

Epistemic Sovereignty in Islamic Education under Secular Regulatory Regimes: A Normative–Integrative Framework for Science Education

Suheri[✉]

Institut Agama Islam At-Taqwa Bondowoso, East Java, Indonesia

Abstract

This study examines the relationship between secular governance systems and epistemic sovereignty in Islamic education, with particular relevance to contemporary science education. Regulatory frameworks such as accreditation, credential hierarchies, and performance standards are often treated as neutral, yet they shape how knowledge and authority are legitimised. Studies on Islamic education mainly focus on institutional adaptation, with limited attention to how these frameworks transform the epistemological basis of knowledge legitimacy. Using a qualitative library-based approach, this study draws on sociology of knowledge, institutional theory, and Islamic intellectual tradition to analyse the impact of secular standardisation on epistemic authority. The findings indicate that the primary challenge facing Islamic education is not institutional marginalisation but normative relocation, where externally codified benchmarks increasingly define legitimacy. Consequently, internally grounded criteria—such as textual continuity, interpretive discipline, scholarly lineage, and ethical formation—risk losing epistemic primacy. This dynamic is particularly evident in science education, where empirical validation and standardised assessment dominate knowledge evaluation. To address this challenge, the study proposes a normative–integrative framework based on the concept of negotiated primacy. This framework enables Islamic educational institutions to engage with secular governance systems while maintaining the hierarchical primacy of their internal epistemological foundations. The study contributes to broader debates on education, governance, and knowledge by conceptualising epistemic sovereignty as a dynamic and reflexive institutional practice in contemporary educational systems.

Keywords: Epistemic Sovereignty, Islamic Education, Secular Governance, Knowledge Legitimacy

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✉ **Correspondence Author:** suheri.lpd@gmail.com

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INTRODUCTION

Modern educational systems are increasingly governed by regulatory architectures that define not only standards of quality but the boundaries of legitimate knowledge. Accreditation frameworks, qualification regimes, performance metrics, and ranking systems function as instruments of coordination and comparability across institutions (Akdon, 2006). Yet they also carry epistemological assumptions. They presuppose what counts as valid knowledge, how expertise is recognised, and which forms of authority deserve institutional endorsement. In this sense, contemporary governance structures are not merely administrative; they are epistemically constitutive.

The expansion of such secular systems has generated renewed attention to the concept of epistemic sovereignty the capacity of a knowledge tradition to determine its own criteria of validity, transmission, and authority (Lumbard, 2024). Epistemic sovereignty extends beyond institutional

autonomy. It concerns the normative foundations through which knowledge is authorised and reproduced. Within sociology of knowledge, legitimacy has long been understood as socially constructed and institutionally stabilised (A & Schimchen, 2025). Organisational theory further demonstrates how regulatory environments shape the forms and practices of institutions through processes of standardisation and isomorphism (Stanley, 2007). However, less attention has been given to how these processes affect traditions whose epistemic authority is grounded not merely in social consensus but in sacred or transcendence-oriented foundations.

Islamic education presents a compelling case in this regard. Historically, its epistemic architecture was structured around revelation, interpretive scholarship, and relational transmission. Authority was authenticated through *sanad* chains of scholarly transmission linking contemporary teachers to earlier generations and through moral credibility embodied in the scholar (Kabba, 2024). Knowledge was not conceived as neutral information but as ethically and spiritually consequential. Its legitimacy derived from fidelity to divine sources and from participation in a community oriented toward moral cultivation (Bagir & Suhadi, 2019). In this configuration, epistemic authority was internally regulated through recognised scholarly hierarchies and communal validation rooted in shared theological commitments.

The rise of modern nation-states and the institutionalisation of secular education systems introduced a different logic. Rational-legal authority privileges codification, documentation, and procedural accountability (Weber, 2013). Within this framework, knowledge legitimacy becomes associated with formal accreditation, measurable learning outcomes, and standardised evaluation. Credentialism defined as the reliance on formal qualifications as primary indicators of competence has become a central feature of contemporary educational governance. Research metrics, peer-review systems, and institutional rankings further reinforce externally defined standards of legitimacy.

Islamic educational institutions today operate within this regulatory environment (Abas Hidayat et al., 2021). Whether in public universities, state-recognised madrasas, or hybrid institutions, compliance with national standards often determines access to funding, recognition, and societal legitimacy (Kabba, 2024). This integration into secular systems has facilitated institutional stability and broader societal participation. Yet it also raises a fundamental question: when the criteria of legitimacy are externally standardised, to what extent can a sacred knowledge tradition retain epistemic sovereignty?

