

## Bridging Educational Inequality through Innovative Learning: The Role of Faith, Institutional Adaptation, and Community Empowerment in Rural Islamic Higher Education

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### Abstract

Educational inequality remains a significant barrier for students from low-income backgrounds in rural Indonesia, limiting access to and persistence in higher education. This study examines how faith, institutional adaptation, and community empowerment interact to support student success at ISIMU Pacitan, a rural Islamic higher education institution. Employing a qualitative case study approach, data were derived from literature analysis, institutional documents, and contextual interpretation, and analyzed using thematic synthesis supported by theoretical triangulation. The findings reveal that student persistence is shaped by the synergistic interaction of three dimensions. Faith provides intrinsic motivation and resilience by framing education as a spiritual endeavor. Institutional adaptation through flexible tuition schemes, work-study integration, and holistic mentoring reduces structural barriers and enhances retention. Meanwhile, community and peer empowerment foster socio-emotional support, collective identity, and collaborative learning. These dimensions collectively form a multidimensional support system that sustains academic engagement in resource-constrained contexts. The study contributes to the literature by proposing an integrated model of student empowerment that bridges faith-based values, institutional strategies, and community dynamics. It also highlights the role of innovative and advanced learning practices in shaping inclusive and context-responsive higher education.

**Keywords:** advanced learning, collaborative learning, community empowerment, educational inequality, experiential learning, faith-based education, innovative learning, rural education.

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## 1. Introduction

Education in rural Indonesia functions not only as a developmental instrument but also as a critical mechanism for disrupting cycles of intergenerational poverty. However, access to higher education for students from low-income backgrounds remains structurally constrained. Persistent inequalities manifest through financial

limitations, including tuition costs and living expenses, which significantly reduce participation in higher education (Yubilianto, 2020). These constraints are further compounded by inadequate educational infrastructure in rural areas, characterized by limited facilities, insufficient learning resources, and a shortage of qualified educators (Ticona Machaca et al., 2025). As

a result, disparities in access are not merely economic but also institutional in nature.

In addition to structural limitations, disparities in social capital further intensify educational inequality. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds frequently lack access to mentorship, academic guidance, and professional networks, which are essential for navigating higher education systems and sustaining academic performance (Cui et al., 2023). The absence of these support systems contributes to lower levels of persistence and completion among rural students. Consequently, educational inequality in this context should be understood as a multidimensional phenomenon involving financial, institutional, and socio-cultural dimensions.

Within this landscape, faith-based higher education institutions have emerged as important actors in addressing educational disparities. These institutions integrate academic learning with spiritual and moral development, thereby offering a holistic educational framework that extends beyond conventional instructional models. Prior studies indicate that religious values can foster resilience, self-regulation, and a strong sense of purpose among students facing socio-economic adversity (Wang & Huang, 2025). In Islamic higher education contexts, the pursuit of knowledge is often framed as both an intellectual and spiritual obligation, reinforcing students' intrinsic motivation to persist despite structural challenges.

However, the effectiveness of faith-based education in promoting student success cannot be understood solely through the lens of religious values. Institutional factors, including adaptive policies, student support services, and inclusive pedagogical approaches, play a critical role in facilitating access and retention. At the same time, community-based support systems contribute

significantly to students' academic experiences, particularly in rural contexts where formal institutional resources are limited. Strong social ties within families and local communities often function as informal safety nets, providing both emotional and material support that enhances student resilience (Chanifah et al., 2024).

ISIMU Pacitan (Institut Studi Islam Muhammadiyah Pacitan) represents a relevant empirical context for examining the interaction of these dimensions. As a rural Islamic higher education institution, ISIMU Pacitan integrates religious values, institutional adaptability, and community engagement in supporting underprivileged students. Many students at ISIMU Pacitan come from pesantren backgrounds, where values such as discipline, collective responsibility, and moral integrity are strongly emphasized (Thoyib et al., 2024). These values contribute to the development of resilience and persistence in academic settings. Furthermore, cultural characteristics within local communities, including collectivism and mutual support, reinforce students' ability to cope with financial and academic challenges.

Despite the growing body of literature on educational inequality and student persistence, existing studies tend to examine key determinants in a fragmented manner. Research has predominantly focused on the individual effects of religious values on student motivation, the role of institutional policies in improving access and retention, or the contribution of community-based empowerment to student engagement (Agurto Adrianzén et al., 2024; Ross et al., 2023). Such approaches, while valuable, do not adequately capture the dynamic interaction between these factors within specific socio-cultural contexts.

This study addresses this limitation by advancing an integrated analytical perspective that conceptualizes student persistence as the result of the interaction between three core dimensions: faith-based values, institutional support mechanisms, and community empowerment structures. The novelty of this study lies in three key contributions. First, it moves beyond single-factor explanations by developing a holistic framework that captures the interdependence of spiritual, institutional, and social dimensions in shaping student outcomes. Second, it situates this framework within the underexplored context of rural Islamic higher education in Indonesia, thereby providing context-specific insights that are often absent in global higher education literature. Third, it empirically examines how these dimensions operate synergistically to support disadvantaged students, offering a more nuanced understanding of persistence that integrates cultural, religious, and structural perspectives.

