
Strengthening the competitiveness of Islamic boarding schools: Strategic insights from a *pondok pesantren*

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Abstract

This study examines the strategic development of *Pondok Pesantren* Ash-Shiddiqi in strengthening institutional competitiveness within contemporary educational contexts. Using a qualitative case study design, data were collected through interviews with institutional leaders, teachers, and students. The findings reveal four key strategic dimensions: the integration of digital technology into learning, the balance between religious and general education, community and alumni engagement, and economic self-sufficiency initiatives. The adoption of iPads and digital media enhances instructional effectiveness and institutional visibility, while structured religious programs preserve the *pesantren*'s spiritual foundation. Community involvement and alumni networks contribute to institutional sustainability and reputation, and entrepreneurial activities support financial independence. These integrated strategies demonstrate how *pesantren* can adapt to modern educational demands without compromising their religious identity. The study contributes to understanding strategic management practices in Islamic boarding schools facing increasing educational competition.

Keywords

Educational innovation, Islamic boarding schools, institutional development, *pesantren* competitiveness, and strategic management

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Introduction

Pondok pesantren represent an integral component of Indonesia's national education system, offering a distinctive educational model that integrates general academic knowledge with Islamic religious teachings. Within the national framework, *pesantren* are generally categorized as non-formal educational institutions operating alongside formal schooling systems (Magfiroh et al., 2023; Ningsih et al., 2023). Historically, their existence has relied heavily on community support and leadership, resulting in diverse organizational forms and educational practices without a uniform standard structure (Rasyid, 2015; Sidiq, 2013).

As community-based private institutions, *pesantren* must continuously sustain their relevance and institutional legitimacy. However, many face significant challenges in adapting to rapid social, technological, and economic changes. Limitations in human resource regeneration and managerial capacity often result in institutional stagnation and, in some cases, decline (Mu'is, 2021). Ensuring the preparation of competent and competitive graduates has therefore become essential for maintaining the long-term sustainability of *pesantren* (Ali et al., 2022; Yusuf & Ma'sum, 2024).

Pesantren are commonly classified into two types: *salaf* (traditional) and *khalaf* (modern). *Salaf pesantren* emphasize classical Islamic texts (*kitab kuning*) and traditional pedagogical methods, whereas *khalaf pesantren* integrate Islamic teachings with modern educational systems and formal curricular structures (Amirudin et al., 2025; Hayati, 2019; Kholilah et al., 2024). Despite this distinction, all *pesantren* share core characteristics, including the central role of the *kyai*, the residential system for *santri*, and traditional instructional methods such as *weton*, *sorogan*, and *bandongan* (Silfiana, 2020). In contemporary contexts, these features increasingly coexist with formalized academic systems and structured curricula.

In the era of globalization, *pesantren* are confronted with intensified competition, technological transformation, and shifting socio-economic expectations. Advances in digital technology and increased public demand for high-quality education compel *pesantren* to enhance their managerial effectiveness and institutional competitiveness (Arief & Assya'bani, 2023; Norman et al., 2024). Modern management practices are now imperative to guarantee efficiency, quality assurance, and sustainability (Najib & Khudli, 2025). Consequently, *pesantren* must strengthen human resource development, infrastructure, financial management, and curriculum integration between religious and general education.

Previous studies have examined *pesantren* development strategies, highlighting persistent challenges such as rigid curricula, limited funding, weak branding, and insufficient professional management (Chairudin, 2017; Kadir, 2024; Yunus et al., 2019). While these studies emphasize structural and managerial constraints, limited research has examined how specific *pesantrens* implement integrated strategic approaches to enhance competitiveness in practice.

Preliminary observations indicate that *Pondok Pesantren Ash-Shiddiqi* has experienced fluctuating student enrollment over the past three academic years, increasing slightly from 769 students in 2022/2023 to 772 in 2023/2024 before declining to 686 in 2025/2026. These fluctuations suggest dynamic institutional conditions influenced by both internal management strategies and external competitive pressures. Such trends underscore the need to examine

how strategic development practices can strengthen institutional sustainability and attract prospective students.