The issue is not one of simple opposition between sacred and secular. Islamic intellectual history demonstrates adaptive engagement with diverse political and institutional contexts (Abu-Rabi', 2005). Scholars historically navigated varying regimes while preserving interpretive continuity. However, the contemporary context differs in scale and intensity. Global quality assurance regimes and benchmarking systems create convergent pressures across educational fields (Budiman et al., 2025). Institutions that diverge significantly from standardised models risk marginalisation. As institutional theory suggests, organisations tend toward isomorphism under coercive and normative pressures (Powell, 2022). The question, therefore, is not whether Islamic education adapts, but how such adaptation reshapes the internal criteria through which knowledge is validated.

Existing scholarship on Islamic education frequently addresses curriculum reform, pedagogical modernisation, or institutional governance. Studies examine how religious institutions integrate scientific disciplines, respond to policy reforms, or enhance administrative efficiency (Achmadin et al., 2024). While these analyses are valuable, they often treat regulatory integration as primarily organisational rather than epistemological. The deeper issue how secular systems reconfigure the normative foundations of knowledge legitimacy remains insufficiently theorised.

This article argues that the encounter between sacred knowledge traditions and secular governance systems generates a crisis of epistemic sovereignty. The term crisis here does not imply institutional collapse, but structural tension. When accreditation frameworks prioritise measurable competencies over interpretive depth, when research productivity metrics outweigh moral formation, and when formal certification becomes the dominant marker of authority, the internal epistemic hierarchy of Islamic education may be subtly displaced. Authority shifts from recognised scholarly lineage and ethical embodiment toward bureaucratically sanctioned credentials.

Such displacement is not necessarily deliberate. Secular systems often present themselves as neutral, procedural, and universally applicable. Yet neutrality is itself normatively embedded. Standards of assessment reflect assumptions about the nature of knowledge, evidence, and learning (EL ASSIJI, 2025). Traditions that conceptualise knowledge as morally transformative and revelation-oriented may not fully align with frameworks oriented toward technical proficiency and quantifiable outcomes. The resulting tension is epistemological before it is administrative (Jamil, 2025).

The concept of epistemic sovereignty provides an analytical lens for examining this tension. It foregrounds the question of who determines the standards by which knowledge is judged legitimate. In contexts where sacred traditions coexist with secular regulatory systems, sovereignty becomes negotiated. Islamic educational institutions may adopt external standards for pragmatic reasons while striving to preserve internal normative commitments (Mousourakis, 2025). The outcome is not necessarily assimilation but hybridization a layered configuration in which multiple authority systems intersect.

The central objective of this study is to analyse how secular standardisation mechanisms influence epistemic authority within Islamic education, particularly in relation to contemporary science education, and to explore the conditions under which epistemic sovereignty can be rearticulated rather than eroded. Employing a qualitative library-based methodology, the study engages interdisciplinary scholarship in sociology of knowledge, educational governance, and Islamic intellectual tradition to examine both the structural pressures imposed by secular systems and the normative resources available within Islamic epistemology for sustaining intellectual autonomy.

The analysis proceeds in two stages. First, it investigates how accreditation regimes, credentialism, and regulatory oversight reshape authority structures within Islamic educational institutions, including their implications for curriculum design and knowledge validation in science learning. Second, it explores how epistemic sovereignty can be reclaimed or renegotiated through the explicit articulation of internal normative foundations. The objective is not to advocate disengagement from secular systems, but to clarify the epistemological consequences of integration and the conditions under which such engagement remains normatively coherent.

In an era characterised by the global convergence of educational standards, the question of epistemic sovereignty extends beyond Islamic education to broader debates in science education and knowledge governance. Religious and cultural traditions worldwide face similar pressures to align with externally defined criteria of legitimacy. Islamic education offers a particularly illuminating case due to its historically articulated epistemic structure and its contemporary engagement with diverse institutional frameworks.

Ultimately, the crisis of epistemic sovereignty is not merely a question of governance, but of authority, authenticity, and intellectual self-determination. Addressing this crisis requires moving beyond managerial adaptation toward a critical re-examination of the normative foundations of knowledge, particularly within increasingly standardised and secularised educational systems.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative, library-based research design oriented toward conceptual clarification and theoretical elaboration. Rather than generating empirical data, the inquiry seeks to interrogate the epistemological implications of secular governance structures for Islamic education and to reconstruct the concept of epistemic sovereignty within this context. The methodological approach aligns with theory-building scholarship that emphasises disciplined conceptual development through systematic engagement with existing literature (Gilson & Goldberg, 2015).