In addition, this study critically engages with the dual role of Islamic educational values. While religious principles can strengthen motivation, resilience, and ethical awareness, overly rigid interpretations may limit critical thinking and intellectual flexibility (Rahman et al., 2022). Therefore, the effectiveness of faith-based education depends on its capacity to remain adaptive and context-responsive. Institutional strategies, including culturally responsive pedagogy and curriculum design that integrates critical thinking with religious moderation, are essential in ensuring that spiritual values function as enabling rather than constraining factors.

Furthermore, community engagement plays a strategic role in extending educational support beyond institutional boundaries. Community-driven initiatives

have been shown to enhance student engagement and academic achievement, particularly in rural and marginalized contexts where formal support systems are limited (Jorgensen, 2020; Trundle & Vaeau, 2024). The alignment between institutional programs and community support structures is therefore critical in creating a sustainable ecosystem that supports student success.

By examining the interaction between faith, institutional support, and community empowerment, this study contributes to the development of a more comprehensive understanding of inclusive higher education in rural contexts. The findings are expected to provide both theoretical and practical implications for policymakers, educators, and institutional leaders seeking to design context-sensitive strategies for improving access, persistence, and success among disadvantaged students in Islamic higher education settings.

## **2. Method**

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach to examine how Islamic higher education institutions in rural and under-resourced contexts empower students from low-income backgrounds to access, persist in, and complete higher education. The case of ISIMU Pacitan (Institut Studi Islam Muhammadiyah Pacitan) is selected as an instrumental case, representing a contextualized model of faith-based higher education that integrates religious values, institutional support mechanisms, and community engagement.

A qualitative case study design is particularly appropriate for this research as it enables an in-depth and holistic understanding of complex social phenomena within their real-life context. In this study, the phenomenon under investigation is the multidimensional process of student

empowerment in a rural Islamic higher education setting, which involves the interaction between cultural, institutional, and structural factors. Furthermore, the interdisciplinary nature of Islamic education encompassing social, pedagogical, and institutional dimensions necessitates an interpretive approach to capture the nuanced experiences of disadvantaged students (Awaludin, 2024). The contextual dimension of rurality is also central to this study, as geographical and socio-economic conditions significantly influence access to and participation in higher education (Trahar et al., 2020).

#### a. Data Collection and Sources

Data were collected through a qualitative document-based approach, integrating multiple sources to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the research problem. The primary data sources include peer-reviewed journal articles, institutional documents related to ISIMU Pacitan, and contextual references relevant to rural Islamic higher education. The literature selection process followed a purposive sampling strategy, focusing on studies that address student persistence, educational inequality, faith-based education, and community empowerment.

Inclusion criteria were established to ensure the relevance and quality of the selected sources. Specifically, the study prioritizes (1) empirical and conceptual research that examines educational access and success among marginalized populations, (2) case studies that demonstrate effective educational practices in similar socio-cultural contexts, and (3) recent publications that reflect current developments in higher education research (Valls et al., 2022). This approach allows the study to situate the ISIMU Pacitan case

within a broader scholarly discourse while maintaining contextual specificity.

In addition, this study incorporates insights related to financial and social inclusion, particularly through the lens of Islamic finance, which has been identified as a potential mechanism for reducing financial barriers and supporting marginalized students (Acheampong & Disman, 2024). Although the primary focus remains on institutional and socio-cultural dimensions, these broader structural factors are considered to provide a more comprehensive analytical perspective.

#### b. Data Analysis Procedures

Data analysis was conducted using a thematic analysis approach combined with critical narrative synthesis. The analysis process followed several systematic stages. First, all collected data were organized and reviewed to identify relevant segments related to student empowerment, persistence, and completion. Second, open coding was applied to categorize recurring patterns and concepts across different data sources. Third, these codes were grouped into broader themes representing key dimensions of the study, namely faith-based values, institutional support mechanisms, and community empowerment structures.

The thematic findings were then interpreted using an integrative analytical framework that draws upon multiple theoretical perspectives, including moral development theory (Narvaez, 2016), social capital theory, and educational equity paradigms. This theoretical triangulation enables a more comprehensive understanding of how different factors interact to shape student experiences and outcomes.

In addition, this study considers broader structural determinants such as economic inequality, political decentralization, and

institutional policy as contextual variables that influence educational access and success. These factors are not treated as primary variables but are incorporated into the analysis to enhance interpretive depth and contextual validity.

### c. Rigor and Trustworthiness

To ensure the rigor and credibility of the findings, several strategies were employed. First, source triangulation was applied by integrating multiple types of data, including scholarly literature, institutional documents, and contextual knowledge, to minimize bias and enhance the validity of interpretations. Second, thematic triangulation was conducted by comparing patterns across different data sources to ensure consistency and reliability of identified themes (Jackson et al., 2023).

Third, reflexivity was maintained throughout the research process to critically assess potential researcher bias and ensure balanced interpretation. This includes acknowledging both the empowering aspects of the ISIMU Pacitan model and the persistent structural challenges faced by disadvantaged students. Fourth, interpretive reliability was strengthened through iterative coding and cross-checking of themes against established theoretical frameworks.

Finally, the findings were continuously cross-referenced with existing literature to validate interpretations and identify areas of convergence and divergence. This process not only enhances the credibility of the analysis but also allows the study to contribute to the identification of research gaps within the broader discourse on Islamic higher education and educational inclusion.

