



**BUILDING LEARNING ORGANIZATIONS IN ISLAMIC UNIVERSITIES:
REFLECTIONS ON GOVERNANCE AND KNOWLEDGE ECOLOGY AT NAHDLATUL
ULAMA UNIVERSITY INDONESIA**

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ABSTRACT

The increasingly dynamic changes in the higher education environment require universities to develop the capacity for adaptation, innovation, and continuous organizational learning. Universities are no longer viewed merely as institutions responsible for teaching and knowledge dissemination, but also as knowledge-based organizations capable of creating, managing, and transforming knowledge into institutional capacity. This article aims to examine the process of building a learning organization at Universitas Nahdlatul Ulama Indonesia (UNUSIA) through the perspectives of organizational governance and knowledge ecology. This study employs a qualitative approach using a reflective organizational autoethnography method. The data were derived from the author's organizational experiences and involvement in UNUSIA's institutional dynamics, participatory observations of academic governance practices, and analysis of institutional documents. Data were analyzed thematically using the theoretical perspectives of learning organization, organizational learning, and knowledge ecology. The findings reveal that the development of a learning organization at UNUSIA is implemented through several strategic practices. First, the application of the Administrative Centralization and Academic Decentralization (SADA) principle establishes a balance between university-wide administrative efficiency and academic innovation at the faculty level. Second, the development of the SIANAS academic information system functions as a digital knowledge ecology that supports information integration, academic documentation, and data-driven decision-making. Third, strengthening human resource capacity through faculty development programs, research activities, community engagement, and scholarly publications contributes to the growth of an academic learning culture. Fourth, collaborative communication practices among academic actors serve as a space for collective learning and organizational reflection. This article demonstrates that transforming higher education institutions into learning organizations depends not only on organizational structures and technological infrastructure but also on academic leadership capacity to cultivate a learning culture, develop knowledge ecosystems, and integrate organizational resources into a continuous learning process.

Keywords: Learning Organization; Knowledge Ecology; Higher Education Governance; Academic Leadership, Nahdlatul Ulama

INTRODUCTION

The rapid changes in the higher education environment due to the development of digital technology, global competition, and increasing demands for academic quality have encouraged universities to carry out institutional transformation in a sustainable manner. Higher education is no longer sufficiently understood as an institution that carries out the functions of education, research, and community service, but also as a knowledge-based organization that must be able to create, manage, and transform knowledge into



institutional capacity. In this context, an organization's ability to learn collectively is an important factor in maintaining the sustainability and competitiveness of universities.

The transformation of higher education in the digital era is not only related to the application of technology, but also concerns changes in organizational culture, leadership patterns, governance systems, and knowledge management mechanisms. Vial (2019) Explains that digital transformation is a process of organizational change influenced by the integration of digital technology that results in significant changes to organizational structure, processes, and value creation. In the context of higher education, digital transformation is becoming increasingly complex because it involves the interaction between technology, people, and academic culture (Benavides et al., 2020).

The concept of learning organization is one of the important approaches in understanding the organization's ability to deal with these changes. A learning organization is an organization that is able to develop individual and collective capacity through a process of reflection, knowledge sharing, and continuous innovation. Although this concept was first developed in the context of business organizations, research developments show that the principle of learning organization has strong relevance in educational institutions, including universities, because universities are essentially organizations that produce and distribute knowledge (Sierra-Huedo et al., 2023).

From the perspective of learning organizations, universities need governance that is able to integrate system stability with innovation flexibility. Marquardt (2011) Explains that learning organizations are built through the connection between learning dynamics, organizational transformation, human empowerment, knowledge management, and technology utilization. This perspective suggests that the success of organizational transformation depends not only on changes in formal structures, but also on the ability of institutions to create an environment that allows knowledge to develop and be used collectively.

One of the important aspects of a learner's organization is the ability to manage knowledge as an organizational asset. In the context of a college, knowledge is not only in formal documents, but it is also inherent in the experiences, practices, and academic interactions between members of the organization. Therefore, the concept of knowledge ecology becomes relevant because it sees knowledge as an ecosystem formed through the dynamic relationship between humans, technology, information, and organizational culture. Recent research shows that effective knowledge management is an important factor in increasing the innovation and adaptability of higher education organizations (Moser & Deichmann, 2021).