The research proceeds from the assumption that governance systems are not epistemologically neutral. Accreditation regimes, credential frameworks, and quality assurance mechanisms are treated here not merely as administrative instruments but as normatively structured environments that shape the conditions under which knowledge is validated (Becker & Niehaves, 2007). Accordingly, the primary corpus of sources was selected from three interrelated domains: sociology of knowledge, institutional and governance theory in education, and Islamic intellectual tradition.

First, literature in sociology of knowledge was engaged to clarify how authority, legitimacy, and knowledge claims become socially stabilised and institutionalised (Döbler, 2022). This body of work provides the analytical foundation for understanding legitimacy as a structured outcome of social recognition rather than an inherent property of knowledge itself. Complementing this, institutional theory and educational governance scholarship were examined to analyse how regulatory systems shape organisational conformity and define standards of recognition (Powell, 2022). These frameworks illuminate the mechanisms through which secular systems standardise criteria of validity across educational fields.

Second, classical and contemporary works on Islamic epistemology were analysed to reconstruct the internal architecture of knowledge legitimacy within the tradition. Particular attention was given to the mechanisms of *sanad*, scholarly lineage, interpretive authority, and ethical formation as structuring principles of epistemic validation (Bagir & Suhadi, 2019). These sources were approached hermeneutically, not as theological affirmations, but as historically embedded systems of epistemic regulation. The aim was to identify how authority was generated, recognised, and sustained within Islamic educational communities independent of modern bureaucratic certification.

The analytical process unfolded in three stages. The first stage involved mapping the epistemic assumptions embedded within secular educational governance. Accreditation standards, credentialism, performance metrics, and ranking systems were examined as mechanisms that codify legitimacy through measurable outputs and procedural compliance. This stage focused on identifying the implicit ontology of knowledge underlying such systems particularly the prioritisation of quantifiability, comparability, and institutional documentation as primary markers of authority (Döbler, 2022).

The second stage reconstructed the normative foundations of epistemic sovereignty within Islamic education. Through comparative reading of classical texts and modern analyses, the study identified core dimensions of internal validation, including relational transmission, moral credibility, interpretive continuity, and communal recognition. This reconstruction clarified that epistemic legitimacy historically emerged from within a self-regulating scholarly ecosystem rather than from external administrative endorsement.

The third stage employed structured conceptual comparison to examine points of convergence, divergence, and tension between these two epistemic regimes. Rather than framing sacred and secular systems as mutually exclusive, the analysis explored how they intersect and reshape one another. Conceptual attention was directed to three analytical axes: locus of authority

(internal versus external validation), criteria of legitimacy (normative coherence versus procedural compliance), and mechanisms of recognition (communal trust versus institutional certification). This comparative synthesis enabled the articulation of epistemic sovereignty as a dynamic and negotiable capacity rather than a static condition (Creswell, 2013).

Methodological rigour was ensured through deliberate cross-disciplinary triangulation and engagement with foundational texts across fields. Care was taken to avoid both romanticisation of pre-modern authority structures and uncritical endorsement of secular regulatory frameworks. Reflexive scrutiny guided the analysis, recognising that both sacred and secular systems are historically situated and normatively embedded. The objective was not to privilege one regime over the other, but to clarify the epistemological stakes involved in their interaction (McIntyre-Mills & Romm, 2019).

As a non-empirical inquiry, the study did not involve human participants and therefore required no ethical clearance for fieldwork. Scholarly integrity was maintained through precise citation practices, transparent argumentation, and faithful representation of primary sources. By integrating systematic literature mapping, hermeneutic reconstruction, and theory elaboration, this methodological approach enables a nuanced analysis of how epistemic sovereignty in Islamic education is reconfigured within secular systems of governance.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Secular Standardisation and the Structural Reconfiguration of Epistemic Sovereignty

The analysis demonstrates that the crisis of epistemic sovereignty in Islamic education does not arise from direct confrontation between sacred and secular worldviews, but from the gradual internalisation of regulatory standards that redefine legitimacy. Secular governance systems, particularly in education, operate through mechanisms of accreditation, standardisation, credentialisation, and audit. These mechanisms appear administratively neutral; yet they embed epistemological assumptions that reshape authority (Jong, 2025).