## 3. Result and Discussion

The findings reveal that ISIMU Pacitan develops a multidimensional support system

that enables underprivileged students to access, persist in, and complete higher education despite significant structural constraints. This system operates through the dynamic interaction of three core dimensions: faith as an internal source of motivation and resilience, institutional adaptation as a mechanism for reducing structural barriers, and community and peer empowerment as a form of social support that sustains student engagement.

Rather than functioning independently, these dimensions are mutually reinforcing and collectively shape students' educational trajectories within a rural Islamic higher education context. Faith provides the foundational cognitive and moral framework that sustains persistence, institutional strategies translate this motivation into accessible learning pathways, and community-based networks strengthen students' sense of belonging and collective agency (Nurhasanah et al., 2022). This integrated model reflects a context-sensitive approach to student empowerment, where spiritual, institutional, and socio-cultural elements converge to address educational inequality in a holistic manner

### a. Faith as Inner Strength

Faith emerges as a central internal mechanism that sustains academic persistence among underprivileged students at ISIMU Pacitan. Within this context, faith is not merely a theological construct but operates as a multidimensional resource encompassing cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions. It shapes how students interpret their educational journey, respond to adversity, and construct meaning in the face of socio-economic constraints (Kurniawan et al., 2023). The findings indicate that faith-based values function as

an intrinsic motivational system that reinforces long-term commitment to education, particularly among students who experience structural disadvantages.

### 1) Faith as a Source of Academic and Existential Motivation

At ISIMU Pacitan, the concept of *thalabul 'ilm* (the pursuit of knowledge) is internalized as both a religious obligation and a pathway toward personal transformation. This dual framing redefines education beyond instrumental outcomes such as employment, positioning it instead as a form of spiritual devotion. Such internalization produces a stronger and more lasting form of intrinsic motivation than

externally driven motivation. Students demonstrate a strong orientation toward goal persistence, supported by a belief that educational success is aligned with divine purpose.

Empirical findings align with previous studies indicating that religiosity contributes positively to self-efficacy, learning motivation, and proactive academic behavior (Sulalah et al., 2025). This suggests that faith-based motivation operates not only at the level of belief but also translates into observable academic behaviors such as consistency in study habits, resilience in overcoming academic difficulties, and long-term goal orientation.

**Table 1. Dimensions of Faith-Based Motivation in Academic Persistence**

| Dimension                | Description                             | Behavioral Indicators                      | Impact on Students               |
|--------------------------|-----------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Cognitive Meaning-Making | Education interpreted as religious duty | Goal-oriented mindset, academic commitment | Strengthens intrinsic motivation |
| Emotional Regulation     | Faith reduces anxiety and stress        | Calmness, optimism under pressure          | Enhances resilience              |
| Moral Orientation        | Learning as ethical responsibility      | Discipline, academic integrity             | Builds character and consistency |
| Existential Purpose      | Education linked to life purpose        | Long-term perseverance                     | Sustains persistence             |

The data presented in Table 1 demonstrate that faith operates through interconnected psychological dimensions that collectively reinforce student persistence. The cognitive dimension allows students to reinterpret educational challenges as meaningful processes rather than burdens, thereby reducing perceived stress. Simultaneously, emotional regulation supported by spiritual beliefs enables students to maintain psychological stability even under financial or academic pressure (Zamhari et al., 2022). This is particularly relevant in rural contexts where uncertainty and resource limitations are prevalent.

The moral dimension further strengthens behavioral consistency by embedding ethical

responsibility into academic engagement. Students are not merely driven by performance outcomes but by a sense of accountability to higher moral standards. Finally, the existential dimension provides long-term direction, allowing students to sustain effort despite delayed rewards. These findings indicate that faith functions as an integrated psychological system that enhances both internal motivation and external academic performance.

### 2) Spiritual Practices as Mechanisms for Resilience and Coping

Beyond belief systems, the operationalization of faith through daily spiritual practices plays a critical role in

strengthening student resilience. Activities such as *shalat*, Qur’anic recitation, and participation in *halaqah* serve as structured coping mechanisms that regulate emotional and cognitive responses to stress. These practices create routine stability, which is essential for students navigating multiple pressures, including financial hardship and academic demands.

Research by [Rakhshanderou et al. \(2021; 2022\)](#) highlights the relationship between spirituality and self-efficacy, demonstrating that higher levels of spiritual engagement contribute to increased confidence in overcoming challenges. At ISIMU Pacitan, this relationship is evident in students’ ability to maintain persistence despite adverse conditions.