Islamic colleges have a unique context in building learning organizations because they are not only oriented towards managerial effectiveness, but also carry certain educational values, identities, and missions. The study of Islamic educational institutions shows a tendency to transform institutions from traditional models to more professional governance through strengthening leadership, quality systems, human resource development, and the use of digital technology (Warisno et al., 2025). However, most of the research on learning organizations in Islamic education still focuses on Islamic boarding schools and schools, while studies on Islamic universities as learning organizations are still relatively limited.



Universitas Nahdlatul Ulama Indonesia (UNUSIA) is one of the Islamic universities that is interesting to study because it has developed as a young institution that faces the challenges of higher education competitions, as well as innovating governance since its inception. One of the characteristics of UNUSIA's governance is the application of the principle of Centralization of Administration and Academic Decentralization (SADA), which is the centralized management of university administration to ensure system efficiency and integration, while academic development is given space to faculties and study programs to encourage innovation.

In addition to the governance of SADA, UNUSIA also develops the SIANAS academic information system as part of institutional digital transformation. The system not only serves as an instrument of academic administration, but also has the potential to become a knowledge ecology that supports documentation, information distribution, and data-driven decision-making. From the perspective of learning organizations, the existence of digital technology is important when it is able to strengthen the organizational learning process, not just increase administrative efficiency (Kalipçi, 2023).

Although the study of learning organization has developed quite widely, there are still limited research on how young Islamic universities build the capacity of learning organizations through a combination of adaptive governance, academic leadership, and the ecology of digital knowledge. Most previous studies have looked more at business organizations or non-university Islamic educational institutions. Therefore, UNUSIA's experience provides space to understand how a developing Islamic university builds organizational learning mechanisms in a specific institutional context.

Based on this context, this article aims to analyze the process of learning organization development at Nahdlatul Ulama University Indonesia through the perspective of organizational governance and knowledge ecology. This article contributes by offering an understanding of how young Islamic universities can develop organizational learning capacity through integration between governance systems, academic leadership, digital technology, and academic culture

RESEARCH METHODS

Research Approach and Design

This study uses a qualitative approach with a reflective organizational autoethnography design to understand the transformation process of Universitas Nahdlatul Ulama Indonesia (UNUSIA) towards a learning organization. This approach was chosen because it allows researchers to examine organizational phenomena through direct involvement in practice, experience, and ongoing institutional dynamics. Organizational autoethnography places the researcher's personal experience as part of scientific data that is systematically analyzed in a broader social context. Ellis et al., (2011) explains that autoethnography connects individual experiences with the social and cultural structure of an organization so as to result in a deeper understanding of a phenomenon.

Research Context

The research was conducted at Universitas Nahdlatul Ulama Indonesia (UNUSIA), a university that was established in 2015 and is in the phase of institutional strengthening towards an adaptive and knowledge-based academic organization. UNUSIA applies the



principles of Administrative Centralization and Academic Decentralization (SADA), as well as developing an integrated academic information system (SIANAS) as part of the organization's digital transformation.

Data Source

The research data taken are sourced from three main categories, namely; 1) Research organizational experience, including involvement in academic governance, institutional meetings, and decision-making processes. 2) Institutional documents, such as academic policies, SIANAS system documents, quality reports, and lecturer development programs. 3) Participatory observation, on academic activities such as faculty meetings, curriculum workshops, FGDs, as well as research and service activities.

Data Collection Techniques

Data collection is carried out through participatory observation, document analysis, and reflection on organizational experiences. Observations are made of formal and informal interactions within organizations, while document analysis is used to understand the organization's policy structure and systems. Experiential reflection is used to capture meanings from organizational practices that are not always written down in formal documents.

Data Analysis Techniques

The data was analyzed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) according to (Braun & Clarke, 2021), which is a thematic analysis approach that views the process of identifying themes as the result of the researcher's reflective interpretation, with an emphasis on transparency, reflexivity, and methodological consistency. The analysis process is carried out through stages; 1) Identify relevant organizational experiences and practices. 2) Coding themes such as SADA governance, digitization of SIANAS, academic leadership, and human resource development. 3) Interpretation of the theme using the theory of organizational learning, knowledge creation, and organizational learning. 4) Preparation of a conceptual model of organizational transformation.

