

Balancing Religious Identity and Globalization: Leadership Motivations for Internationalization in Indonesian Islamic Universities

Ririn Syahrani

Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris, Universitas Muhammadiyah Kendari,
Indonesia

Email: ririn@umkendari.ac.id

*Naskah diserahkan: 22-03-2025;
Direvisi: 24-04-2025;
Diterima: 28-04-2025;*

ABSTRACT: Internationalisation of higher education is often associated with efforts to improve quality, build a global reputation, and comply with national policies. However, internationalisation has a distinct push at Islamic-based universities. This qualitative study aims to reveal the motivations of the leaders of two Islamic universities, each of which represents a state or private status, in their pursuit of the internationalisation agenda. To maintain ethical standards, these institutions will be designated as Tulip University and Rose University. Data were collected via semi-structured interviews with seven leaders from both universities directly involved in the formulation of internationalisation policies. The study's findings indicate that Tulip University views internationalisation as a strategy to establish a positive image of Muslims in a global context and as a component of the Islamic da'wah mission. In contrast, Rose University emphasises the importance of compliance with national policies and accreditation standards as key factors influencing international engagement. Both universities consider institutional reputation a strategic element in enhancing their global presence, despite their differing historical backgrounds and orientations. The findings indicate that the Islamic higher education's internationalisation is driven not only by academic or economic considerations but also by the ideological and religious values inherent to the institution's identity.

Keywords: Drive for Internationalization, Indonesian Higher Education, Internationalization of Higher education, Islamic Higher Education.

ABSTRAK: Internasionalisasi pendidikan tinggi kerap dikaitkan dengan peningkatan mutu, reputasi global, dan kepatuhan terhadap kebijakan nasional. Namun, dalam konteks universitas berbasis Islam, internasionalisasi juga memiliki dimensi ideologis yang khas. Penelitian ini merupakan studi kualitatif dengan pendekatan studi kasus yang bertujuan untuk mengkaji motivasi para pemimpin dua universitas Islam di Indonesia dalam merumuskan strategi internasionalisasi. Kedua institusi yang menjadi fokus kajian ini, yang dalam tulisan ini disebut sebagai Universitas Rose dan Universitas Tulip, mewakili sektor negeri dan swasta serta mencerminkan pendekatan yang berbeda dalam merespons dinamika global. Data diperoleh melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur dengan tujuh pemimpin universitas yang terlibat langsung dalam perumusan kebijakan internasionalisasi. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Universitas Tulip memaknai internasionalisasi sebagai bagian dari misi dakwah Islam sekaligus strategi untuk membangun citra positif umat Muslim dalam konteks global. Sementara itu, Universitas Rose menekankan pentingnya kepatuhan terhadap kebijakan nasional dan standar akreditasi sebagai pendorong utama keterlibatan internasional. Meskipun memiliki latar kelembagaan dan orientasi yang berbeda, kedua universitas sama-sama memandang reputasi institusional sebagai aspek strategis dalam memperkuat posisi di tingkat global. Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa internasionalisasi di perguruan tinggi Islam tidak semata

didorong oleh logika akademik atau ekonomi, melainkan juga oleh nilai-nilai ideologis dan keagamaan yang melekat pada identitas institusi.

Kata Kunci: *Internasionalisasi Pendidikan Tinggi, Kepemimpinan, Motivasi Internasionalisasi, Universitas Islam.*

INTRODUCTION

Internationalisation of the higher education (IHE) is defined Knight (2004, p.2) as "the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions, or delivery of post-secondary education." This definition has been widely cited by scholars investigating the same topic all over the world. Nowadays, IHE has become a defining strategy for universities worldwide, enhancing academic quality, institutional reputation, and global competitiveness (De Wit, 2019; Knight, 2008). Global discussions on this subject indicate that internationalisation has functioned as a vehicle to elevate the quality of higher education, raise institutional reputes, and bolster global competitiveness (De Wit, 2002a; Knight, 2008). Researchers have extensively studied this phenomenon from diverse perspectives, notably economic rationales (Hudson, 2016), academic enrichment (Hunter et al., 2023), and policy-driven imperatives (Mäkinen, 2023). Nevertheless, predominant analyses have primarily focused on secular institutions or Western contexts, thereby marginalising alternative institutional types and contexts (Tight, 2022).