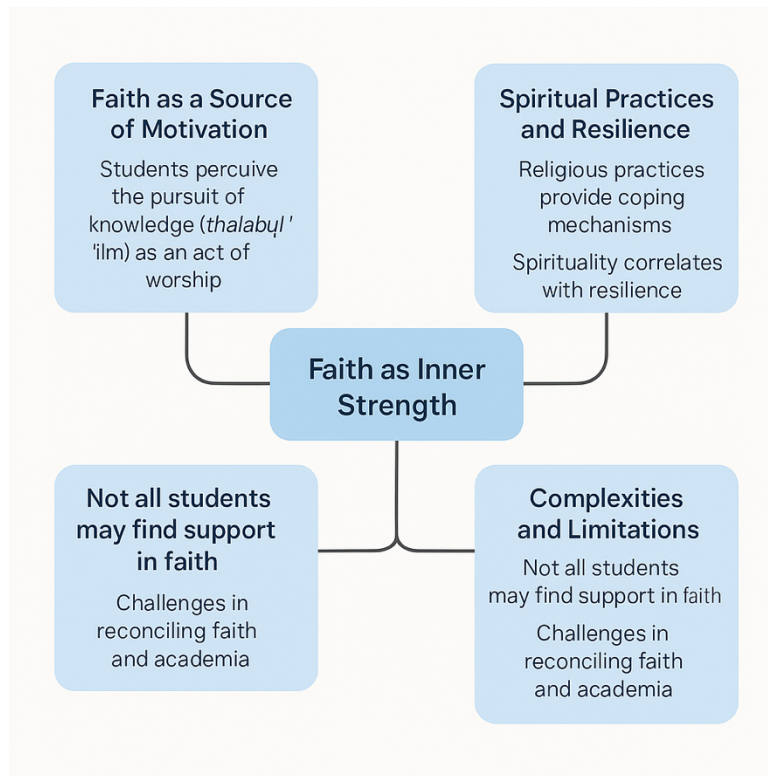
**Table 2. Role of Spiritual Practices in Student Resilience**

| Practice          | Function                 | Psychological Effect | Academic Outcome      |
|-------------------|--------------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|
| Shalat (Prayer)   | Routine discipline       | Emotional stability  | Improved focus        |
| Qur’an Recitation | Reflective engagement    | Reduced anxiety      | Better concentration  |
| Halaqah           | Social-spiritual support | Sense of belonging   | Increased persistence |
| Muhadharah        | Public expression        | Confidence building  | Active participation  |

Table 2 illustrates how spiritual practices function as both individual and collective coping mechanisms. Individually, practices such as prayer and recitation foster mindfulness and emotional regulation, which are critical for maintaining academic focus. Collectively, activities such as *halaqah* create a supportive environment that reduces feelings of isolation and enhances peer connection.

The integration of these practices into daily routines contributes to the development of adaptive coping strategies. Students learn

to manage stress through structured spiritual engagement rather than avoidance or withdrawal. This has significant implications for academic persistence, as resilience is not only maintained but continuously reinforced through repeated practice ([Parmin et al., 2021](#)). The combination of individual discipline and communal reinforcement creates a robust support system that sustains student engagement over time.



**Picture 1. Faith as Inner Strength**

The conceptual representation in Figure 1. Faith as Inner Strength illustrates the integrative role of faith in shaping student resilience and persistence. The model positions faith at the core of a dynamic system that connects motivation, coping mechanisms, and behavioral outcomes. Faith serves as the foundational layer that influences both internal psychological processes and external academic behaviors.

From an analytical perspective, the figure highlights three primary pathways. First, the motivational pathway demonstrates how faith generates intrinsic purpose, which drives sustained academic engagement. Second, the coping pathway illustrates how spiritual practices translate belief into actionable strategies for managing stress and adversity (Nurhasanah et al., 2022). Third, the behavioral pathway shows how these internal processes manifest in observable outcomes such as persistence, discipline, and academic achievement.

Importantly, the figure also reflects the recursive nature of these interactions. Positive academic experiences reinforce faith-based beliefs, creating a feedback loop that strengthens both motivation and resilience over time. This dynamic interaction suggests that faith is not a static attribute but an evolving resource that adapts to students' educational experiences. The model therefore provides a conceptual foundation for understanding how internal belief systems can interact with external conditions to produce sustained educational success in marginalized contexts.

### 3) Complexities and Limitations of Faith in Educational Contexts

Despite its significant benefits, the role of faith in education is not without limitations. The findings indicate that the influence of faith varies across individuals and may produce different outcomes depending on personal, cultural, and institutional factors.

Some students experience tensions between religious expectations and academic demands, particularly in contexts that require critical thinking and intellectual autonomy.

**Table 3. Challenges and Limitations of Faith-Based Educational Contexts**

| Challenge                  | Description                                  | Impact on Students                  | Institutional Implication   |
|----------------------------|----------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Religious Fatigue          | Overexposure to religious routines           | Decreased engagement                | Need for balanced approach  |
| Cognitive Dissonance       | Conflict between faith and critical thinking | Confusion, reduced confidence       | Encourage dialogic learning |
| Social Conformity Pressure | Expectation to align with dominant beliefs   | Feelings of exclusion               | Promote inclusivity         |
| Limited Flexibility        | Rigid interpretation of values               | Restricted intellectual exploration | Adaptive pedagogy needed    |

As shown in Table 3, the role of faith must be understood within a broader socio-educational context that includes both enabling and constraining factors. While faith provides structure and meaning, excessive rigidity may limit students' intellectual growth and critical engagement. This is consistent with findings by Lee et al. (2024), which emphasize the need for supportive and inclusive environments within religious educational institutions.

The presence of cognitive dissonance among some students highlights the importance of integrating critical thinking within faith-based education. Rather than positioning faith and reason as opposing forces, institutions must create spaces where both can coexist and inform one another. Additionally, issues of social conformity indicate that not all students experience faith-based environments in the same way, underscoring the need for culturally sensitive and inclusive pedagogical approaches (Zamhari et al., 2022).