Institutional theory has long argued that organisations conform to regulatory and normative pressures in order to secure legitimacy and survival (Mahmood, 2017). In modern education systems, legitimacy is stabilised through compliance with national qualification frameworks, measurable learning outcomes, documented curricula, and externally verified credentials (Mappasessu & Akmal, 2025). Over time, these standards become naturalised as objective benchmarks of academic validity. What begins as administrative coordination evolves into epistemic structuring.

Islamic education historically functioned within a different logic of validation. Authority emerged through recognised scholarly lineage, interpretive competence, and moral credibility. The mechanism of *sanad* ensured continuity, while *ijazah* confirmed mastery within relational networks rather than bureaucratic systems (Bagir & Suhadi, 2019). Knowledge legitimacy was not detached from ethical formation; it was inseparable from it. The scholar's authority rested upon trust grounded in communal recognition and fidelity to sacred sources.

The expansion of secular standardisation introduces an alternative evaluative regime. Accreditation bodies define curricular requirements; ministries regulate degree equivalence; performance metrics quantify scholarly productivity (Middaugh, 2001). These processes gradually reposition the locus of authority from internally generated criteria to externally codified benchmarks. Islamic institutions seeking public recognition must align with these systems (Koenig, 2007). In doing so, they often recalibrate curricula, redefine faculty qualifications, and restructure assessment practices to meet regulatory expectations (Dobija et al., 2018).

This alignment reflects what institutional theory describes as coercive and normative isomorphism (Powell, 2022). Coercive pressures arise from state regulation and funding requirements; normative pressures stem from professional standards and global academic norms (Altbach et al., 2019). Islamic educational institutions adapt not necessarily because they abandon their traditions, but because survival within national systems requires compliance. Over time, however, adaptation influences internal hierarchies of value (Buchori et al., 2023).

Credentialism illustrates this transformation clearly. In modern systems, authority is frequently inferred from formal degrees and institutional affiliation (Baker, 2011). Doctoral titles, indexed publications, and recognised accreditation status function as primary markers of expertise. While Islamic scholarship historically valued deep textual mastery and recognised lineage, contemporary recognition increasingly depends upon bureaucratically certified qualifications. The scholar becomes legible within secular systems through formal credentials rather than through relational endorsement alone.

This shift produces structural asymmetry. External benchmarks gain epistemic weight, while internal criteria risk marginalisation. Even when sacred knowledge remains central to curricula, its legitimacy may be evaluated through external indicators such as research impact metrics or formal degree equivalence (Tholen, 2020). The result is not the disappearance of sacred authority, but its partial translation into bureaucratic language.

Audit culture intensifies this dynamic. Contemporary governance emphasises documentation, evaluation, and measurable outputs (Shore, 2008). Compliance becomes demonstrable through reports, performance indicators, and periodic reviews. Such mechanisms enhance transparency and accountability, yet they also privilege quantifiable dimensions of knowledge over qualitative depth (Freidson, 1988). Interpretive subtlety, moral formation, and relational mentorship are difficult to capture within standardised metrics. When what can be measured becomes what counts, epistemic priorities subtly shift.

The crisis of epistemic sovereignty, therefore, lies in normative relocation. The authority to define legitimate knowledge gradually moves from within the tradition to regulatory frameworks external to it. Islamic education remains institutionally intact, yet its criteria of validation are increasingly negotiated within secular paradigms. Sovereignty becomes conditional upon compliance (Lumbard, 2024).

It is important to avoid reductive narratives. Secular standardisation does not simply suppress sacred knowledge. It can provide structural stability, protect institutional integrity, and enable participation in broader academic communities (Hammond, 2022). However, benefits do not eliminate epistemological consequences. When accreditation standards determine curricular structure, they shape interpretive emphasis. When research metrics define scholarly success, they influence intellectual priorities.

The reconfiguration of epistemic sovereignty is thus structural rather than rhetorical. It unfolds through everyday administrative practices curriculum design, faculty hiring standards, degree recognition policies, quality assurance procedures. Each adjustment appears pragmatic. Yet cumulatively, they alter the evaluative architecture of knowledge. To clarify this transformation, the following table summarises the contrast between internally grounded epistemic sovereignty and externally standardised legitimacy.