One dimension of IHE that is still rarely explored by researchers in this discourse is the practice of internationalization in religion-based universities (Stevenson, 2014). While some studies have uncovered IHE practices at some Christian universities and their religion-based strategies (De Wit et al., 2018; Edwards, 2024; Hwang, 2018), Islamic higher education institutions, particularly in non-Western contexts, remain comparatively unexplored. Islamic universities, characterised by dual educational and religious mandates, may approach internationalisation with distinct motivations and strategic orientations, potentially integrating religious identity and institutional mission into their global engagement (Sumiati, Tekke, & Java, 2024). Examining these particular motivations provides significant new perspectives on how religious elements interact with traditional internationalisation justifications like policy-driven expectations, academic aspirations, and financial incentives.

Indonesia offers an interesting context for examining the practice of internationalisation in Islamic higher education due to the considerable diversity within the governing structures of its Islamic universities. Islamic universities in Indonesia comprise both public and private institutions; state Islamic universities are governed by the Ministry of Religious Affairs, whereas private Islamic universities are under the Ministry of Research and Higher Education. These institutional disparities enhance the autonomy and fiscal robustness of these campuses. Private institutions possess comparatively greater autonomy than public universities. In this context, state Islamic colleges carefully match their educational efforts with national education programs, alongside well defined religious objectives. In financial terms, private Islamic universities must

independently cover operational costs, whereas state universities receive funding from the government (Kafid & Rohman, 2018).. These disparities profoundly influence their approach to and execution of internationalisation, particularly in harmonising religious objectives with wider scholarly and policy frameworks

In Indonesia, research concerning the internationalisation of higher education demonstrates a year-on-year growth in quantity. My search for the keyword "internationalisation of education in Indonesia" reveals that study on International Higher Education (IHE) commenced in the latest 2000s, and now, Google Scholar lists 14 pages of IHE research. The examined dimensions of internationalisation are varied, encompassing internationalisation strategies (Baskoro, 2011; Daeng Pawero, 2016; Fuadi, 2016), the impact of internationalisation on the higher education landscape in Indonesia (Gaus & Hall, 2017; Soepriyanti, 2016), challenges of international higher education (Soejatminah, 2009), discourse surrounding international higher education in Indonesia (Cahyadi., 2017), the Internationalisation Curriculum (Assegaf, Zainiyah, & Fahmi, 2022; Sakhiyya, 2018; Susilawati et al., 2025), and the challenges faced by international students (Syahriani & Sain, 2025). There are still few who investigate the perspectives of institutional leaders, particularly from Islamic universities. Consequently, Critical understanding of how these leaders view the importance and goals of internationalisation, as well as how they manage the conflict between their institutional reputation, policy commitments, and religious identity, is thus still lacking. Thus, addressing this gap is crucial for a thorough comprehension of the complex and diverse aspects of internationalisation in Indonesian Islamic higher education.

This study seeks explicitly to examine the motivations and strategic considerations of university leaders at two Indonesian Islamic universities—one public and one private—in their approaches to internationalisation. Specifically, it investigates (1) how university leaders conceptualise the purpose and value of internationalisation, and (2) the extent to which religious motivations, alongside reputational and policy-driven factors, influence institutional decision-making. By foregrounding leadership perspectives within this distinctive educational and religious setting, the study contributes meaningfully to the broader academic discourse on higher education policy, leadership studies, and theories of internationalisation. It challenges prevailing assumptions that internationalisation is principally driven by economic or purely academic imperatives, highlighting instead the complex interplay of religious identity and institutional mission in shaping internationalisation practices within Islamic higher education contexts (Fuadi, 2016).

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach with a case study method to investigate in depth the motivations of university leaders in internationalising higher education at two Islamic higher education institutions in Indonesia. The two research locations were chosen because they represent both state and private Islamic universities, allowing for a full understanding of the phenomena of

internationalisation. To maintain the principles of research ethics and participant confidentiality, both universities were given pseudonyms: the private Islamic university was called "Tulip University," while the state Islamic university was called "Rose University." The use of pseudonyms was carried out consistently throughout the process of data collection, analysis, and reporting of research results.