Overall, the findings suggest that faith functions most effectively as a source of empowerment when it is implemented in a flexible and context-responsive manner. Institutions must therefore balance the preservation of religious values with the promotion of intellectual openness and inclusivity. This balanced approach ensures

that faith continues to serve as a source of strength rather than a potential constraint in students' educational journeys.

**b. Institutional Adaptation and Support**

Institutional adaptation at ISIMU Pacitan represents a strategic response to the structural barriers faced by students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Rather than relying solely on conventional administrative models, the institution adopts a context-sensitive approach that integrates financial flexibility, academic support, and socio-cultural responsiveness (Parmin et al., 2021). This adaptive capacity enables ISIMU Pacitan to function not only as an educational provider but also as a facilitator of equitable access and sustained academic participation. The findings indicate that institutional support plays a mediating role between students' internal motivation (driven by faith) and their actual academic outcomes, thereby translating potential into measurable success.

**1) Flexible Financial Mechanisms and Access Expansion**

Financial constraints remain one of the most significant barriers to higher education participation among rural students. ISIMU Pacitan addresses this challenge through a set of adaptive financial policies designed to

align institutional requirements with students' economic realities. These include installment-based tuition systems, targeted

scholarship programs, and emergency financial assistance.

**Table 4. Financial Support Mechanisms and Their Impact**

| Support Type             | Description                               | Immediate Effect           | Long-Term Impact          |
|--------------------------|-------------------------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------|
| Flexible Tuition         | Installment-based payment system          | Reduces financial pressure | Improves retention        |
| Internal Scholarships    | Targeted aid for disadvantaged students   | Increases access           | Enhances completion rates |
| Emergency Financial Aid  | Short-term assistance for urgent needs    | Prevents dropout           | Maintains continuity      |
| Cost Adjustment Policies | Adaptive fees based on economic condition | Inclusive access           | Promotes equity           |

Table 4 demonstrates that financial flexibility operates as a structural intervention rather than a supplementary policy. By allowing tuition payments to be adjusted according to students' financial capacity, the institution reduces immediate economic stress, which is often the primary trigger of dropout. This approach reflects a shift from standardized financial models toward adaptive governance that prioritizes equity.

Scholarship programs further strengthen this mechanism by providing targeted support to underprivileged students. Beyond financial relief, these scholarships serve as institutional recognition of student potential, reinforcing motivation and academic commitment. Empirical evidence suggests that financial aid significantly improves student retention and completion rates, particularly among low-income populations (Moores & Burgess, 2023).

Additionally, emergency financial aid plays a crucial role in addressing unexpected economic disruptions, which are

common in rural contexts characterized by unstable income patterns. The inclusion of cost-adjustment policies ensures that financial support is not static but responsive to changing student conditions. Collectively, these mechanisms demonstrate that financial adaptation is central to sustaining educational participation and reducing inequality.

## 2) Integration of Work and Study as a Sustainability Strategy

ISIMU Pacitan complements financial assistance with structured work-study opportunities that enable students to achieve financial sustainability while maintaining academic progress. Unlike external employment, which often conflicts with academic schedules, campus-based work is designed to be flexible and supportive of students' learning commitments.

**Table 5. Work-Study Integration Model**

| Component            | Description                  | Skill Development     | Academic Relevance |
|----------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------|
| Administrative Roles | Office and clerical tasks    | Organizational skills | Time management    |
| Library Assistance   | Academic resource management | Information literacy  | Research support   |
| Student Services     | Peer support roles           | Communication skills  | Social engagement  |
| Technical Support    | IT and digital assistance    | Technical competence  | Digital literacy   |

Table 5 illustrates that work-study integration at ISIMU Pacitan functions as a multidimensional strategy that addresses both financial and developmental needs. Students engaged in campus employment gain access to stable income sources while simultaneously developing transferable skills such as time management, communication, and problem-solving.

Importantly, this model minimizes the negative trade-offs commonly associated with student employment. External jobs often impose rigid schedules and high physical demands, which can negatively impact academic performance. In contrast, institutionally integrated work opportunities are aligned with academic calendars and supervised environments, ensuring that work complements rather than disrupts learning (Kurniawan et al., 2023).

Furthermore, participation in campus roles enhances students' sense of belonging and institutional engagement. Students

become active contributors to the academic community, which strengthens their identity as members of the institution. This aligns with findings by Holcombe and Kezar (2020), which emphasize the importance of integrated support systems in improving outcomes for first-generation and low-income students.

Thus, work-study integration not only supports financial stability but also contributes to holistic student development and long-term employability.

### 3) Holistic Mentoring and Institutional Support Systems

A key strength of ISIMU Pacitan lies in its holistic mentoring approach, which integrates academic guidance, social support, and spiritual development. This multi-layered mentoring system ensures that students receive continuous and comprehensive assistance throughout their academic journey.

Table 6. Holistic Mentoring Framework

| Mentoring Type      | Focus Area        | Key Activities             | Impact on Students      |
|---------------------|-------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------|
| Academic Mentoring  | Learning support  | Study planning, tutoring   | Improved performance    |
| Peer Mentoring      | Social adaptation | Orientation, peer guidance | Increased belonging     |
| Spiritual Mentoring | Moral development | Religious discussions      | Strengthened resilience |
| Career Mentoring    | Future planning   | Career advice, networking  | Enhanced readiness      |

Table 6 highlights that mentoring at ISIMU Pacitan extends beyond conventional academic advising. Academic mentoring provides structured support for learning, while peer mentoring facilitates social integration, which is particularly important for students transitioning from rural or pesantren backgrounds.

