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Cultural Legitimacy, Tiered Quality Structures, and Digital Traceability: Operationalizing the PPEPP Cycle for SDG 4 in Pesantren-Affiliated Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To investigate how pesantren-affiliated private Islamic higher education institutions operationalize internal quality assurance through the PPEPP cycle while sustaining culturally embedded religious identities and contributing to Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4). **Method:** A descriptive qualitative multisite case study was conducted at Universitas Ibrahimy Situbondo, Universitas Nurul Jadid Probolinggo, and Universitas Darussalam Gontor Ponorogo. Data were generated through in-depth interviews with 21 purposively selected institutional actors, moderate participant observation of audit and management-review processes, and analysis of quality-assurance regulations, audit manuals, and corrective-action records. Cross-case analysis combined data condensation, comparative displays, and pattern matching. **Results:** The analysis identified five interlocking mechanisms: culturally legitimate translation of quality standards through itqan, amanah, and khidmah; tiered quality structures connecting university, faculty, and study-program levels; contextualized execution of the PPEPP cycle; introspective internal audits linked to closed-loop management reviews and resource allocation; and digital platforms that strengthen evidence traceability. Three governance configurations emerged: adaptive-traditional (UNIB), standardization-integrative (UNUJA), and total-integrative (UNIDA). **Novelty:** The study advances a Techno-Spiritual Quality Assurance Model that explains how faith-based universities can reduce ceremonial compliance by coupling regulatory standards with cultural legitimacy, distributed quality governance, and digitally verifiable evidence trails.

INTRODUCTION

Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) places equitable access to high-quality tertiary education at the center of the global education agenda (United Nations, 2015; Wells, 2018). This mandate has become increasingly consequential as worldwide higher-education participation has expanded from approximately 99.5 million students in 2000 to more than 200 million in recent years, intensifying pressure on institutions to safeguard academic standards, institutional integrity, and social relevance (Altbach & Forest, 2006; Wells, 2018). In emerging economies, private institutions absorb a substantial share of this expansion, including demand from socioeconomically marginalized and geographically peripheral populations (Bloom & Rosovsky, 2006; Kinser & Levy, 2006). Expansion without robust internal quality mechanisms, however, can generate institutional strain and weaken the relationship between increased access and educational quality (Eaton, 2023; El-Khawas, 2006).

This challenge is particularly salient in Indonesian Islamic higher education, where private institutions constitute the dominant organizational form. National Education Management Information System (EMIS) data record 1,001 Islamic higher-education institutions, of which only 59 (6%) are public and 942 (94%) are private (Perguruan Tinggi Keagamaan Islam Swasta, PTKIS). In East Java, 175 of 204 PTKIS (85.78%) are physically, socially, or administratively embedded in pondok pesantren. Consequently, progress