

Online Learning Technology for Religious Education: A Study of LMS Effectiveness Among PAUD Teachers in Indonesia's Affirmation Scholarship Program

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Abstract

This study examines the implementation of multicultural values in online Islamic Religious Education (PAI) for Early Childhood Education (PAUD) teachers receiving Affirmation Scholarships at Universitas Terbuka (UT). Using a quantitative descriptive survey method, data were collected from 69 respondents across Indonesia over three months (April–June 2026) through 14 online learning activities delivered via UT's Learning Management System (LMS). The study analyzes how PAI online learning integrates multicultural principles tolerance, inclusivity, and social cohesion within a nationally diverse teaching context. Findings show that 78.3% of respondents strongly agree that PAI online learning is easily accessible, 71% strongly agree that PAI materials enrich Islamic understanding relevant to early childhood teaching, and 64.7% strongly agree that tutor support and the LMS effectively sustain learning motivation. These results indicate that PAI online learning at UT is effective in cultivating multicultural competency among PAUD teachers, despite challenges of geographic dispersion and digital literacy variation. The study contributes to the global discourse on multicultural education by contextualizing it within Indonesia's Islamic educational tradition and open distance learning system.

Kata kunci:

Pendidikan
multikultural;
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Abstrak

Studi ini meneliti implementasi nilai-nilai multikultural dalam Pendidikan Agama Islam (PAI) daring untuk guru Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini (PAUD) penerima Beasiswa Afiriasi di Universitas Terbuka (UT). Dengan menggunakan metode survei deskriptif kuantitatif, data dikumpulkan dari 69 responden di seluruh Indonesia selama tiga bulan (April–Juni 2026) melalui 14 aktivitas pembelajaran daring yang disampaikan melalui Sistem Manajemen Pembelajaran (LMS) UT. Studi ini menganalisis bagaimana pembelajaran PAI daring mengintegrasikan prinsip-prinsip multicultural toleransi, inklusivitas, dan kohesi sosial dalam konteks pengajaran yang beragam secara nasional. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa 78,3% responden sangat setuju bahwa pembelajaran PAI daring mudah diakses, 71% sangat setuju bahwa materi PAI memperkaya pemahaman Islam yang relevan dengan pengajaran anak usia dini, dan 64,7% sangat setuju bahwa dukungan tutor dan LMS secara efektif mempertahankan motivasi belajar. Hasil ini menunjukkan bahwa pembelajaran PAI daring di UT efektif dalam menumbuhkan kompetensi multikultural di kalangan guru PAUD, meskipun menghadapi tantangan penyebaran geografis dan variasi literasi digital. Studi ini berkontribusi pada wacana global tentang pendidikan multikultural dengan mengontekstualisasikannya dalam tradisi pendidikan Islam Indonesia dan sistem pembelajaran jarak jauh yang terbuka..

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INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is a highly diverse nation encompassing more than 300 ethnic groups, over 700 regional languages, and six officially recognized religions, rendering multicultural education not merely a pedagogical option but an existential necessity for national cohesion (Mariyono, 2024; Suri & Chandra, 2021). The rapid expansion of digital technologies and online learning platforms has fundamentally reshaped the landscape of higher education, creating unprecedented opportunities for educators located in geographically remote regions to access professional development that was previously beyond their reach (Idris et al., 2023; Maarif et al., 2023; Syafi'i, 2025). In this context, Universitas Terbuka (UT), as Indonesia's sole open and distance learning university, has become a crucial vehicle for delivering Islamic Religious Education (Pendidikan Agama Islam, PAI) to PAUD teachers across the archipelago through its Affirmation Scholarship (Beasiswa Afirmasi) program.

Islamic Religious Education in Indonesia occupies a unique position at the intersection of religious identity, multicultural coexistence, and civic values. Scholars have consistently highlighted the capacity of PAI to serve as a platform for cultivating tolerance, respect for diversity, and *wasathiyah* (moderate Islamic) values that are essential in a pluralist democratic society (Alabdulhadi & Alkandari, 2024a, 2024b). The integration of multicultural values into PAI is particularly significant at the early childhood level, where foundational attitudes toward difference are formed and where teachers' own multicultural competencies directly shape the educational experiences of young children (Mukhsin et al., 2024; Wahyono et al., 2022).