Validity and Reflexivity

The validity of the research is maintained through triangulation of data sources (experience, documents, and observations). In addition, this study applies the principle of reflexivity, which is the researcher's awareness of position, experience, and potential bias in the data interpretation process. (Tracy, 2010) emphasizing that the quality of qualitative research is determined by the transparency of the analysis process and the depth of the researcher's reflection.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Institutional Governance Transformation through Administrative Centralization and Academic Decentralization (SADA)

The results of the study show that one of the main foundations in building the capacity of learner organizations at Universitas Nahdlatul Ulama Indonesia (UNUSIA) is a governance design that integrates administrative efficiency with academic flexibility



through the principles of Administrative Centralization and Academic Decentralization (SADA). This principle has been applied since the beginning of the establishment of UNUSIA in 2014 as an organizational strategy to build a university system that is effective, efficient, and able to develop adaptively.

The implementation of SADA departed from the need to build an organizational structure that was not too bureaucratic, but still had strong coordination capabilities. As a university that is in a growth phase, UNUSIA realizes that a fat organizational structure can increase administrative complexity without always resulting in an improvement in service quality. Therefore, universities opt for a governance model that places strategic administrative functions at the university level, while faculties and study programs are given space to develop their academic functions. In its implementation, the management of human resource administration for lecturers, education staff, and students is carried out centrally by the university. This system includes the management of personnel data, student services, academic administration, and various other institutional services. Meanwhile, the faculty is given authority in academic aspects such as curriculum development, research agenda preparation, implementation of community service activities, development of academic cooperation, and capacity building of lecturers.

The findings of the study suggest that the pattern results in a relatively lean faculty structure with a primary focus on strengthening academic function. The Faculty was not built as a large administrative unit, but as a center for scientific development and academic innovation. This condition allows faculty managers to devote more attention to improving the quality of learning, curriculum development, and strengthening academic culture.

The coordination process between universities, faculties, and study programs is carried out through formal and informal communication mechanisms. Coordination meetings between universities and faculties are held regularly every month, both face-to-face and through digital platforms. In addition, the use of social media-based communication groups involving university leaders, faculties, and study programs allows for the exchange of information to take place quickly and flexibly.

Academic decision-making is carried out through a deliberative process involving various levels of the organization. Academic forums such as early semester meetings, learning evaluations, curriculum workshops through Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), and research dissemination forums become a common space to evaluate, share experiences, and formulate academic development. These findings suggest that SADA is not just an administrative mechanism, but has become an organizational pattern that shapes the way UNUSIA manages the relationship between institutional integration and academic autonomy.

SIANAS as Digital Infrastructure for Institutional Knowledge Development

The results of the study show that digital transformation is one of the important instruments in strengthening the UNUSIA organizational system. The implementation of SIANAS (UNUSIA Academic and Administrative Information System) is a form of institutional innovation that supports the integration of various academic and administrative activities in one digital system. SIANAS was developed to manage various main services of higher education, ranging from the process of admitting new students, managing student academic data, filling out Study Plan Cards (KRS), managing lecture



schedules, learning processes, input of grades, evaluation of lecturers by students, to final project administrative services such as submitting research titles and thesis guidance processes. In addition to supporting administrative services, the existence of SIANAS resulted in changes in the organization's work pattern. Academic activities that previously relied on manual documents and communication between individuals began to transform into documented data-driven systems. This allows universities to have a more integrated source of information to conduct academic monitoring and evaluation.

The results of the study show that the use of SIANAS also supports changes in the work culture of the academic community. Lecturers and students are increasingly accustomed to using digital systems in carrying out their academic activities. This system encourages information disclosure, accelerates services, and increases accountability of academic processes. Thus, SIANAS in the context of UNUSIA is not only positioned as an administrative technology device, but develops into part of the organizational knowledge infrastructure that supports the institutional learning process.