Therefore, this study aims to analyze the strategic development and management practices implemented by *Pondok Pesantren* Ash-Shiddiiqi to strengthen its institutional competitiveness. By examining its approaches to educational innovation, organizational management, and community engagement, this research seeks to contribute to the broader discourse on strategic transformation in Indonesian *pesantrens* in response to contemporary challenges.

Literature Review

Strategic management and institutional competitiveness in pesantren

In recent years, the discourse on *pesantren* development has increasingly emphasized the importance of strategic management to enhance institutional competitiveness. [Najib and Khaulli \(2025\)](#) argue that *pesantrens* must transition from traditional, leadership-centered management to structured strategic planning to ensure sustainability in an increasingly competitive educational environment. Similarly, [Norman et al. \(2024\)](#) highlight that technology-based management systems significantly improve service quality and institutional performance in Islamic boarding schools. These studies suggest that competitiveness is not solely determined by religious authority but also by managerial professionalism, quality assurance systems, and adaptive leadership.

Furthermore, research by [Budiman et al. \(2025\)](#) demonstrate that *pesantren* competitiveness depends on effective human resource development and curriculum innovation. Institutions that successfully integrate strategic planning, staff training, and performance evaluation mechanisms tend to show higher levels of public trust and student enrollment growth. [Arief and Assya'bani \(2023\)](#) also emphasize that digital transformation plays a critical role in strengthening institutional branding and communication with stakeholders. In this context, strategic management is closely linked to institutional visibility, stakeholder engagement, and long-term sustainability.

However, despite these advancements, many *pesantren* still struggle with limited managerial capacity and insufficient long-term planning ([Faizin, 2024](#)). The absence of measurable performance indicators and structured institutional strategies often weakens their ability to compete with formal educational institutions. Therefore, contemporary literature underscores the need for *pesantren* to adopt comprehensive strategic management frameworks that integrate organizational development, innovation, and community engagement to enhance competitiveness.

Integration of religious and modern education in Islamic boarding schools

The integration of religious education into modern academic curricula has become a central theme in the transformation of *pesantrens*. [Achmadin et al. \(2024\)](#) explain that modern *pesantren* increasingly combine traditional Islamic teachings with formal education systems to produce graduates who are both spiritually grounded and academically competent. This hybrid

model reflects a broader shift toward educational pluralism, where religious institutions adapt to national and global educational standards without abandoning their identity.

Kholilah et al. (2024) further argue that the relevance of *pesantren* in the digital era depends on their ability to incorporate contemporary skills, such as digital literacy, critical thinking, and technological competence, into their curricula. Their findings indicate that *pesantrens* that integrate digital tools into learning environments experience improved student engagement and learning outcomes. Similarly, Norman et al. (2024) observe that technological adaptation enhances institutional credibility and aligns *pesantren* education with modern societal expectations.

Nevertheless, balancing religious authenticity with modernization presents challenges. Yusuf and Ma'sum (2024) note that rapid modernization may create tension between traditional pedagogical values and contemporary educational demands. Effective integration, therefore, requires careful curriculum design, strong leadership commitment, and alignment between institutional vision and educational practices. Recent studies suggest that successful *pesantren* transformation lies not in replacing tradition but in harmonizing it with innovation to create a sustainable educational model.

Community engagement, alumni networks, and economic sustainability

Community-based governance remains a defining characteristic of *pesantren* institutions. Sanusi and Anshory (2024) emphasize that community involvement significantly influences institutional legitimacy and sustainability. *Pesantren* that maintain strong relationships with local stakeholders tend to receive greater social and financial support. This aligns with Ningsih et al. (2023), who argue that *pesantren* development is deeply embedded in socio-cultural networks that reinforce institutional resilience.

Alumni networks also contribute substantially to institutional growth. Budiman et al. (2025) note that alumni engagement strengthens institutional branding, expands partnership opportunities, and enhances graduate mobility. In many cases, alumni serve as ambassadors who promote the *pesantren's* reputation at the national and international levels. Such networks not only reinforce institutional identity but also facilitate access to broader educational and professional opportunities.