Theoretically, this study is anchored in Banks's (1993) multidimensional model of multicultural education content integration, knowledge construction, prejudice reduction, equity pedagogy, and empowering school culture as extended by later work on policy dimensions (S. Lee et al., 2023) and institutionalization (M. Lee et al., 2019), and complemented by Syafi'i's (Imam Syafi'i, 2026; Syafi'i. I, 2025) *wasathiyah*-inclusive education framework. Within this framework, multicultural competency is treated not merely as cognitive knowledge of diversity but as an integrated disposition of affective openness, behavioral tolerance, and pedagogical skill, cultivated when tolerance and pluralism are embedded directly within disciplinary content in this case Islamic religious education rather than delivered as a separate add-on curriculum (Hasanuddin et al., 2023).

Despite this growing body of scholarship, significant research gaps persist. First, the intersection of online learning and multicultural Islamic education remains underexplored, particularly in contexts characterized by profound geographic and socioeconomic diversity such as Indonesia (Rohartati et al., 2024). Second, the specific multicultural learning experiences of PAUD teachers who occupy a uniquely influential position in shaping children's earliest social dispositions have received insufficient scholarly attention (Maromi & Hasibuan, 2024; Munastiwi & Sumarni, 2023). Third, the

role of affirmative action scholarship programs in democratizing access to multicultural PAI education at the university level constitutes a largely unexplored domain. The present study addresses these gaps by providing empirical evidence from a nationwide cohort of PAUD teachers engaged in online PAI learning at UT.

The state of the art in this field reflects three converging trajectories. First, an increasing body of research documents the effectiveness of online platforms in delivering multicultural education content to diverse learners, particularly in post-COVID-19 environments where digital learning has become normalized (Idris et al., 2023; O'Donnell et al., 2025). Second, the integration of *wasathiyah* values moderation, balance, and inclusive Islamic identity into formal education programs has emerged as a key strategy for Indonesian Islamic educational institutions seeking to navigate the tensions between religious authenticity and multicultural citizenship (Syafi'i & Rofi'i, 2023). Third, *pesantren* and Islamic higher education institutions have increasingly adopted hybrid and digital modalities, demonstrating the adaptability of Islamic educational traditions to contemporary pedagogical demands (Imam Syafi'i & Sariyani, 2025; Lathifah et al., 2025).

The urgency of the present study is underscored by several converging social dynamics. Indonesia continues to face challenges of sectarian tension, digital misinformation, and identity-based conflict, with reports documenting millions of items of negative online content including hate speech, hoaxes, and pornography circulating on social media (Sánchez-Oñate, 2025; Syafi'i, 2025). In this environment, PAUD teachers who can integrate multicultural and moderate Islamic values into their teaching play a vital preventative role. Moreover, the geographic dispersion of Affirmation Scholarship recipients across Indonesia from Lombok and Lampung to Kalimantan Utara and Kepulauan Riau means that online PAI at UT constitutes a critical bridge between institutional Islamic education and communities that would otherwise be served poorly by conventional campus-based programs. The novelty of this study lies in its combination of nationwide survey evidence, qualitative respondent reflections, and theoretical synthesis to map the multicultural dimensions of PAI online learning for PAUD teachers, a combination that has not previously been attempted in the Indonesian scholarly literature.

This paper is organized as follows. Following the introduction, the methods section describes the library research design and survey instrument employed. The findings section presents and analyzes the three-component questionnaire data alongside respondent reflections on their learning experiences. The discussion situates these findings within the international multicultural education literature and the specific context of Indonesian Islamic higher education. The conclusion synthesizes the implications for policy and practice in online PAI delivery for PAUD teachers.