Human Resource Development as a Foundation for Academic Learning Culture

The development of learning organizations at UNUSIA is closely related to the development strategy of human resources, especially lecturers and education staff. Since the process of strengthening institutional quality has been carried out, the university has paid attention to improving individual competencies as part of organizational capacity development. One of the first steps to strengthen quality was through benchmarking activities involving the Internal Supervisory Unit (SPI) and the UNUSIA Quality Assurance Institute (LPM) to Gunadarma University Depok. The activity was continued with a training program to strengthen the quality system which lasted for one semester in 2018. This program is one of the initial momentum in building institutional awareness about the importance of quality-based governance.

In the aspect of education personnel, the university provides support through various administrative competency improvement programs. Library managers are directed to participate in the librarian certification program as part of strengthening the professionalism of academic services. All staff are facilitated by training to strengthen digital administration in collaboration with Microsoft. Meanwhile, lecturer capacity building is carried out through various activities that include improving learning competencies, research, community service, and scientific publications. The program is carried out on an ongoing basis through training, seminars, workshops, and academic mentoring. This shows a change in the academic orientation of lecturers. Research activities, community service, and scientific publications are increasingly part of academic culture. University support in the form of competitive research and community service grants as well as publication incentives for articles in reputable journals are one of the driving factors for increasing lecturer involvement in knowledge-based academic activities.

Collaborative Academic Practices as Collective Learning Spaces

The organizational learning process at UNUSIA develops through various spaces of academic interaction. Learning does not only take place through formal programs, but also through communication, collaboration, and exchanging experiences between members of the organization. The lecturer academic meeting forum which is held at the beginning of



every semester is a space to equalize perceptions related to the learning process. In addition, the curriculum workshop conducted through the FGD provides an opportunity for lecturers to evaluate and develop the curriculum according to the development of science and the needs of the community.

The dissemination of lecturers' research results which is carried out every semester is also an important mechanism in building a culture of knowledge sharing. The forum not only involves lecturers, but also students so as to create a more open academic relationship between knowledge producers and users. In addition to formal forums, communication through digital media between organizational levels is a supporting factor for the formation of more flexible interactions. Leaders of universities, faculties, and study programs can coordinate quickly in responding to various academic and administrative problems. These findings show that a culture of communication and collaboration is an important element in the process of forming collective learning within UNUSIA.

Institutional Challenges in Developing a Sustainable Learning Organization

Although various transformation strategies have been implemented, the results of the study show that UNUSIA still faces a number of challenges in building a sustainable learning organization. As a relatively young university in Jakarta, UNUSIA faces competition with other universities that already have institutional experience, academic reputation, and a longer network. This condition requires universities to continue to innovate and strengthen their academic differentiation. Another challenge is ensuring that an organization's learning practices do not depend solely on a specific individual or program, but can become an institutional culture inherent in the entire organization's system. Knowledge management is also an important challenge, especially in transforming individual experiences and practices into documented institutional knowledge. Thus, the process of building a learning organization at UNUSIA is still a continuous journey that requires leadership consistency, strengthening academic culture, and developing organizational knowledge systems.

SADA as a Systems Thinking Strategy in Building a Higher Education Learning Organization

The results of the study show that the application of the principles of Centralization of Administration and Academic Decentralization (SADA) is an important foundation in building the capacity of UNUSIA as a learning organization. This governance pattern shows an effort to create a balance between the need for institutional integration and the space for academic innovation. Administrative centralization allows universities to build service standards, resource efficiency, and system consistency, while academic decentralization provides flexibility to faculty and study programs to develop academic creativity. From these findings, it can be understood through the perspective of systems thinking in the concept of learning organization. Senge (1990) explains that learning organizations require the ability to see organizations as an interconnected system, not as a collection of units that run separately. In the context of higher education, a systemic approach becomes important because the quality of an institution is not only determined by one specific section, but by the relationship between governance, human resources, technology, academic culture, and the learning process.



Research on the transformation of higher education organizations shows that universities that are able to develop adaptive governance tend to have better abilities to deal with changes in the external environment. According to Oplatka & Arar (2017), the leadership and governance of modern higher education requires a balance between institutional control and professional autonomy in order for academic innovation to flourish. In the context of UNUSIA, SADA shows a form of governance that seeks to avoid two extremes: first, excessive centralization that can inhibit academic creativity; Second, decentralization without coordination can lead to organizational fragmentation. This pattern shows that organizational structures are designed not only for administrative efficiency, but also as an organizational learning mechanism. This is in line with the study Fullan (2020) which explains that educational organizations that are able to thrive are not just organizations that have a formal structure, but organizations that are able to build collective capacity through relationships, collaboration, and continuous learning. Thus, SADA can be understood as an institutional strategy that allows UNUSIA to build an organizational environment that supports collective learning.