Researcher employed purposive sampling to select my participants according to their positions in the decision-making process of university internationalisation. They included seven university leaders: four from Tulip University (Rector, Head of the International Affairs Office, Dean of the Faculty of Economics, and Dean of the Faculty of Education) and three from Rose University. They were selected due to their responsibility, authority, and active engagement in formulating their institutions' internationalisation policies and strategies.

Individual, face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted with the informants. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. The interview guide was designed to be flexible and open-ended, facilitating participants' ability to articulate their thoughts, feelings, and motives comprehensively. Interviews were conducted in Indonesian to ensure comfort and the accuracy of information. All interviews were recorded with the consent of participants and transcribed verbatim for subsequent data analysis.

Qualitative data were analysed through thematic analysis to identify patterns, following Braun & Clarke (2006)'s framework. This analysis entails multiple reviews of interview transcripts, coding them, and subsequently categorising the codes into overarching themes that represent the motivations of higher education executives for internationalisation. The data was reanalysed iteratively to verify that the identified themes align with the informants' meanings. Analytical validity was ensured through source triangulation, peer debriefing, and informant checks (Norris, 1997).

This research adheres to ethical standards. As stated, individuals' identities remain confidential, and institutional names are anonymised through the use of pseudonyms (Nduna et al., 2022). Prior to the interview, each participant provided informed consent, ensuring confidentiality (Ogloff & Otto, 1991). This approach enables the examination of university leaders' motivations within the framework of the internationalisation of Islamic higher education, offering significant theoretical and practical insights for the field of internationalisation studies.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the key themes that emerged from the analysis of university leaders' perspectives on internationalization in two Indonesian Islamic universities—one public and one private. The findings indicate that leaders conceptualize internationalization as shaped by three main factors: (1) religious motivations, (2) policy compliance, and (3) institutional reputation. However, leaders also identified significant structural barriers that constrain internationalization efforts.

Religious Motivations as a Core Driver of Internationalization

At Tulip University, internationalization is framed as both an academic strategy and a religious mission. Leaders emphasized that engagement with the global academic community serves as a form of da'wah (Islamic propagation), aimed at projecting Islam's intellectual and moral values to the world. The rector of Tulip University articulated this perspective:

"One of the biggest reasons we internationalize is to tackle the accusations against Muslims. Many people still associate Islam with extremism. By sending our students abroad and welcoming international students, we want to show the world that Islam is about peace, knowledge, and global cooperation." (Rector of Tulip University, Interview).

The dean of the Faculty of Economics reinforced this perspective, arguing that student mobility served as a tool for religious diplomacy, allowing students to showcase Islamic values in international academic spaces:

"When our students go abroad, they are not just learners. They are also ambassadors of Islam. They must demonstrate that Islam is a religion of tolerance, hard work, and academic excellence." (Dean of Economics, Interview).

In addition to shaping outbound mobility, religious ideology also influenced institutional policies for inbound students. Tulip University requires all female students, including international students, to wear the hijab on campus, regardless of their religious background. The dean of the Faculty of Education justified this policy, stating:

"International students are welcome, but they must respect our Islamic values. This includes following modest dress codes while on campus." (Dean of Education, Tulip University, Interview).

These perspectives indicate that faith-based internationalization at Tulip University is not just about global academic integration but also about religious representation and outreach. In contrast, at Rose University, religious motivations were absent from leaders' perspectives on internationalization. Instead, leaders emphasized policy compliance and global competitiveness as the primary rationales.

National Policy Compliance as a Driver of Internationalisation

At Rose University, internationalization was largely framed as a policy obligation rather than a strategic choice. The Rector of Rose University highlighted that internationalization is driven by Indonesia's national accreditation standards, particularly Higher Education Law No. 12 of 2012, which mandates international engagement in research, student mobility, and institutional partnerships:

"Internationalization is necessary because it aligns with national and global education standards. Universities are evaluated based on how well they integrate international components, and we must ensure we remain competitive." (Rector, Rose University).