The present study is therefore guided by the following three research questions:

RQ1. How do PAUD teachers receiving Affirmation Scholarships at Universitas Terbuka perceive the accessibility and ease of online Islamic Religious Education (PAI)?

RQ2. To what extent does online PAI learning at Universitas Terbuka contribute to the enhancement of Islamic understanding that is multicultural and relevant to early childhood education practice?

RQ3. How do the tutor support, Learning Management System (LMS), and online discussion forums at Universitas Terbuka enable PAUD teachers to sustain active engagement and motivation in multicultural PAI learning?

METHOD

This study employs a quantitative descriptive survey design, in which primary data were collected directly from PAUD teachers through a structured questionnaire and analyzed descriptively (Puji Lestari et al., 2024). The primary data were collected via a structured questionnaire administered through Google Forms to PAUD teachers enrolled in the PAI course at Universitas Terbuka under the Affirmation Scholarship program. Data collection took place over three months (April–June 2026), spanning 14 online learning activity sessions conducted across Indonesia. The survey was completed by 69 respondents (68–69 valid responses per item, reflecting minor item-level non-response). The questionnaire comprised three items operationalizing the three dimensions of the research questions, each rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Agree) to 5 (Strongly Disagree). Respondents also provided qualitative impressions (*kesan*) and recommendations (*pesan*) that were subject to thematic analysis.

The three questionnaire items and their corresponding scales were as follows: (1) accessibility and ease of access to PAI online learning at UT; (2) the contribution of PAI learning material to the enrichment of Islamic understanding relevant to PAUD teaching; and (3) the effectiveness of tutor support, LMS, and discussion forums in sustaining learner engagement and motivation. The Likert scale was structured so that a response of 1 indicated Strongly Agree and a response of 5 indicated Strongly Disagree, consistent with standard practice in Indonesian educational survey research (Mukhsin et al., 2024).

Documentary data were analyzed through content analysis, with themes identified inductively from the literature and deductively from the research framework. Survey data were analyzed descriptively, with frequency distributions and percentages computed for each response category. Qualitative responses were analyzed thematically, with recurring patterns in impressions and recommendations identified and categorized. The integration of documentary and survey evidence followed the mixed evidence synthesis procedures described by Shannon-Baker (Rohartati et al., 2024; Shannon-Baker, 2018).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Questionnaire Data Overview

The survey instrument yielded three datasets, each reflecting one of the three research dimensions. The results are presented below with accompanying bar chart visualizations derived from the Google Form response data. The Likert scale runs from 1 (Strongly Agree) to 5 (Strongly Disagree), so high concentrations at scale point 1 indicate strong affirmative responses.

Item 1: Accessibility and Ease of Online PAI Learning

The first questionnaire item addressed the accessibility and ease of PAI online learning at Universitas Terbuka for PAUD teachers receiving Affirmation Scholarships. Of 69 respondents, 54 (78.3%) selected response option 1 (Strongly Agree), 9 (13%) selected option 2 (Agree), 1 (1.4%) selected option 3 (Neutral), 3 (4.3%) selected option 4 (Disagree), and 2 (2.9%) selected option 5 (Strongly Disagree). These results indicate an overwhelmingly positive perception of the accessibility of UT's online PAI delivery, with more than nine in ten respondents (91.3%) reporting agreement or strong agreement.

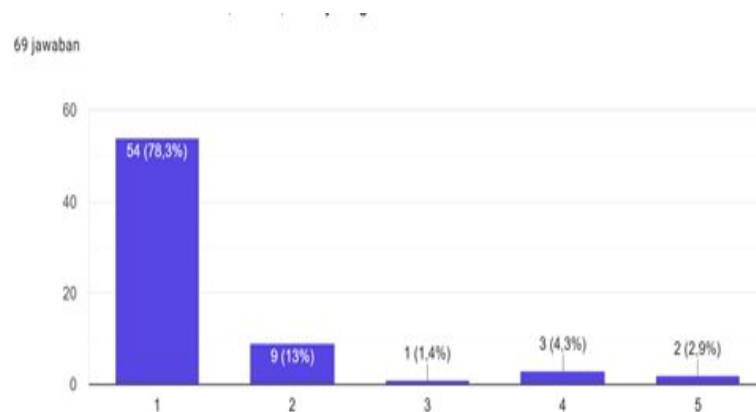


Figure 1. Respondent Perceptions of Accessibility of Online PAI Learning (n=69)