SIANAS as an Ecology of Digital Knowledge in the Organizational Learning Process

One of the important findings of this study is that the implementation of SIANAS not only functions as an academic administration system, but develops into an organizational knowledge infrastructure. This system allows for a variety of academic activities to be documented, integrated, and can be used as a source of information in decision-making. From a knowledge management perspective, learning organizations need the ability to create, store, share, and use knowledge systematically. Although the concept of knowledge creation was first developed by Nonaka & Takeuchi (1995), contemporary research shows that digital transformation has changed the way higher education organizations manage knowledge. Digital technology allows knowledge that was previously scattered on individuals to be consolidated into institutional assets.

Benavides et al. (2020) explain that digital transformation in higher education is not only related to the use of technology, but also changes in organizational processes, work culture, and decision-making mechanisms. Thus, the success of higher education digitalization is highly dependent on the ability of organizations to integrate technology with human needs and institutional processes. In the context of UNUSIA, SIANAS shows characteristics as an ecology of knowledge because it brings together three main elements: human, technology, and information. Lecturers, students, and academic managers interact through the same system, resulting in a more open flow of information. Academic data that was previously administrative in nature now has strategic value as a source of organizational reflection.

This concept is in line with the study of Kalipçı (2023) which shows that information technology can strengthen learning organizations when used as a means of improving learning skills, innovation, and organizational services. This means that technology does not automatically create a learning organization, but becomes an instrument that strengthens the learning culture when supported by the right organizational system. Thus, UNUSIA's experience shows that the digital transformation of higher education needs to be understood not only as the modernization of services, but as the development of an ecology



of knowledge that allows organizations to learn from their own data, experiences, and academic practices.

Academic Leadership as a Driver of Organizational Learning Culture

The results of the study show that the success of various organizational transformation practices at UNUSIA is greatly influenced by the role of academic leadership in building communication, coordination, and a culture of collaboration. Regular meetings of universities-faculties, academic forums, curriculum workshops, and lecturer development activities show that leadership is not only carried out through structural instruction, but through the creation of spaces for interaction and shared learning. In the study of learning organizations, leaders have an important role as vision-directors, change facilitators, and organizational capacity builders. Research Bond et al., (2021) shows that modern college leadership is increasingly shifting from an individualistic model to a collective model that emphasizes collaboration and distribution of leadership. This perspective has relevance to the practice at UNUSIA. A growing leadership model shows a tendency towards a collaborative pattern, where academic decisions are not only determined top-down, but through a deliberative process involving various elements of the organization.

According to Schein (2017), leaders have a major role in shaping organizational culture through values, practices, and patterns of continuous communication. In the context of colleges, a culture of learning cannot emerge through formal policy alone, but must be built through leadership example and consistency. The practice of academic leadership at UNUSIA shows that learning organizations need leaders who are able to create psychological and structural conditions so that members of the organization feel that they have room to learn, contribute, and innovate.

Experience in managing academic organizations shows that the process of organizational change takes place more effectively when leaders are able to create open communication spaces, encourage active participation of academics, and build a sense of ownership of the institution's vision and goals. In the context of higher education, transformational leadership is no longer understood solely as the ability to influence subordinates, but as a process of building collaboration, empowering organizational members, and creating an environment that supports collective learning and continuous innovation. Recent studies have shown that transformational leadership contributes to increased organizational member engagement, collaborative culture, innovation capacity, and institutional ability to respond to increasingly complex environmental changes (Kasalak et al., 2022).