Similarly, the Head of the International Office at Rose University emphasized that global engagement is required for institutional ranking and funding eligibility

"If we do not engage in internationalization, our accreditation score will suffer. That, in turn, affects funding and overall institutional ranking." (Head of International Office, Rose University, Interview, 2019)

At Tulip University, while national policy was acknowledged as a factor in internationalization, leaders expressed that religious objectives were prioritized over compliance. The Dean of the Faculty of Education stated:

"We comply with national policies, but internationalization for us is about more than accreditation—it is about expanding Islamic knowledge and positioning ourselves as a global center for Islamic education." (Dean of Education, Tulip University).

This indicates that while both universities operate under Indonesia's national higher education policies, their motivations for compliance differ significantly.

Institutional Reputation as a Strategic Priority

Leaders at both universities identified institutional reputation as a key motivation for internationalization, albeit with differing rationales. At Rose University, reputation-building was viewed as an essential strategy for improving global rankings and attracting high-quality students and faculty. The Rector of Rose University stated:

"Universities today are judged by their international reach—how many foreign collaborations they have, their research impact, and their ability to attract international students. Without internationalization, we risk being left behind." (Rector, Rose University).

At Tulip University, reputation-building was also a concern, but it was framed within the context of Islamic universities proving their academic legitimacy. The Head of the International Office argued:

"There is a misconception that Islamic universities are not as strong as public universities. Through internationalization, we prove otherwise—we are just as competitive, if not more." (Head of International Office, Tulip University).

This suggests that while both universities prioritize reputation-building, Tulip University views it as a means of challenging stereotypes about Islamic education, whereas Rose University sees it as a ranking-driven necessity.

The findings of the study demonstrate that leadership motivations for internationalization in Islamic universities are shaped by a combination of religious ideology, policy compliance, and institutional prestige considerations. While public and private Islamic universities both engage in global academic collaborations, their rationales differ. Some leaders prioritize internationalization as an extension of their Islamic mission, while others focus on policy-driven incentives. These findings contribute to internationalization theory by showing that faith-based institutions may not adhere to conventional models of global engagement, but instead pursue hybrid approaches shaped by both religious and policy imperatives.

Internationalization of Islamic Higher Education: A Convergence of Ideology, Reputation, and Policy Demands

This study critically extends the current understanding of internationalization motivations among leaders in Islamic higher education contexts in Indonesia by revealing distinctively ideological, particularly religious, motivations alongside well-documented policy and reputational drivers. While prevailing literature extensively emphasizes academic quality, economic rationales, and policy compliance as the primary motivations for higher education internationalization (Knight, 2008; Kusumawati, Nurhaeni, & Nugroho, 2019), the current findings notably expand upon this discourse by highlighting the central role of religious motivations within Islamic universities, particularly at private institutions.

The explicit religious motivation evident at the private Islamic university, articulated as Islamic da'wah, positions internationalization as an ideological and religious mission aimed at correcting global misconceptions and stereotypes about Islam. Although the literature on internationalization recognizes various ideological dimensions shaping institutional strategies (De Wit, 2002b; Mäkinen, 2023), the explicit religious outreach rationale in the Indonesian Islamic context contributes uniquely to existing scholarly conversations. While prior studies have acknowledged the role of religious institutions in international education broadly, they predominantly focus on Christian contexts (De Wit et al., 2018; Edwards, 2024; Hwang, 2018). Therefore, this study provides significant empirical evidence for understanding Islamic higher education's global engagement strategies, filling an important gap highlighted by scholars like de Wit & Altbach (2020) and Tight (2022), who call for more diverse empirical exploration beyond the conventional Western-centric or secular frameworks.

Contrastingly, the public Islamic university's internationalization strategy reflects a predominant alignment with policy-driven imperatives, shaped heavily by national accreditation standards and competitive institutional reputation concerns. This finding resonates with previous research highlighting the impact of

external accreditation standards and national policy frameworks in shaping universities' internationalization strategies (Armstrong & Laksana, 2011; Castro, Rosa, & Pinho, 2015; Fester, Gasman, & Nguyen, 2012). Public Islamic universities, governed by national policy directives, illustrate institutional responsiveness to external evaluation metrics, such as accreditation and funding mechanisms, reinforcing previous observations that internationalization is frequently perceived as necessary for institutional legitimacy and sustainability (Garwe & Thondhlana, 2022).