Table 1. Contrasting Logics of Knowledge Legitimacy in Islamic Education

Dimension	Internally Grounded Epistemic Sovereignty	Secular Standardised Legitimacy
Locus of Authority	Scholarly lineage and communal recognition	Regulatory bodies and accreditation agencies
Validation	Relational transmission (<i>sanad</i>), moral	Formal certification, documented

Mechanism	credibility	compliance
Criteria of Expertise	Mastery of canonical texts, interpretive depth	Degrees, indexed publications, measurable outputs
Mode of Recognition	Ethical trust and scholarly endorsement	Institutional ranking and bureaucratic approval
Accountability Structure	Normative coherence within tradition	Procedural compliance with state standards
Epistemic Orientation	Transcendence-oriented and ethical	Quantifiable, standardised, performance-based

Table 1 illustrates that the transformation concerns not merely institutional structure but epistemic orientation. The sacred model privileges continuity, relational trust, and moral authority. The secular model privileges comparability, documentation, and measurable productivity (Hammond, 2022). Neither model is inherently illegitimate; each reflects a distinct ontology of knowledge. The tension arises when one becomes dominant.

Epistemic sovereignty does not disappear immediately under secular standardisation. Rather, it becomes layered and contested. Institutions may continue to teach classical texts while simultaneously restructuring programs to satisfy accreditation criteria. Faculty may hold recognised lineage while also pursuing formal degrees to maintain institutional legitimacy. Sovereignty persists, but in negotiated form.

The structural risk lies in gradual inversion of primacy. When external validation becomes the primary determinant of authority, internal criteria may shift from foundational to supplementary status (Lassere et al., 2007). Sacred knowledge may survive as content, yet lose its normative autonomy. The crisis, therefore, is not institutional extinction but epistemological subordination (Nasr, 2005).

Understanding this dynamic requires moving beyond simplistic binaries of sacred versus secular. The issue is not whether Islamic education should engage with modern governance. It already does. The deeper question concerns how engagement reshapes the authority to define legitimate knowledge. Secular standardisation, through its procedural neutrality and administrative rationality, exerts epistemic influence that often remains unexamined.

The findings of this section establish that the crisis of epistemic sovereignty is structural, cumulative, and subtle. It unfolds through processes of adaptation that enhance institutional survival while potentially recalibrating normative foundations. Recognising this transformation is the first step toward articulating a framework in which sacred knowledge can engage secular systems without relinquishing its internal criteria of legitimacy.

Rearticulating Epistemic Sovereignty: Toward a Normative–Integrative Framework for Islamic Education

If the preceding section demonstrated that secular standardisation gradually relocates the locus of epistemic authority, the present section addresses the constructive question of rearticulation. The crisis of epistemic sovereignty identified here should not be misread as institutional collapse or cultural incompatibility. Rather, it reflects a structural tension between two normative regimes: one grounded in transcendence-oriented epistemology, the other embedded in rational-legal governance (Hughes, 2003). The task, therefore, is not withdrawal from secular systems but the reconstruction of epistemic primacy within them.

Epistemic sovereignty, as conceptualised in this study, refers to the capacity of a knowledge tradition to define the criteria by which knowledge claims are validated and authority is recognised. In sociology of knowledge, legitimacy is stabilised through socially institutionalised processes of

(Berger, 2020). Institutional theory further demonstrates that organisations internalise external expectations in order to secure survival (Hu et al., 2007). Yet these frameworks primarily address social validation. Islamic epistemology introduces an additional dimension: legitimacy is not only socially mediated but normatively anchored in fidelity to revelation and interpretive continuity. Authority thus derives from a dual grounding communal recognition and transcendental reference (Williams et al., 2009).

Rearticulating epistemic sovereignty requires disentangling procedural legitimacy from epistemic legitimacy. Procedural legitimacy refers to compliance with externally codified standards such as accreditation requirements, degree equivalence frameworks, and quality assurance metrics (Anthony, 2018). Epistemic legitimacy, by contrast, refers to coherence within the internal normative structure of a knowledge tradition its interpretive methodologies, hierarchies of sources, and ethical commitments (Kabba, 2024). Secular governance systems regulate the former; Islamic intellectual tradition historically defines the latter. The crisis emerges when procedural benchmarks begin to substitute for epistemic primacy (Hashim, 2010).

A normative–integrative reconstruction therefore rests upon three interdependent principles: layered authority, calibrated integration, and reflexive institutionalisation.

First, layered authority recognises that contemporary Islamic education operates within multiple overlapping regimes of validation (Millie, 2025). Sacred textual authority, communal scholarly endorsement, institutional certification, and state accreditation coexist within a plural epistemic environment. Rather than collapsing these regimes into a single metric of legitimacy most often bureaucratic recognition a layered framework differentiates their domains of operation. Such differentiation prevents what institutional theory would describe as over-internalisation of external norms (Ghasemy et al., 2022). Sacred authority remains normatively primary, even as regulatory compliance secures institutional survival.

