervise graduate research, design advanced curricula, and contribute to scholarly publications. Furthermore, postgraduate education encourages universities to invest in faculty development, research collaboration, and academic scholarship, which are important for sustaining research-oriented academic cultures (Faqih et al., 2025; Mundiri et al.,

2025). Research culture itself plays a significant role in supporting scholarly inquiry, academic dialogue, and knowledge production within universities (Marginson, 2022; Iskarim, 2024).

Strategic Transformation toward a Research-Based Science Education Ecosystem

The transformation of postgraduate education in Islamic higher education institutions should be understood not only as an expansion of academic programs but also as a strategic shift toward the development of a research-based science education ecosystem. The findings of this study show that the establishment of postgraduate education encouraged the institution to move from a teaching-oriented model toward a research-driven academic environment that supports scientific learning and knowledge production. Strategic management played an important role in this transformation through visionary leadership, institutional planning, and the mobilisation of academic resources. Institutional leaders helped redefine academic priorities toward research development and scientific engagement, while institutional planning supported the integration of curriculum development, research activities, and academic governance. As a result, postgraduate education became a platform for combining teaching and research through inquiry-based and problem-oriented learning approaches. The emergence of postgraduate programs also encouraged lecturers to strengthen their research competencies, participate in scholarly publication, and engage in academic collaboration. These developments gradually strengthened the institutional research culture and created an academic environment that supports critical thinking, innovation, and sustainable science education.

In contemporary higher education discourse, postgraduate programs are widely regarded as key drivers of scientific knowledge production, critical inquiry, and interdisciplinary engagement (Altbach et al., 2019). The transition from teaching-oriented institutions toward research-based academic ecosystems is closely linked to the development of science education and knowledge production (Marginson, 2022). Strategic management, including visionary leadership and institutional planning, plays a significant role in supporting this transformation by strengthening structural and cultural foundations for research-oriented learning (Shattock, 1999). Leadership in higher education is also understood not only as administrative management but as an epistemic force that shapes institutional directions in knowledge production and academic development (Duhaime et al., 2021). Furthermore, research culture is recognised as a fundamental element in sustaining science education ecosystems because it supports scholarly inquiry, critical thinking, innovation, and the production of new knowledge (Iskarim, 2024).

The transformation toward a science education ecosystem also requires stronger institutional governance and organisational systems to support more complex academic processes such as thesis supervision, research ethics, and quality assurance. These developments encourage institutions to establish more structured and transparent governance practices that ensure the quality and sustainability of postgraduate education. At the same time, Islamic higher education institutions hold a unique position in integrating Islamic intellectual traditions with modern scientific approaches through interdisciplinary learning and research. This integration allows institutions to contribute to science education by offering value-based and holistic perspectives for addressing global challenges such as sustainability, social development, and ethical governance (Blackman & Kennedy, 2009; Hefner, 2016).

Moreover, the transformation toward a research-based science education ecosystem is closely linked to the expansion of academic networks and collaborative partnerships. As postgraduate programs develop, institutions increasingly engage with external scholars, research institutions, and academic communities. These collaborations facilitate knowledge exchange, enhance research quality, and broaden the intellectual horizons of both students and faculty

members. Academic networking is therefore an essential component of science education systems, as it enables institutions to participate in global knowledge production and remain responsive to emerging scientific developments (Marginson, 2022).

Taken together, these findings suggest that strategic management functions as a key driver in transforming institutional capacity into a sustainable science education ecosystem. The alignment of leadership, planning, human resource development, governance, and academic networking creates a synergistic framework that supports the integration of teaching and research within postgraduate education. This transformation not only enhances the academic quality of institutions but also contributes to the broader development of science education by fostering critical inquiry, interdisciplinary engagement, and knowledge production.

The emergence of postgraduate education in Islamic higher education institutions represents a strategic opportunity to develop research-based science education systems that are both academically rigorous and contextually relevant. By leveraging strategic management practices, institutions can move beyond traditional teaching models and establish dynamic academic ecosystems that support innovation, collaboration, and intellectual growth. This study therefore contributes to the growing body of literature on science education management by demonstrating how institutional transformation can be achieved through the integration of strategic governance and research-oriented academic practices.

CONCLUSION

Strategic management through visionary leadership, systematic planning, and coordinated resource mobilisation plays a crucial role in supporting the sustainability of postgraduate programs and strengthening institutional capacity. The findings show that postgraduate education contributes to the development of research culture, academic human resources, governance systems, and academic networks, thereby fostering a research-based science education ecosystem that integrates teaching, research, and interdisciplinary engagement. In addition, postgraduate programs provide a platform for integrating Islamic intellectual traditions with contemporary scientific practices, enabling institutions to produce knowledge that is both contextually grounded and globally relevant. Theoretically, this study contributes to higher education management discourse by positioning strategic management as a transformative mechanism for institutional development, while practically offering insights for policymakers and institutional leaders in strengthening postgraduate education. Despite its limitations as a single-case qualitative study, the research highlights that postgraduate education serves as a strategic instrument for transforming Islamic higher education institutions into research-driven and multidisciplinary academic ecosystems capable of remaining relevant in a globalised higher education landscape.

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