The differences between the two institutions illustrate the nuanced interplay between religious and policy-driven motivations. While religious motivations at the private Islamic university explicitly guide their strategic international initiatives, at the public Islamic university, these strategies are framed primarily by policy compliance, reflecting a broader trend observed globally where public universities often respond to state-centric rationales and external stakeholder demands (Garwe & Thondhlana, 2022; Mäkinen, 2023). This difference highlights the critical influence of governance structures—private versus public—in shaping institutional approaches toward internationalization, aligning with the findings by Taylor (2004), who identified governance and institutional management as essential components influencing universities' internationalization strategies.

Institutional reputation emerged consistently across both institutions as a key motivation for internationalization, aligning with global trends emphasizing competitive positioning and market-driven strategies (Yesufu, 2018). However, while the private Islamic university leverages reputation to counter global misconceptions about Islamic education, the public Islamic university prioritizes enhancing competitiveness in alignment with global ranking and accreditation standards. This finding supports arguments presented by Jones, Leask, Brandenburg, & de Wit (2021), emphasizing how universities increasingly balance global social responsibility with market-driven forces in their internationalization strategies.

From a theoretical standpoint, this study highlights how institutional identities, shaped by distinctive ideological and governance contexts, profoundly influence internationalization rationales. It challenges the prevailing view that internationalization strategies across higher education institutions converge primarily on economic or policy-driven rationales (De Wit, 2002b; Taylor, 2004). The integration of religious rationales expands the theoretical understanding of internationalization beyond conventional Western-centric models, encouraging future scholarship to further explore faith-based higher education settings globally.

Practically, these findings suggest important implications for policymakers and higher education leaders. Recognizing religious motivations as significant drivers of internationalization could inform more nuanced and culturally sensitive policy frameworks that acknowledge institutional identities. Such tailored approaches may strengthen international collaborations, supporting institutions in leveraging their distinctive religious and cultural assets strategically in global

higher education networks (Castro et al., 2015; Gammeltoft, 2006). Furthermore, understanding the implications of policy-driven rationales at public Islamic universities can guide policymakers in balancing regulatory compliance with strategic flexibility, enhancing the global competitiveness of these institutions.

Finally, this study underscores the necessity for comparative international research to further validate and expand upon these insights. As globalization and geopolitical complexities reshape the landscape of international higher education, it is critical to examine how diverse institutional identities—particularly religious ones—influence global engagement strategies. Such research would enrich the theoretical and practical understanding of internationalization strategies and facilitate more inclusive global policy development that respects and leverages institutional diversity (Castro et al., 2015; de Wit & Altbach, 2020).

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the motivation of university leaders in the internationalisation of Islamic universities in Indonesia is driven by three primary factors: religious motivation, adherence to national policies, and institutional reputation. At Tulip University, a private Islamic institution, internationalisation is viewed as a component of Islamic da'wah aimed at enhancing the perception of Islam globally, while also serving as an academic strategy to bolster the institution's reputation. Conversely, at a state Islamic university (Rose University), internationalisation is prioritised as a means of adhering to national policies, particularly concerning accreditation and enhancing global competitiveness. This difference indicates that institutional identity and ownership status, whether private or state, affect the strategic orientation of universities in their approach to internationalisation.

This study theoretically enhances the understanding of higher education internationalisation by introducing a novel perspective on the role of religious ideological elements as strategic motivations, particularly within Islamic-based universities. Understanding religious motivation and national policies is essential for university leaders and policymakers in formulating internationalisation strategies that align with institutional identity and address the challenges posed by the globalisation of higher education. Additional comparative research is essential to enhance comprehension of the impact of religion and institutional context on the internationalisation strategies of higher education institutions in a broader sense.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The author would like to express sincere gratitude to all university leaders who participated in this study. Their time, insights, and willingness to share their institutional experiences were instrumental to the completion of this research. Appreciation is also extended to the respective institutions for granting access and supporting the data collection process in an ethical and constructive manner.

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