Economic self-sufficiency has likewise emerged as a strategic priority in *pesantren* management. Widjanarko (2024) demonstrates that *pesantren* engaging in entrepreneurial initiatives—such as agribusiness, retail operations, and skill-based production—enhance financial stability while providing practical learning experiences for students. These initiatives reflect a shift toward sustainable institutional models that combine religious education with socio-economic empowerment. Consequently, recent literature suggests that *pesantren* competitiveness increasingly depends on integrating community support, alumni networks, and entrepreneurial innovation within a cohesive strategic framework.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore the strategic development practices implemented at *Pondok Pesantren Ash-Shiddiiqi* in strengthening institutional

competitiveness. A qualitative approach was selected because it enables an in-depth examination of complex organizational processes, leadership strategies, and educational innovations in their real-life contexts. Qualitative research is particularly appropriate when the objective is to understand participants' perspectives and contextual dynamics rather than to measure variables statistically (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). By focusing on participants' experiences and institutional practices, this approach enables a comprehensive understanding of how strategic management is conceptualized and enacted within the *pesantren* setting.

The research was conducted at *Pondok Pesantren Ash-Shiddiqi* in Jambi, Indonesia. The selection of this site was based on its observable institutional transformation and fluctuations in student enrolment over the past three academic years. These dynamics indicate active strategic efforts to maintain and enhance institutional competitiveness in response to changing educational demands. The *pesantren* provides a rich case for examining how Islamic boarding schools integrate educational innovation, community engagement, and economic initiatives within a strategic management framework.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure they had direct knowledge of the institution's development strategies. The participants included the head of the *pesantren*, the deputy head responsible for public relations and institutional development, teachers engaged in academic and extracurricular programs, and students representing different grade levels. Their involvement in decision-making processes and educational implementation made their perspectives relevant and essential to the research objectives.

Data were collected primarily through semi-structured interviews supported by document review. Semi-structured interviews provided flexibility to explore emerging issues while maintaining focus on predetermined themes such as strategic planning, technology integration, curriculum balance, community involvement, and economic self-sufficiency. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 60 minutes and was conducted face-to-face. Institutional documents, including program descriptions and 368 enrolment data, were reviewed to complement the interview findings and enhance data triangulation.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. This method involves systematically identifying, organizing, and interpreting patterns within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis began with data familiarization through the repeated reading of interview transcripts, followed by initial coding to identify meaningful units of information. These codes were then grouped into broader themes reflecting key strategic dimensions of institutional development. The themes were interpreted in relation to existing literature on strategic management and *pesantren* transformation.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, data triangulation was conducted by comparing perspectives from administrators, teachers, and students. Member checking was also employed by confirming selected interpretations with participants to enhance credibility. Ethical principles were observed throughout the research process, including obtaining informed consent and ensuring participant confidentiality by anonymizing the presentation of findings.

Findings

Strategies to foster institutional development: education, dakwah, and economic self-sufficiency

The findings from interviews with the management and students of *Pondok Pesantren Ash-Shiddiqi* reveal several strategic initiatives aimed at fostering institutional development in three main areas: education, *dakwah* (Islamic missionary work), and economic self-sufficiency. One of the most significant strategies in education is integrating modern technology into the learning process. As explained by one of the informants:

“Alhamdulillah, we have adapted to current technological developments. We use iPads for learning so that students can broaden their access to learning materials and use the internet.”

This statement demonstrates the *pesantren*'s commitment to adapting to technological advancement to improve the quality of instruction and expand students' access to learning resources. The students also acknowledged the transformative impact of this digital shift. One santri stated:

“Now we study using iPads. The biggest change has been since the pesantren started using iPads for learning. Previously, senior students carried thick printed books; now all materials are digital in one device.”

Another student added:

“Now we use iPads, something we never imagined would exist in a pesantren. It really helps make our learning process more interactive and enjoyable.”