Spiritual mentoring reinforces internal motivation by aligning academic pursuits

with religious values, thereby creating consistency between personal beliefs and institutional expectations. Meanwhile, career mentoring prepares students for post-graduation pathways, ensuring that education translates into socio-economic mobility.

This integrated mentoring system reflects a student-centered approach that addresses multiple dimensions of student

experience simultaneously. Research by [Destin et al. \(2021\)](#) supports the effectiveness of such holistic models in improving engagement and persistence

among marginalized populations. By combining academic, social, and spiritual support, ISIMU Pacitan creates a resilient ecosystem that sustains student success.

**Table 7. Institutional Adaptation and Support Strategies at ISIMU Pacitan**

| Support Category              | Description                                                                                                               | Purpose and Impact                                                                                               |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Flexible Tuition Schemes      | Allows installment-based or adjusted tuition payments based on students' financial capacities.                            | Reduces immediate financial stress and dropout risk for low-income students.                                     |
| Internal Scholarships         | Scholarships targeted at underprivileged students based on financial need and academic promise.                           | Enhances retention and affirms institutional support for marginalized groups.                                    |
| Part-Time Job Opportunities   | Campus-based employment such as administrative assistants, library aides, or service roles tailored to student schedules. | Promotes financial independence without hindering academic progress; develops soft skills.                       |
| Academic Mentoring            | Faculty-led and peer-supported guidance in academics and campus integration.                                              | Boosts academic performance, motivation, and sense of belonging.                                                 |
| Spiritual and Moral Mentoring | Incorporates Islamic values into mentoring sessions, emphasizing personal growth, ethics, and resilience.                 | Reinforces moral development and inner strength, particularly beneficial for first-generation or rural students. |
| Limitations and Gaps          | Some students may lack awareness of these resources or face barriers in navigating institutional procedures.              | Highlights the need for improved outreach, simplified processes, and inclusive access strategies.                |

Table 7 presents a comprehensive synthesis of the institutional adaptation framework implemented at ISIMU Pacitan, integrating financial, academic, and socio-cultural support mechanisms into a unified model of student empowerment. Unlike the preceding tables (Table 4–6), which analyze each dimension in isolation, Table 7 consolidates these elements to demonstrate how institutional strategies operate as an interconnected system rather than discrete interventions.

From a structural perspective, Table 7 confirms that financial adaptability through flexible tuition schemes and targeted scholarships serves as the foundational layer of institutional support. These mechanisms directly address economic barriers that disproportionately affect students from low-income backgrounds. As previously discussed, financial aid is strongly correlated with improved retention and completion rates ([Moores & Burgess, 2023](#)),

and its integration within a broader institutional framework enhances its effectiveness by ensuring continuity rather than one-time relief.

At the meso level, the table highlights the role of work-study integration and mentoring systems as bridging mechanisms that connect access with persistence. Part-time employment opportunities embedded within the institution reduce students' financial vulnerability while simultaneously fostering skill development and institutional engagement. Similarly, mentoring systems encompassing academic, peer, and spiritual dimensions function as relational infrastructures that translate institutional policies into meaningful student experiences. This aligns with findings by [Destin et al. \(2021\)](#), which emphasize that sustained engagement among disadvantaged students depends on the availability of multidimensional support systems.

Importantly, Table 7 also reveals the significance of socio-cultural alignment within institutional strategies. The integration of spiritual mentoring and community-based values reflects a context-sensitive approach that resonates with students' backgrounds, particularly those from pesantren and rural communities (Zaslavski, 2023). This alignment enhances not only accessibility but also psychological belonging, which is a critical determinant of persistence in higher education.

However, the table also identifies several operational limitations that require critical attention. Issues related to uneven access, limited awareness of available programs, and administrative complexity indicate that the effectiveness of institutional adaptation is not solely determined by program availability but also by its accessibility and usability (Pease Dreibelbis et al., 2024). These constraints suggest the need for improved communication strategies, streamlined administrative processes, and continuous monitoring systems to ensure equitable distribution of support.

In a broader analytical context, Table 7 illustrates that institutional adaptation at ISIMU Pacitan reflects a shift toward a *holistic and systemic model of educational support*. Rather than addressing financial, academic, and social challenges separately, the institution integrates these dimensions into a cohesive framework that enhances resilience and persistence among underprivileged students. This model contributes to the literature by demonstrating that effective institutional support in rural higher education contexts requires not only resource provision but also structural alignment, cultural sensitivity, and operational coherence.

### c. Community and Peer Empowerment

Community and peer empowerment at ISIMU Pacitan not only function as socio-relational support systems but also reflect emerging paradigms of innovative and advanced learning in higher education. In contrast to traditional teacher-centered models, the learning environment observed in this context demonstrates characteristics of collaborative, contextual, and socially embedded learning processes (Mkwananzi & Melis, 2020). These processes align with contemporary perspectives on innovative learning, which emphasize student agency, co-construction of knowledge, and the integration of real-world contexts into educational experiences.