This layered model also resonates with scholarship on institutional plurality and competing logics, which emphasises that organisations frequently navigate coexisting normative systems (Mair et al., 2015). Islamic education is not a passive recipient of secular regulation; it is a site of negotiation between religious and bureaucratic logics. Sovereignty is preserved when internal epistemic standards continue to structure curricular substance and scholarly recognition, even if institutional form adapts to external frameworks (A'la & Makhshun, 2022).

Second, calibrated integration refers to strategic engagement rather than absorptive assimilation. Not all dimensions of secular governance equally affect epistemic foundations. Financial transparency and administrative accountability, for example, may enhance institutional credibility without redefining knowledge hierarchies (Akhyar, 2024). However, curricular standardisation that marginalises interpretive depth or reorders textual centrality directly affects epistemic sovereignty. Calibration requires discerning which regulatory mechanisms regulate form and which reshape substance.

This distinction echoes Weber's analysis of rational-legal authority, in which procedural rationalisation reorganises institutional structures but does not automatically extinguish traditional or charismatic legitimacy (Camic et al., 2005). The question is not whether rationalisation occurs it does but whether sacred authority retains normative coherence within rationalised systems. Calibration transforms adaptation into conscious negotiation rather than incremental displacement (Heunis et al., 2023).

Third, reflexive institutionalisation ensures that sovereignty is not merely declared but structurally embedded. Islamic educational institutions must continuously evaluate how compliance decisions affect internal epistemic hierarchies (Miftahussurur et al., 2025). Governance reforms, faculty recruitment standards, and research evaluation systems should be assessed not only for

administrative efficiency but for their normative implications (Dill, 1998). Reflexivity guards against the subtle inversion of primacy in which bureaucratic credentials overshadow interpretive mastery.

Importantly, rearticulation also requires intellectual renewal. Sacred epistemology cannot rely solely on inherited legitimacy; it must demonstrate ongoing interpretive vitality. When internal scholarship remains rigorous and contextually responsive, it sustains epistemic credibility beyond external certification (Auda, 2022). Conversely, if sacred knowledge becomes symbolically preserved but intellectually stagnant, bureaucratic metrics will naturally fill the evaluative vacuum. Sovereignty depends on epistemic productivity grounded in internal criteria.

This reconstruction challenges deterministic narratives of secularisation. Classical accounts often assume that rationalisation progressively marginalises sacred authority (Weber, 2009). However, contemporary scholarship on religion in modernity suggests more complex patterns of coexistence and hybridisation. Sacred and secular regimes frequently intersect without complete absorption (Hammond, 2022). Islamic education illustrates that sovereignty is neither automatically eroded nor automatically preserved; it is negotiated through institutional practice (Alfiyanto et al., 2024).

The normative–integrative framework proposed here therefore conceptualises sovereignty as negotiated primacy. Islamic educational institutions may operate within national accreditation systems, participate in global academic networks, and adopt measurable performance indicators (Saleh, 2022). Yet sovereignty is sustained when these mechanisms do not redefine the internal hierarchy of knowledge. Textual centrality, interpretive discipline, and ethical formation remain foundational even as procedural compliance ensures institutional recognition (Morreale et al., 2000).

This perspective reframes the crisis identified in before Section. The crisis is not the presence of secular systems per se, but the unreflective internalisation of their epistemic assumptions (Alaali, 2025). When regulatory metrics are treated as exhaustive definitions of legitimacy, displacement occurs. When they are situated within a broader normative hierarchy, coexistence becomes possible (Alfiyanto et al., 2024).

Ultimately, epistemic sovereignty in contemporary Islamic education must be understood as dynamic and reflexive rather than static or isolationist. It requires explicit articulation of internal criteria, strategic engagement with external systems, and continuous evaluation of how authority is structured and recognized (Millie, 2025). Sovereignty does not mean disengagement from modern governance; it means retaining the authority to define what counts as legitimate knowledge even while operating within plural institutional environments.