The integration of iPads has not only facilitated access to digital materials but has also encouraged interactive learning and enhanced students' digital literacy. The implementation follows a structured progression system:

“About 80% of it has been implemented. We now have extracurricular programs, and the use of iPads is organized into levels—level 1, level 2, and level 3.”

This tiered approach reflects a systematic effort to gradually and sustainably develop students' technological competence.

Beyond education, the *pesantren* actively strengthens its *dakwah* mission through structured outreach programs. Senior students are assigned to deliver religious speeches and participate in community religious activities. As stated by the informant:

“Our students have a schedule to deliver short sermons every Friday, and once a month at a nearby junior high school.”

Additionally, students participate in religious events such as Maulid Nabi and Isra Mi'raj celebrations, and senior students join a “khidmat” program that resembles community service. Through this program, students are sent to rural villages to conduct religious teaching and community engagement activities, strengthening both their missionary competence and social responsibility. In terms of economic self-sufficiency, the *pesantren* has developed several entrepreneurial initiatives. One informant explained:

“Previously we raised cattle. Now we cultivate goats. So, if someone needs a goat for a circumcision event, they can buy it from Ash-Shiddiqi.”

In addition to livestock farming, the *pesantren* operates two minimarkets:

“Alhamdulillah, we have two minimarkets, one in the male dormitory and one in the female dormitory.”

Fish farming, particularly catfish cultivation supported by government assistance in 2017, further strengthens financial sustainability:

“We have had fish farming for a long time, since 2016–2017.”

These initiatives not only generate income but also provide students with practical training in entrepreneurship and agriculture. Students also recognized the *pesantren's* comprehensive facilities as a competitive advantage:

“This pesantren has many advantages. First, the facilities are very complete—there are basketball, futsal, and football fields, a running track, a recording studio, two minimarkets, fishponds, and goat pens.”

Moreover, the recognition of the *pesantren's* diploma has expanded students' opportunities to pursue higher education abroad, particularly in Egypt:

“Now, Alhamdulillah, we have our own recognized diploma, so students can directly continue their studies there and it is officially acknowledged.”

Overall, these findings demonstrate a comprehensive institutional strategy that integrates educational modernization, *dakwah* engagement, and economic entrepreneurship to enhance sustainability and competitiveness.

Strategies to balance religious education with modern skills

The findings also reveal deliberate efforts to balance traditional religious education with modern competencies. One informant explained:

“For learning, we use iPads. However, alongside that, we continue spiritual strengthening in our boarding supervision.”)

Religious learning remains central, as confirmed by:

“We continue to conduct classical text studies. Now the kitab study is scheduled on Saturday night.”

A student further elaborated:

“From morning until noon, we study general subjects like in regular schools. At night, we have boarding activities such as classical kitab studies and Qur’an memorization targeting 30 juz.”

Another student stated:

“Every day there is a well-structured schedule, starting with formal classes and followed by boarding activities. There are regular memorization sessions and kitab studies every Saturday night.”

Extracurricular activities further support holistic development:

“There are cooking skills programs, and both male and female students have cooking extracurricular activities to help generate funds.”

“The pesantren provides many extracurricular choices, from sports like basketball and futsal, to martial arts (IPSI and PSHT), hadrah performances, and cooking activities whose products are sometimes sold during events.”

Community engagement is reinforced through the khidmah program:

“Students in grades 9 and 12 are given opportunities similar to community service, going to villages for a week or ten days to teach children and conduct dakwah.”

Technology also strengthens institutional visibility:

“Since we use iPads, students can now create content, and Alhamdulillah, we already have a studio.”

Community and alumni support further reinforce development:

“Alhamdulillah, the community here strongly supports us. Almost all our activities are supported by the local community.”

“Alumni in the community promote the pesantren through their ideas.”