The findings indicate that peer networks and community engagement at ISIMU Pacitan create a distributed learning ecosystem, where knowledge is constructed through interaction, shared experience, and collective problem-solving. This aligns with the principles of advanced learning, particularly in terms of adaptive learning environments, socio-cultural learning integration, and experiential knowledge development. In this sense, community and peer empowerment do not merely support learning they *constitute* the learning process itself.

#### 1) Peer Networks as Collaborative Learning Systems

Peer support structures at ISIMU Pacitan function as informal yet highly effective collaborative learning environments. Students engage in continuous interaction through discussion, shared problem-solving, and mutual feedback, which enhances both cognitive and social learning outcomes. This model reflects a shift toward *peer-driven learning ecosystems*, a key characteristic of innovative learning frameworks.

Table 8. Peer Networks as Innovative Learning Environments

| Dimension             | Learning Characteristic      | Innovation Aspect      | Impact                 |
|-----------------------|------------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|
| Informal Interaction  | Knowledge sharing            | Collaborative learning | Improved understanding |
| Peer Discussion       | Co-construction of knowledge | Active learning        | Higher engagement      |
| Student Organizations | Experiential leadership      | Project-based learning | Skill development      |
| Religious Communities | Value-based learning         | Holistic learning      | Meaningful education   |

Table 8 illustrates that peer networks operate as decentralized learning platforms where students actively construct knowledge rather than passively receive it. This aligns with innovative learning paradigms that prioritize interaction, participation, and contextual relevance. Informal interactions and peer discussions enable students to process complex concepts through dialogue, thereby enhancing comprehension and retention.

Student organizations further extend this model by incorporating experiential and project-based learning elements. Students engage in leadership roles, organize activities, and solve real-world problems, which contributes to the development of higher-order thinking skills (Satria WD., 2025). Religious communities add a unique dimension by integrating value-based

learning, ensuring that knowledge acquisition is aligned with ethical and spiritual frameworks (Mayr & Oppl, 2023). This holistic approach reflects advanced learning principles that emphasize the integration of cognitive, affective, and moral dimensions.

## 2) Community-Based Learning as Experiential and Contextual Learning

Community-driven programs at ISIMU Pacitan represent a form of experiential learning that is deeply embedded in local contexts. These programs transform learning into a socially situated process, where students engage directly with community realities.

Table 9. Community Programs as Advanced Learning Models

| Program           | Learning Approach      | Advanced Learning Element  | Outcome          |
|-------------------|------------------------|----------------------------|------------------|
| Halaqah           | Reflective learning    | Metacognitive development  | Self-regulation  |
| Dakwah Camps      | Experiential learning  | Leadership-based learning  | Confidence       |
| Service Learning  | Contextual learning    | Real-world problem solving | Social impact    |
| Peer Study Groups | Collaborative learning | Adaptive learning          | Academic success |

Table 9 demonstrates that community-based programs at ISIMU Pacitan align closely with advanced learning frameworks, particularly in their emphasis on experiential, reflective, and adaptive learning. Halaqah sessions foster metacognitive awareness, enabling students to reflect on their learning processes and

develop self-regulation skills. This is a key component of advanced learning systems that prioritize learner autonomy.

Service-learning initiatives represent a strong example of contextual and problem-based learning. Students engage directly with societal challenges, applying theoretical knowledge to practical situations

(Qothrunada et al., 2025). This not only enhances learning relevance but also develops critical thinking and social responsibility. Jorgensen (2020) highlights that such models are particularly effective in marginalized contexts, where education

must be closely aligned with community needs.

Overall, these programs demonstrate that learning at ISIMU Pacitan extends beyond classroom boundaries, embodying a form of advanced learning that is adaptive, contextual, and socially embedded.

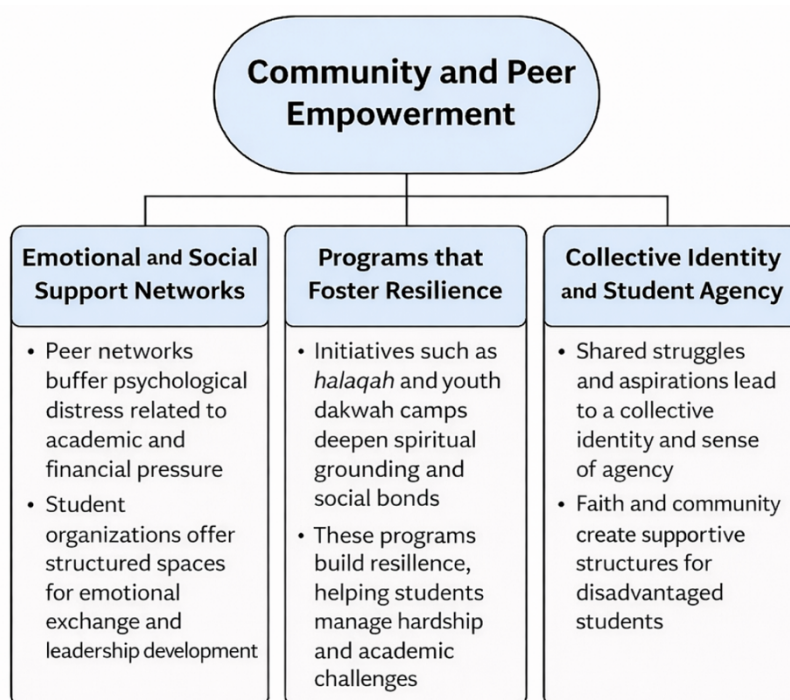


Figure 2. The of Figure Community and Peer Empowerment

Figure 2 illustrates the conceptual transformation of community and peer empowerment into an innovative learning ecosystem. The model positions community interaction as a central node that connects cognitive, social, and experiential learning processes. Unlike traditional linear learning models, this framework emphasizes a networked structure where learning occurs through multiple pathways.

