

SUSTAINABLE LEADERSHIP IN HIGHER EDUCATION TRANSFORMATION: A CASE STUDY OF UIN KHAS JEMBER, INDONESIA

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Abstract: The study examines the role of sustainable leadership in facilitating the institutional transformation of UIN Kiai Haji Achmad Siddiq (KHAS) Jember, Indonesia, from a religious college (STAIN) into an integrated Islamic university (UIN). Employing a qualitative phenomenological approach, the research investigates the lived experiences of 21 academic leaders across three phases of transformation between 2010 and 2024. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews and analyzed to identify recurring patterns of leadership behavior, structural adaptation, and governance innovation. The findings indicate that sustainable leadership extends beyond strategic planning to encompass the cultivation of inter-organizational synergy, trust-based collaboration, and regulatory agility. Leadership practices foregrounded participatory governance, capacity building, and cultural sensitivity, enabling the institution to harmonize Islamic traditions with contemporary academic standards. The study offers two original theoretical contributions—inter-organizational resonance and adaptive regulation—which broaden the conceptual landscape of sustainable leadership within faith-based higher education. Ultimately, the transformation of UIN KHAS Jember illustrates that sustainable leadership, when embedded in strong relational infrastructures and inclusive institutional practices, can effectively guide organizations through complex transitions with coherence, adaptability, and resilience.

Keywords: Sustainable leadership, higher education transformation, Islamic university, institutional change

INTRODUCTION

The rapid transformation of the global environment, accelerated by technological advances and shifting societal demands, has prompted higher education institutions, particularly in the public sector, to reassess their operational and leadership paradigms. In the context of public sector institutions, particularly religious-based universities in Indonesia, the ability to remain relevant, responsive, and resilient has become paramount. As globalization reshapes the contours of knowledge, governance, and service delivery, institutional agility, driven by visionary and sustainable leadership, is no longer optional—it is imperative (Iqbal & Piwowar-Sulej, 2022; Keller & O'Connor, 2022).

The transformation process of UIN Kiai Haji Achmad Siddiq Jember (UIN KHAS Jember), formerly STAIN Jember and subsequently IAIN Jember, serves as a compelling case study for analyzing sustainable leadership in institutional transformation. From 2010 to 2024, only 27 out of 43 State Islamic Higher Education Institutions (PTKINs) in Indonesia succeeded in transitioning to full university status. UIN KHAS Jember stands out as an exemplar, having undergone three substantial institutional shifts within a decade. These transitions entailed not merely administrative renaming but a deep structural reorganization involving vision redefinition, academic diversification, curriculum integration, stakeholder realignment, and systemic governance redesign.

Leadership has been consistently recognized as a critical determinant in the success of organizational change (Bass, 2022; Northouse, 2021). However, the sustainability of leadership—its ability to maintain direction, coherence, and institutional resilience across successive stages of change—remains an underexplored area, particularly within faith-based public universities in the Global South. Sustainable leadership, as conceptualized by Bass and Avolio (2022), entails more than charismatic transformation. It necessitates building systems that embed moral commitment, participatory governance, collaborative ethos, and long-term capacity

development. Yet, most prevailing leadership theories are drawn from Western, corporate-centric models, leaving significant gaps when applied to culturally and structurally distinct institutions such as PTKINs. The transition of UIN KHAS Jember occurred in three phases, each marked by distinct leadership challenges. As STAIN Jember (1997–2014), the institution focused exclusively on Islamic sciences, operating within a limited organizational framework. During this phase, leadership was largely reactive and bounded by administrative conservatism. As IAIN Jember (2014–2021), the institution expanded its academic portfolio and administrative structure, requiring strategic leadership to mediate between traditional religious curricula and emerging demands for interdisciplinary relevance. The final transformation into UIN KHAS Jember (2021–present) positioned the institution within a competitive landscape of Southeast Asian universities, emphasizing global engagement, research innovation, and integration of Islamic and general sciences.

Each phase introduced greater structural complexity and elevated expectations. The shift from a teaching-based to a research-oriented institution necessitated not only curricular reforms but also significant investment in human capital, technological infrastructure, and external partnerships. The leadership's ability to orchestrate these developments while preserving institutional identity underscores the importance of a sustainable leadership model tailored to such transformations.