Lecturer Development as the Implementation of Personal Mastery and Organizational Capacity

Human resource development is one of the main strategies in building the capacity of learning organizations at UNUSIA. Lecturer competency improvement programs, support for research and community service, and publication incentives reflect the institution's commitment to building a knowledge-based academic culture. From a learning organization perspective, organizational learning begins from individual learning which is then transformed into collective knowledge through the process of knowledge sharing,



reflection, and collaboration. The concept of personal mastery put forward by Senge emphasizes that an organization can only develop if the individuals in it are committed to continuing to improve their capacity. Recent findings show that continuous investment in lecturer development through faculty development, professional learning, and knowledge sharing mechanisms is a prerequisite for the formation of adaptive and innovative learning organizations in higher education (Fan & Beh, 2024; Vreekamp et al., 2023)

Other research suggests that individual development should be followed by organizational mechanisms capable of transforming personal competencies into institutional capacities. According to Basten & Haamann (2018), the learning organization needs a mechanism that allows individual knowledge to be shared and developed into collective knowledge (Mishra & Upadhyay, 2021). In the context of UNUSIA, the increase in research activities and lecturers' publications shows a change in academic culture. Lecturers are not only positioned as teachers, but also as producers of knowledge. Institutional support through research grants and publication incentives shows that universities seek to create systems that encourage productive academic behavior. This shows that the development of learning organizations requires a relationship between individual development and organizational system design. As individuals develop and organizations provide space for knowledge sharing, the learning capacity of institutions will be stronger.

Conceptual Framework for UNUSIA's Transformation Towards a Learning Organization

Based on the overall findings of the research, organizational learning capacity building at UNUSIA can be understood as an organizational transformation process that takes place through the connection of four main elements, namely adaptive governance, digital knowledge ecology, academic leadership, and human resource capacity development. *First*, adaptive governance through the application of the principles of Centralization of Administration and Academic Decentralization (SADA) becomes a structural foundation that allows organizations to maintain a balance between the integration of university systems and the academic innovation space. *Second*, the ecology of digital knowledge through SIANAS serves as an organizational infrastructure that supports the creation, documentation, and distribution of academic information as part of institutional memory. *Third*, academic leadership plays a role in creating a shared vision, building organizational communication, and providing a collaborative space that allows for collective learning. *Fourth*, the development of human resource capacity through training, research, community service, and scientific publications is an important mechanism in building an academic culture oriented towards continuous learning.

The framework shows that the process towards learning organization in higher education does not take place through a single intervention, but through the interaction between organizational structure, technology, people, and academic culture. In the context of UNUSIA as a developing Islamic university, these findings show that learning organizations are built through an institutional adaptation process that integrates management efficiency with strengthening academic capacity. However, this conceptual framework is contextual based on UNUSIA's transformation experience and is not intended as a universal model for all universities. Further testing through comparative research on



various colleges is needed to see the relevance and feasibility of developing this framework in the broader context of higher education.

CONCLUSION

This study found that the development of learning organizations at Universitas Nahdlatul Ulama Indonesia (UNUSIA) takes place through the process of strengthening organizational governance, developing knowledge ecology, and forming an academic learning culture. The findings of the study show that the application of the principles of Administrative Centralization and Academic Decentralization (SADA) since the beginning of UNUSIA has become a strategic mechanism in integrating administrative efficiency with academic flexibility. The centralization of administration allows universities to build an integrated service system, while academic decentralization provides space for faculties and study programs to develop curriculum, research, academic cooperation, and faculty capacity building.

This study also found that the existence of SIANAS as an academic information system has developed not only as an administrative instrument, but as an organizational knowledge infrastructure that supports documentation, information integration, and data-driven academic decision-making. In addition, various human resource development programs through training, quality strengthening, research grants, community service, and scientific publication support contribute to the formation of an academic culture that is more oriented towards the creation and sharing of knowledge. The practice of organizational communication through academic meetings, coordination forums, curriculum FGDs, and research dissemination shows that there is a collective learning space that strengthens the process of forming a learning organization.

Based on these findings, this study concludes that the capacity of learning organizations at UNUSIA is built through the connection between adaptive governance, knowledge technology, academic leadership, and human resource development. However, the process still needs to be strengthened so that organizational learning does not only take place through specific programs or individuals, but becomes a documented and sustainable institutional knowledge system. Therefore, the necessary follow-up is the development of a more systematic institutional knowledge management mechanism, including documentation of academic good practices, lecturer knowledge management, and continuous evaluation of the effectiveness of digital systems in supporting organizational learning. Further research can be carried out through comparative studies in several Islamic universities to develop a more contextual learning organization model for Islamic universities in Indonesia.

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