The figure highlights three interconnected domains. First, the collaborative domain represents peer interactions as sites of knowledge co-construction. Second, the experiential domain captures community-based activities as platforms for applied learning. Third, the

identity domain reflects the role of collective values in shaping learner motivation and engagement.

From an advanced learning perspective, the figure demonstrates how learning is distributed across formal and informal environments. Students navigate between classroom instruction, peer interaction, and community engagement, creating a dynamic and adaptive learning trajectory (Kawakip & Sulanam, 2023). This aligns with contemporary theories of learning that emphasize flexibility, personalization, and contextual relevance.

Importantly, the model also illustrates feedback loops between these domains. Experiences gained from community

engagement inform peer discussions, which in turn influence individual learning strategies (Beri et al., 2025). This cyclical process enhances both depth and sustainability of learning outcomes, positioning ISIMU Pacitan as an example of an integrated and innovative learning ecosystem.

### 3) Collective Agency as a Driver of Transformative Learning

The emergence of collective identity among students at ISIMU Pacitan represents a critical component of advanced learning, particularly in fostering transformative learning experiences. Students move beyond passive participation to become active agents in their educational journey.

**Table 10. Collective Agency in Advanced Learning Context**

| Dimension          | Learning Role           | Innovation Element      | Impact               |
|--------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|----------------------|
| Shared Experience  | Social learning         | Situated learning       | Emotional resilience |
| Collective Goals   | Collaborative planning  | Co-learning             | Persistence          |
| Cultural Alignment | Identity-based learning | Inclusive learning      | Belonging            |
| Leadership Roles   | Active participation    | Transformative learning | Empowerment          |

Table 10 shows that collective agency transforms students into active participants in the learning process, aligning with the principles of transformative and advanced learning. Through shared experiences, students engage in situated learning, where knowledge is constructed within real-life contexts. Collective goals foster co-learning environments that enhance both motivation and persistence.

Cultural alignment ensures that learning remains relevant and inclusive, particularly for students from marginalized backgrounds. Leadership roles further reinforce transformative learning by enabling students to take ownership of their development and contribute to their communities (Suhaera et al., 2025).

However, as noted earlier, not all students experience these processes equally. Variations in participation and identity alignment highlight the need for inclusive learning designs that accommodate diverse student backgrounds (Fang et al., 2025).

## 4. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Islamic higher education institutions in rural

contexts, such as ISIMU Pacitan, can function as transformative ecosystems that effectively support underprivileged students in accessing, persisting in, and completing higher education. The findings reveal that student success is not determined by a single factor but emerges from the dynamic interaction of three interconnected dimensions: faith as an internal source of motivation and resilience, institutional adaptation as a mechanism for reducing structural barriers, and community and peer empowerment as a socio-relational support system.

Faith plays a foundational role in shaping students' cognitive and existential orientation toward education. By framing learning as a form of spiritual devotion, faith generates intrinsic motivation, strengthens resilience, and sustains long-term commitment despite socio-economic constraints. Institutional adaptation further translates this internal motivation into accessible and actionable pathways through flexible financial policies, integrated work-study opportunities, and holistic mentoring systems. These strategies collectively reduce

barriers to access while enhancing retention and academic performance. At the same time, community and peer empowerment provide an essential layer of emotional, social, and collaborative support, enabling students to develop collective agency, a sense of belonging, and adaptive coping strategies within a resource-constrained environment.

Importantly, this study advances the understanding of student persistence by proposing an integrated model that moves beyond fragmented explanations. The findings highlight that faith-based values, institutional mechanisms, and community dynamics operate synergistically rather than independently, forming a multidimensional support system that is both context-sensitive and sustainable. In addition, the study contributes to the broader discourse on innovative and advanced learning by demonstrating that learning in this context is not confined to formal instruction but is distributed across peer interactions, community engagement, and experiential practices. This reflects a shift toward collaborative, contextual, and transformative learning paradigms.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the literature by bridging the gap between faith-based education, social capital theory, and student persistence frameworks, offering a holistic model of empowerment in rural Islamic higher education. From a practical standpoint, the findings provide actionable insights for policymakers and institutional leaders, particularly in designing adaptive policies, inclusive support systems, and community-based learning strategies that address the needs of marginalized students.

Nevertheless, the study acknowledges several limitations, including the context-specific nature of the case and the reliance on

qualitative analysis, which may limit generalizability. Future research is recommended to conduct comparative studies across institutions, incorporate longitudinal designs to assess long-term outcomes, and further explore the scalability of this integrated model in diverse educational settings.

Overall, this study affirms that when faith, institutional adaptability, and community empowerment are strategically aligned, higher education can serve as a powerful instrument for social mobility and educational equity in marginalized rural contexts.

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