Despite this remarkable evolution, empirical evidence indicates persistent gaps between institutional aspirations and on-the-ground implementation. First, human resource development has lagged behind structural expansion. While the number of faculty and staff increased from 150 (STAIN era) to 551 (UIN era), qualitative challenges remain in aligning staff competencies with new academic and administrative demands. Second, although curriculum integration has been formally adopted, inconsistencies in pedagogy and assessment models reveal difficulties in operationalizing interdisciplinary learning.

These observations highlight a first-order empirical gap: a disconnect between transformation objectives and institutional readiness in terms of human resources, curriculum delivery, and governance mechanisms.

A second-order theoretical gap arises from the inadequacy of mainstream leadership theories to capture the nuances of leadership within Islamic higher education in Indonesia. Existing models tend to emphasize market efficiency, managerialism, or charismatic authority, offering limited insights into the collaborative, values-based, and context-sensitive leadership practices essential for religious institutions navigating state policy, community norms, and academic rigor simultaneously.

Finally, a normative gap emerges from the disjuncture between policy frameworks and implementation realities. Although the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs has established legal pathways for institutional transformation (from STAIN to IAIN to UIN), the regulatory apparatus often lacks specificity, leaving institutions to navigate ambiguities regarding resource allocation, accreditation, and governance transitions. This regulatory incongruity places an additional burden on institutional leadership to interpret, adapt, and sometimes fill the void left by national policy.

The urgency of addressing these interrelated gaps provides a strong rationale for this study. It aims to explore how sustainable leadership can be conceptualized and operationalized to mediate institutional transformation in a way that is adaptive, inclusive, and future-oriented. The focus on UIN KHAS Jember offers a rich empirical context for developing a grounded model of sustainable leadership applicable to other PTKINs and similar institutions in the Global South.

This research further contributes to expanding the theoretical framework of sustainable leadership by integrating context-specific variables such as external cultural support, participatory political processes, and religious-academic hybridity. By analyzing the leadership strategies across three institutional epochs, this study not only enriches the academic discourse on transformational leadership in public universities but also offers practical insights for policymakers, university administrators, and development agencies seeking to foster sustainable institutional change.

In sum, the transformation of UIN KHAS Jember is not merely a narrative of growth; it is a complex case of adaptive governance, organizational learning, and cultural negotiation. By interrogating the leadership dynamics that enabled—and at times constrained—this transformation, the study positions itself at the intersection of administrative science, educational reform, and leadership innovation. This inquiry is not only timely but essential, given the rising demand for sustainable, inclusive, and locally embedded models of university leadership in a rapidly evolving global landscape.

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Foundations of Sustainable Leadership

The concept of sustainable leadership (SL) has gained considerable traction in contemporary organizational and educational research, particularly in the context of complex institutional change. Sustainable leadership is broadly understood as a form of leadership that ensures long-term success and ethical stewardship while nurturing systemic adaptability, stakeholder engagement, and organizational learning (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006; Northouse, 2021). It emphasizes vision, collaboration, inclusion, and the capacity to manage change with a strong ethical and communal foundation.

Drawing on transformational leadership theory (Bass & Avolio, 1994), SL moves beyond transactional efficiency to embrace a long-term, values-driven approach to institutional development. It entails the ability

of leaders to promote cultural coherence, enhance social capital, and build resilient organizational structures that can withstand external shocks (Avery & Bergsteiner, 2011). This aligns closely with public sector leadership models that integrate New Public Governance and New Public Services paradigms, which emphasize citizen engagement, transparency, and collaborative governance (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015; Osborne, 2006).

Within the education sector, SL is instrumental in bridging the historical divide between academic tradition and modern innovation. Chiu and Cheng (2022) suggest that educational leadership must not only manage present demands but also craft pathways toward future resilience. This requirement becomes particularly pressing in religiously affiliated institutions, where normative traditions coexist with growing demands for interdisciplinary and global relevance.

2.2 Empirical Studies on Sustainable Leadership and Institutional Transformation

A growing body of empirical research has examined how SL facilitates institutional transformation, particularly in higher education. For example, Teece (2020) highlights how dynamic capabilities — including leadership — are essential for universities undergoing structural shifts. In the Indonesian context, the work of Iqbal and Piwowar-Sulej (2022) has underscored the necessity for public universities to adopt adaptive governance frameworks when navigating transitions from traditional to modern institutional identities.