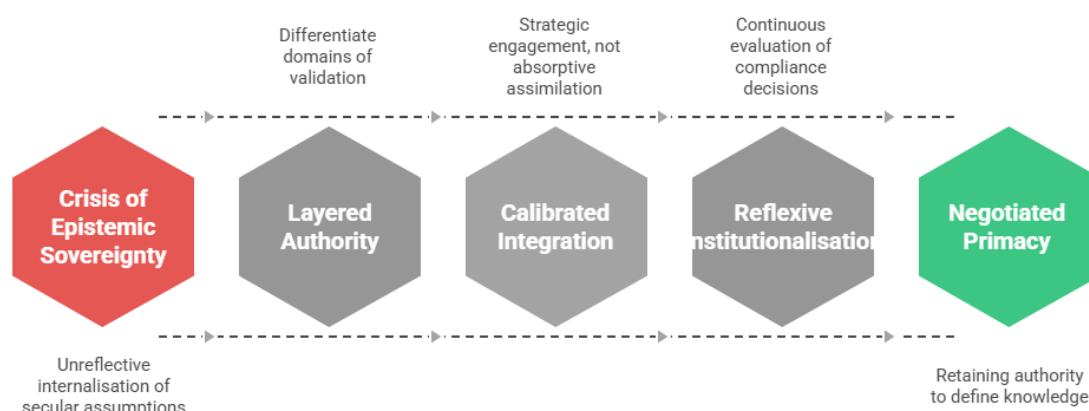


Figure 1. Reararticulating Epistemic Sovereignty

In Figure 1, the encounter with secular standardisation may function not only as a source of tension but as a catalyst for clarification. It compels Islamic education to articulate its epistemic foundations with greater precision and to institutionalise them consciously. The future of sacred knowledge within secular systems depends not on resistance alone, but on disciplined reconstruction—one that preserves normative coherence while navigating the realities of modern regulatory governance.

Implications for Science Education: Reframing Epistemic Sovereignty in Islamic Science Learning

The question of epistemic sovereignty acquires particular urgency within the domain of science education, where the legitimacy of knowledge is predominantly structured through empirical validation, experimental reproducibility, and standardised assessment frameworks. In contemporary educational systems, science is often presented as a value-neutral enterprise grounded in observation and verification. However, as sociology of knowledge has demonstrated, what counts as “valid knowledge” is always embedded within broader epistemological assumptions and institutional arrangements (Berger, 2020). In this regard, science education is not merely a pedagogical field but a site where competing epistemic regimes intersect and negotiate authority.

Within Islamic educational contexts, this intersection generates a complex tension. On the one hand, modern science education emphasises empiricism, quantification, and universal standards of validation. On the other hand, Islamic epistemology situates knowledge within a broader metaphysical and ethical framework rooted in revelation (*waḥy*), reason (*‘aql*), and transmitted tradition (*naql*). Historically, Islamic intellectual tradition did not dichotomise between “religious” and “scientific” knowledge; rather, it cultivated an integrated epistemic vision in which empirical inquiry functioned within a transcendence-oriented worldview (Nasr, 2005). The contemporary separation between these domains is therefore not inherent, but historically contingent and institutionally reinforced.

The expansion of global science education frameworks, including international benchmarking systems such as PISA and TIMSS, has intensified the standardisation of science learning outcomes. These systems prioritise measurable competencies, problem-solving skills, and cognitive performance indicators. While such frameworks contribute to comparability and quality assurance, they also implicitly define the parameters of legitimate knowledge (Anthony, 2018). In Islamic educational institutions, alignment with these standards often becomes necessary for accreditation, funding, and public recognition. As a result, science curricula may be restructured to prioritise externally defined competencies, sometimes at the expense of internal epistemic coherence.

This process illustrates what may be termed epistemic displacement within science education. The authority to define what counts as valid scientific knowledge shifts from internally grounded philosophical and theological frameworks to externally codified standards of assessment. In practice, this can lead to a form of curricular dualism: religious subjects maintain a normative orientation toward revelation and ethics, while science subjects are taught within a strictly empirical and instrumental paradigm. Such compartmentalisation risks fragmenting the learner’s intellectual worldview, undermining the integrative epistemology that historically characterised Islamic education.

From the perspective of epistemic sovereignty, the critical issue is not whether Islamic institutions adopt modern science curricula, but how such adoption is epistemologically framed. If scientific knowledge is presented as epistemically autonomous and detached from broader metaphysical considerations, then secular assumptions become internalised as normative (Lumbard, 2024). Conversely, if science is taught as a mode of inquiry that operates within a wider

ontological and ethical horizon, epistemic sovereignty can be preserved even within standardised frameworks.

This distinction has significant implications for curriculum design. A sovereignty-oriented approach to science education would not reject empirical methods or global standards, but would contextualise them within an Islamic epistemological framework (Choudhury, 2011). For instance, the study of natural phenomena can be framed not only as an exercise in technical understanding, but also as a means of reflecting upon divine order (*āyāt kauniyyah*). Such an approach aligns with classical Islamic scholarship, where the pursuit of knowledge was simultaneously intellectual and spiritual. Integrating this perspective into contemporary curricula requires deliberate pedagogical strategies rather than implicit assumptions.