These findings demonstrate that *Pondok Pesantren Ash-Shiddiqi* strategically integrates religious tradition, technological innovation, community engagement, and entrepreneurial initiatives to build a competitive and sustainable educational institution while preserving its core Islamic identity.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that *Pondok Pesantren Ash-Shiddiqi* has implemented a multidimensional development strategy integrating technological innovation, curriculum balance, community engagement, economic entrepreneurship, and holistic student formation. These strategies reflect an adaptive institutional response to contemporary educational competition while preserving Islamic identity. The following discussion deepens the analysis of each strategic dimension in relation to current scholarship.

Integration of technology in education, one of the most significant findings is the structured integration of digital technology, particularly iPads, across both instructional and extracurricular activities. The adoption of digital tools has enhanced access to learning materials, supported interactive pedagogy, and enabled students to engage in content creation. Norman et al. (2024) argue that technological transformation strengthens institutional quality and competitiveness in Islamic education. Similarly, Hartono (2021) notes that the modernization of *pesantren* increasingly depends on strategic digital adaptation to meet global educational standards.

Unlike many *pesantren* that struggle with technological infrastructure and teacher readiness (Yunus et al., 2019), Ash-Shiddiqi has implemented a tiered system of digital literacy development. This structured approach reflects deliberate institutional planning rather than symbolic modernization. Najib and Khandli (2025) emphasize that strategic management frameworks are essential to ensure that innovation produces a sustainable impact rather than a temporary change.

Moreover, integrating iPads contributes not only to academic improvement but also to institutional branding and visibility. Students' ability to produce digital content and disseminate activities via social media strengthens external engagement and public trust. However, the sustainability of such integration requires continuous teacher training, guidance on digital ethics, and investment in infrastructure. Without these supporting mechanisms, technological adoption may risk becoming performative rather than transformative. Therefore, Ash-

Shiddiiqi's experience illustrates how technology, when embedded within strategic planning, can enhance competitiveness without undermining religious values.

Balancing religious education and general knowledge, the findings demonstrate that Ash-Shiddiiqi successfully balances religious education with general academic subjects through structured scheduling and curriculum alignment. Students engage in mathematics, science, and language studies during the day while participating in Quran memorization, classical kitab studies, and spiritual supervision at night. This dual model aligns with Arifin's (2018) assertion that *pesantren* play a crucial role in integrating religious and secular knowledge to prepare students for modern challenges.

Previous research indicates that some *pesantren* face difficulty maintaining this balance, often prioritizing traditional religious instruction over academic competitiveness (Rahardjo, 2020). In contrast, Ash-Shiddiiqi's approach reflects a conscious effort to produce graduates who are both spiritually grounded and academically capable. Yusuf and Ma'sum (2024) emphasize that parental expectations increasingly favor institutions that combine strong religious identity with formal academic excellence.

Additionally, the inclusion of extracurricular programs such as sports, martial arts, cooking, and creative arts strengthens holistic development. Kholilah et al. (2024) argue that modern Islamic educational institutions must cultivate life skills, collaboration, and creativity alongside doctrinal understanding. By integrating structured religious instruction with contemporary competencies, Ash-Shiddiiqi demonstrates that tradition and modernization are not mutually exclusive. Instead, they can function synergistically to enhance institutional relevance and graduate competitiveness in both religious and secular spheres.

Community involvement and alumni support, community engagement emerges as a central pillar of institutional sustainability. The findings show that local community members actively support religious programs, social events, and institutional initiatives. Sanusi and Anshory (2024) highlight that community trust functions as social capital that reinforces institutional resilience, particularly in community-based educational models such as *pesantren*. Ash-Shiddiiqi's strong local support indicates effective stakeholder relationship management. Alumni involvement further strengthens institutional reputation and strategic networking. Budiman et al. (2025) argue that alumni networks serve as symbolic and practical capital that expands institutional visibility and partnership opportunities. The ability of Ash-Shiddiiqi graduates to pursue further studies in Egypt enhances institutional credibility and demonstrates the success of its certification system.