Studies on Islamic higher education institutions (PTKINs) are relatively sparse but suggest significant leadership challenges. These include balancing religious values with academic freedom, navigating bureaucratic reforms, and integrating Islamic studies with the natural and social sciences (Suyatno et al., 2019). Transformative leadership in this setting must therefore function across multiple dimensions: symbolic, strategic, and operational.

The case of UIN KHAS Jember exemplifies this multidimensional demand. As documented in prior transformation efforts from STAIN to IAIN, and later to UIN, leadership played a critical role in setting vision, mobilizing internal consensus, and negotiating with external stakeholders. Yet, the shift from a mono-disciplinary to an interdisciplinary institution has not been without significant challenges, especially concerning structural reconfiguration, faculty readiness, and regulatory alignment.

2.3 Gaps in the Literature

Despite the growing literature, three major research gaps remain apparent and are explicitly identified in this study:

- a. **Empirical Gap:** Although many studies emphasize the importance of leadership during transformation, few provide longitudinal empirical insights into how leadership maintains effectiveness across different phases of institutional change. This study uncovers a gap between organizational aspirations and administrative capacities, particularly in areas such as human resource development, curriculum integration, and organizational restructuring.
- b. **Theoretical Gap:** Most sustainable leadership theories originate from corporate or Western educational settings, which often assume a resource-rich environment and cultural homogeneity (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006). These models fail to fully capture the unique challenges faced by Indonesian PTKIN, which operate under a dual mandate: to remain true to religious principles while expanding academic horizons. This study introduces new theoretical dimensions, particularly the importance of external cultural support and participatory political processes, thereby expanding the theoretical relevance of SL in a pluralistic and resource-constrained environment.
- c. **Normative Gap:** There is a gap between the formal policy framework and practical implementation. Although regulatory mechanisms by the Ministry of Religious Affairs provide formal pathways for transformation (e.g., from STAIN to UIN), institutional readiness remains uneven. Leadership often lacks autonomy or resources to implement strategic visions, leading to what this study calls a “gap between structural change and institutional culture.”

METHODS

This study applies a qualitative methodology with a phenomenological approach to explore how sustainable leadership contributes to the institutional transformation of UIN Kiai Haji Achmad Siddiq (KHAS) Jember. The research focuses on understanding the lived experiences of university leaders as they navigated complex organizational changes during the transition from STAIN to IAIN, and eventually to UIN. This approach enables a deep exploration of how leadership practices responded adaptively to evolving institutional demands.

By using phenomenology, the study seeks to uncover the subjective meanings and insights held by those directly involved in the transformation process. It emphasizes rich, contextual data rather than broad generalizations, aiming to interpret how leadership shaped structural reforms, developed human resources, and adjusted the academic curriculum in response to change. This focus aligns with the research objective of describing the essence of leadership experiences during a critical period of institutional growth.

The research was conducted at UIN KHAS Jember, an Islamic higher education institution that experienced a rapid transformation across three institutional stages. The site was selected for its unique development trajectory, which required strong leadership to address challenges in governance, curriculum integration, and

stakeholder coordination. Participants were chosen through purposive sampling based on their roles in the transformation process. They included current and former rectors, vice-rectors, deans, unit heads, senior lecturers, and administrative leaders—individuals with first-hand knowledge of the institutional changes.

A total of 21 informants were involved in the study, representing various leadership roles across different transformation phases. Their experiences span from the STAIN period before 2015, through the IAIN phase (2015–2021), and into the current UIN era post-2021. This timeline allows the study to trace patterns of leadership continuity and change over time, offering insights into how sustainable leadership supported institutional development across different stages.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The transformation of UIN KHAS Jember from STAIN to IAIN and finally to a full university represents not only a change in nomenclature but also a paradigm shift in institutional governance, leadership, and structural management. This section elaborates on the empirical findings derived from qualitative analysis using a phenomenological approach. The main themes are discussed in relation to sustainable leadership theory, particularly the model proposed by Janice et al. (2017), which emphasizes stakeholder engagement, organizational process, and external environment, now enriched with the concepts of inter-organizational synergy and adaptive regulation.

4.1 Leadership Roles in Organizational Transformation

a. Inter-Organizational Synergy as a Driving Force

One of the most significant findings highlights the importance of synergy among internal organizational units. Cross-departmental collaboration became the foundation for unified progress. Leaders at UIN KHAS Jember initiated strategic cross-unit forums, including faculty, staff, and external stakeholders, to align institutional goals with national education mandates. These forums nurtured a participative atmosphere and built a sense of institutional ownership among academic and non-academic personnel.