Furthermore, the issue of epistemic sovereignty extends to science literacy. In global discourse, science literacy is often defined in terms of the ability to understand scientific concepts, evaluate evidence, and apply knowledge to real-world problems (Allui & Sahni, 2016). While these competencies are essential, they represent only one dimension of literacy. Within an Islamic epistemological framework, literacy also involves the capacity to situate knowledge within a moral and metaphysical context. A scientifically literate student, therefore, is not only one who can interpret data, but also one who understands the ethical implications and ultimate purposes of knowledge.

The dominance of standardised assessments tends to privilege the former dimension while marginalising the latter. This creates an asymmetry in educational priorities, where measurable competencies are emphasised and normative reflection is relegated to peripheral subjects. From the standpoint of epistemic sovereignty, this imbalance constitutes a subtle but significant shift in the hierarchy of knowledge. Rearticulating sovereignty in science education thus requires expanding the concept of literacy to include ethical and epistemological awareness.

The implications are equally evident in the context of STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) education. STEM frameworks are often promoted as engines of innovation, economic growth, and technological advancement (Sanders et al., 2011). However, they are typically grounded in utilitarian and instrumental rationality. Islamic education, by contrast, emphasises the ethical orientation of knowledge and its role in human flourishing (*maṣlaḥah*). The challenge, therefore, is to engage with STEM education without reducing knowledge to purely functional or economic terms (Auda, 2022). A calibrated integration approach can address this challenge. Rather than uncritically adopting STEM models, Islamic educational institutions can selectively integrate their methodological strengths while embedding them within a broader ethical and epistemological framework. For example, engineering education can incorporate discussions on environmental stewardship (*khilāfah*), while technological innovation can be evaluated in terms of social justice and ethical responsibility (Miftahussurur et al., 2025). Such integration does not dilute scientific rigor; rather, it enriches it by situating it within a meaningful normative context.

At the level of pedagogy, rearticulating epistemic sovereignty requires moving beyond content integration toward epistemic integration. This involves making explicit the underlying assumptions of both scientific and Islamic knowledge systems and encouraging critical reflection on their relationship. Teachers play a crucial role in this process. As mediators of knowledge, they must be equipped not only with technical expertise but also with epistemological awareness. Teacher training programs, therefore, should include components that address the philosophy of science, Islamic epistemology, and their points of convergence and divergence.

Finally, the rearticulation of epistemic sovereignty in science education necessitates institutional reflexivity. Educational institutions must continuously evaluate how their policies, curricula, and assessment practices shape the hierarchy of knowledge. Accreditation requirements

and performance metrics should be engaged critically, not merely complied with procedurally. Where possible, institutions can advocate for more inclusive evaluation frameworks that recognise diverse epistemological orientations. In this light, epistemic sovereignty in science education is best understood not as resistance to modernity, but as a form of critical engagement. It involves the capacity to participate in global scientific discourse while retaining the authority to define the meaning and purpose of knowledge within one's own tradition. The concept of negotiated primacy becomes particularly relevant here. Islamic educational institutions can operate within standardised systems of science education, yet maintain the normative primacy of their epistemological foundations.

In conclusion, the implications of epistemic sovereignty for science education are profound and far-reaching. They call for a rethinking of curriculum design, science literacy, STEM integration, pedagogical practice, and institutional governance. More fundamentally, they invite a reconsideration of what it means to know within a plural epistemic landscape. By reframing science education as a site of epistemological negotiation rather than mere technical instruction, Islamic education can contribute to a more holistic and ethically grounded vision of knowledge—one that remains responsive to global standards while rooted in enduring normative commitments.

CONCLUSION

This study argues that the major transformation in Islamic education today is epistemological rather than merely organisational. Secular regulatory systems such as accreditation, performance metrics, and credential hierarchies shape how knowledge and authority are legitimised, creating a crisis of epistemic primacy over who determines valid knowledge. While Islamic education traditionally relies on textual fidelity, scholarly lineage, and ethical formation, modern governance prioritises standardisation and measurability. The study introduces the concept of negotiated primacy, which views epistemic sovereignty as a dynamic process that allows Islamic education to engage with secular systems without abandoning its internal epistemological foundations. In science education, this requires integrating scientific learning with ethical and philosophical reflection to preserve epistemic identity while participating in global discourse. Although limited by its conceptual nature, the study highlights that epistemic sovereignty can endure through critical, reflexive, and adaptive engagement with modern educational governance.

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