Beyond symbolic recognition, alumni also contribute to promotional strategies and program development. Syafa'at et al. (2021) emphasize that alumni engagement enhances institutional sustainability through mentorship, advocacy, and resource mobilization. However, sustaining alumni involvement requires structured communication channels and long-term relationship management. Without systematic coordination, alumni contributions may remain informal and underutilized. Thus, Ash-Shiddiiqi's strategic inclusion of alumni reflects an understanding that competitiveness is reinforced not only internally but also through external relational networks.

Economic self-sufficiency and entrepreneurial strategy, economic self-sufficiency represents another strategic dimension of institutional competitiveness. The *pesantren's* initiatives in livestock farming, fish cultivation, minimarkets, and skill-based entrepreneurship demonstrate

diversification of income sources. Kadir (2024) argues that entrepreneurial education in *pesantren* enhances both institutional sustainability and student empowerment. The findings confirm that economic activities at Ash-Shiddiqi serve both as revenue-generating mechanisms and experiential learning platforms.

While Yunus et al. (2019) found that many *pesantren* struggle to sustain economic ventures due to limited managerial expertise, Ash-Shiddiqi appears to integrate entrepreneurship into broader strategic planning. This supports Adhikari and Shrestha's (2023) argument that institutional transformation requires coordinated development across managerial, financial, and educational sectors.

Economic diversification also reduces dependency on tuition fees and external funding, thereby strengthening institutional autonomy. However, sustainability depends on professional management, market analysis, and risk assessment. Without systematic evaluation, entrepreneurial initiatives may face stagnation. The case of Ash-Shiddiqi suggests that embedding entrepreneurship within educational values—rather than treating it as a separate business activity—creates a more resilient and educationally meaningful model of institutional development.

Holistic student development, Ash-Shiddiqi's overall strategy reflects a holistic educational philosophy that integrates intellectual, spiritual, social, and practical competencies. Students are exposed to structured academic learning, religious discipline, community service (374nrolme), digital literacy, and entrepreneurial engagement. Baharuddin (2022) argues that holistic development prepares students to navigate modern complexities while maintaining moral integrity.

This integrated approach suggests that *pesantren* competitiveness extends beyond academic indicators or enrolment numbers. Instead, it involves producing adaptable graduates, socially responsible, and spiritually grounded. Such a model responds to contemporary societal expectations, where educational institutions are evaluated not only by academic achievement but also by character formation and real-world competence.

Furthermore, holistic programming strengthens institutional identity by reinforcing shared values and collective responsibility. However, maintaining balance among multiple developmental domains requires consistent leadership, structured evaluation, and long-term vision. Without strategic coordination, holistic initiatives risk fragmentation. Ash-Shiddiqi's integrated model demonstrates how *pesantren* can remain faithful to their religious mission while adopting innovative practices that ensure sustainability and relevance in a competitive educational landscape.

Conclusion

This study explored the strategic development practices implemented at *Pondok Pesantren* Ash-Shiddiqi to strengthen institutional competitiveness in a contemporary educational context. The findings indicate that the *pesantren* has adopted an integrated strategy combining technological innovation, balanced curriculum management, community engagement, alumni networking, and economic entrepreneurship. These dimensions work collectively to enhance institutional sustainability while maintaining the *pesantren's* core Islamic identity.

The integration of digital technology, particularly through structured iPad-based learning, demonstrates the institution's commitment to adapting to modern educational demands. At the same time, a balanced approach to religious and general academic subjects ensures that students develop both spiritual depth and academic competence. Extracurricular programs and community-based initiatives further support holistic student development, fostering leadership, social responsibility, and practical life skills.

Economic self-sufficiency initiatives, including livestock farming, retail services, and skill-based entrepreneurship, strengthen financial independence and provide experiential learning opportunities for students. Strong community support and active alumni involvement also contribute to institutional credibility and long-term resilience.

Overall, the case of *Pondok Pesantren* Ash-Shiddiqi illustrates that *pesantren* competitiveness depends on the ability to harmonize tradition and innovation within a coherent strategic framework. This study contributes to the discourse on *pesantren* transformation by emphasizing the importance of strategic management and adaptive leadership in ensuring institutional relevance and sustainability in the 21st century.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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