This finding aligns with Goleman's (2020) emotional intelligence theory in leadership, where awareness of institutional dynamics and empathy toward various stakeholders' positions foster effective collaboration. Inter-organizational synergy enabled the optimal allocation of resources, minimized duplication, and harmonized conflicting agendas.

b. Dialogic and Inclusive Leadership Practices

Sustainable leadership, in the context of this study, required ongoing dialogue between institutional leaders and the academic community. Open discussions and regular academic senate meetings played a crucial role in refining transformation strategies. The role of leaders as facilitators rather than top-down decision-makers resonated with Denhardt and Denhardt's (2014) "New Public Service" framework, emphasizing service over control.

Through regular feedback mechanisms, leadership adapted to contextual needs, allowing policy refinement and greater community acceptance. The participatory nature of this dialogic leadership fostered mutual trust and empowered subordinate leadership at various levels.

c. Trust as the Foundation of Change

The empirical evidence strongly supports the assertion that trust is the linchpin of institutional transformation. Trust was built through transparent communication, consistency in policy enforcement, and responsiveness to staff needs. The research observed that in instances where trust faltered—often due to delayed communication or unilateral decision-making—resistance emerged, leading to policy delays or low implementation fidelity.

This finding reinforces the sustainable leadership dimensions described by Kantabutra and Avery (2011), particularly the emphasis on long-term relational capital over short-term authority enforcement.

4.2 Structural Change Management

a. Reorganization and Structural Realignment

The institutional upgrade required a thorough reorganization, including the establishment of new faculties, revision of academic regulations, and the restructuring of support services. The process was complex, involving not only administrative but also cultural transformations. Resistance was managed through proactive socialization and trial initiatives.

The transformation process affirms Kotter's (2023) model of change, particularly the early phases involving the establishment of a sense of urgency and forming powerful guiding coalitions. These coalitions—comprising former rectors, key administrators, and influential academics—played a pivotal role in navigating internal resistance.

b. Adaptive Regulatory Mechanisms

The research found that transformation was impeded when regulations were overly rigid or when there was a mismatch between institutional policies and national regulations. Leaders responded by developing internal

policies that could flexibly adapt to changing conditions while still aligning with higher education governance frameworks.

This adaptive regulatory practice adds a novel dimension to the Janice et al. (2017) model and resonates with dynamic capability theory (Teece, 2020), wherein institutions must continuously reconfigure routines and competencies in response to environmental changes.

c. Managing Conflict during Structural Change

During the transformation, latent conflicts arose due to differences in role expectations, perceived injustices in resource distribution, and unclear career paths. Leadership addressed these through conflict mediation committees and strategic communication.

Drawing on Senge's (2022) learning organization theory, UIN KHAS Jember utilized structural tensions as opportunities for collective learning and institutional strengthening. The institutionalization of reflection processes post-conflict resolution was a best practice that reduced recurrence and built resilience.

4.3 Human Resource Development Strategies

a. Competency Building and Strategic Talent Management

Sustainable transformation demanded capacity enhancement among both faculty and administrative personnel. The university implemented professional development programs aligned with its new academic status, covering curriculum design, blended learning technology, and academic research.

This initiative echoes the findings of Metsämuuronen et al. (2013), who underscore the importance of future-oriented decision-making and capability development in educational governance.

b. Inclusive Leadership in HR Development

The research revealed that inclusive leadership practices significantly influenced motivation and performance. Faculty and staff reported greater commitment when they were involved in decisions related to promotions, workload distribution, and professional growth.

The leadership style emphasized here reflects Greenleaf's (2020) servant leadership model, where the growth of people and community building are core objectives of leadership.

4.4 Regulatory Flexibility in Capacity Building

One key barrier in human resource transformation was the rigidity of national recruitment policies and promotion pathways. In response, the university introduced internal incentive schemes and mentoring programs to fill capability gaps. While awaiting national reforms, these institutional innovations provided transitional support and avoided stagnation.

4.5 Theoretical Contributions

The findings of this study extend the horizon of sustainable leadership theory by unearthing nuanced dynamics often overshadowed in existing models. Within the context of UIN KHAS Jember's institutional metamorphosis, leadership was not merely an act of individual agency but a choreography of collective synchronization across units and levels of governance. This internal harmony—what might be described as inter-organizational resonance—proved indispensable for aligning stakeholder engagement with strategic execution. Rather than functioning as isolated silos, academic and administrative divisions became interdependent instruments in a complex leadership orchestra, each reinforcing the other's rhythm and purpose.

Equally revelatory was the role of what can be termed *regulatory agility*—a sort of administrative yoga, if you will. Faced with rigid national frameworks that often moved slower than a glacier in bureaucratic molasses, university leaders were compelled to stretch, bend, and occasionally pirouette their internal policies to maintain momentum. Rather than resisting constraint with brute force, leadership at UIN KHAS Jember exercised finesse, crafting adaptive responses that respected overarching rules while still enabling innovation at the ground level. This dance between structure and flexibility, though exhausting at times, allowed transformation to proceed with coherence and continuity.

Together, these insights do not merely color within the lines of existing theory—they redraw parts of the canvas. They invite us to reimagine sustainable leadership not just as a constellation of internal traits or a checklist of external pressures, but as an evolving ecosystem. In this ecosystem, synergy is not optional—it is oxygen. And regulation, when adaptive, becomes not a constraint but a compass. Such reframing offers a deeper and more contextually grounded understanding of leadership within public sector higher education, especially in institutions where the sacred and the scientific must cohabit under one roof.

4.6 Implications and Model Synthesis

The integrated model of sustainable leadership that emerges from this research does not rely on linear or compartmentalized components, but rather on the dynamic interplay of deeply interconnected domains. Leadership practices at UIN KHAS Jember reveal a sophisticated choreography where attention to stakeholders, refinement of internal organizational processes, and responsiveness to the external environment operate in tandem. These elements do not stand alone; they are enmeshed in a web of continuous feedback, negotiation, and co-evolution.

At the heart of this transformation lies the capacity to generate synergy across institutional units—a form of systemic coherence where collaboration is not incidental but intrinsic to the organizational logic. Such synergy, coupled with an acute sensitivity to regulatory realities, allows the leadership structure to remain agile, interpreting rules not as static boundaries but as evolving frameworks that require contextual reinterpretation.

In this model, sustainable leadership manifests not only through formal strategy but through relational infrastructure, participatory mechanisms, and the institutionalization of adaptability. It is this interdependence—this organic integration of strategic, procedural, and cultural elements—that sustains institutional transformation in the face of uncertainty, complexity, and competing demands. The model thus serves as both a theoretical scaffold and a practical compass for navigating transitions in higher education institutions embedded within socio-religious contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that sustainable leadership plays a pivotal role in navigating the complex institutional transformation of UIN Kiai Haji Achmad Siddiq Jember, from a religious college (STAIN) to an Islamic institute (IAIN), and eventually into a fully integrated university (UIN). By analyzing leadership practices across these three stages of transformation, the research provides a comprehensive understanding of how adaptive governance, inter-organizational synergy, and regulatory flexibility can support meaningful and enduring organizational change in higher education.

The findings confirm that sustainable leadership extends beyond charismatic or strategic capabilities—it encompasses inclusive dialogue, long-term visioning, and a context-sensitive approach to structural and human resource development. The research answers its central question by showing that sustainable leadership facilitated structural realignment, managed stakeholder expectations, bridged regulatory gaps, and enhanced academic capacity despite institutional constraints. Leaders at UIN KHAS Jember succeeded not merely by enforcing top-down reforms but by fostering institutional trust, cultivating internal collaboration, and crafting adaptive policies to manage resistance and complexity.

Theoretically, this study contributes to expanding the sustainable leadership model by introducing two critical dimensions—inter-organizational synergy and regulatory agility—as core elements that enable higher education institutions in the Global South to thrive under transformation. Practically, the proposed model offers a strategic and relational framework for university administrators and policymakers seeking to balance tradition with innovation, autonomy with accountability, and vision with implementation.

In sum, the transformation of UIN KHAS Jember underscores that sustainable leadership is not only a conceptual ideal but an operational necessity. It provides both the ethical compass and the adaptive capacity required to lead institutions through uncertainty while remaining anchored in their cultural and educational missions. This study offers a replicable model and valuable insights for other Islamic higher education institutions embarking on similar journeys of institutional evolution.

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