Item 2: Enrichment of Islamic Understanding Relevant to PAUD Teaching

The second item assessed the degree to which PAI online learning at UT contributed to PAUD teachers' Islamic understanding in ways relevant to their professional practice. Of 69 respondents, 49 (71%) chose option 1 (Strongly Agree), 15 (21.7%) chose option 2 (Agree), 2 (2.9%) chose option 3 (Neutral), 0 (0%) chose option 4 (Disagree), and 3 (4.3%) chose option 5 (Strongly Disagree). An aggregate of 92.7% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with this item, and notably, no respondent selected the Disagree option.

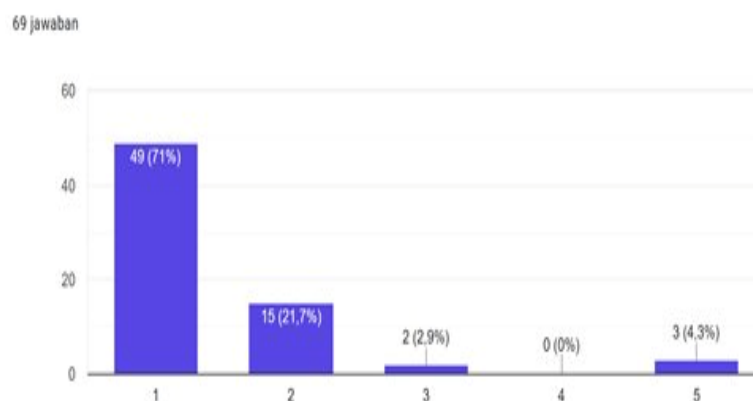


Figure 2. Respondent Perceptions of Islamic Understanding Enrichment through PAI Learning (n=69)

Notably, no respondent selected the "Disagree" option (option 4) for this item; the small proportion who did not agree chose either Neutral or Strongly Disagree.

Item 3: Effectiveness of Tutor, LMS, and Discussion Forum Support

The third item measured respondents' evaluation of the effectiveness of tutor support, the Learning Management System, and online discussion forums in maintaining active participation and learning motivation. Of 68 valid responses, 44 (64.7%) chose option 1 (Strongly Agree), 18 (26.5%) chose option 2 (Agree), 2 (2.9%) chose option 3 (Neutral), 0 (0%) chose option 4 (Disagree), and 3 (4.4%) chose option 5 (Strongly Disagree). In total, 91.2% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed.

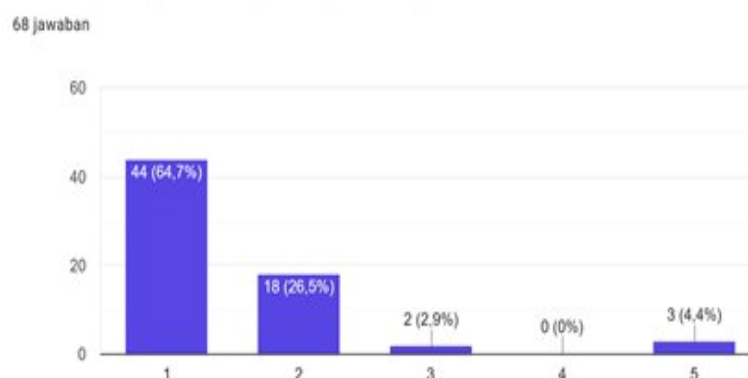


Figure 3. Respondent Perceptions of Tutor Support, LMS, and Discussion Forum Effectiveness (n=68)

In the accompanying qualitative data, multiple respondents described tutors as "inspirational," "patient," "humorous," and capable of "connecting religion to everyday life."

Qualitative Themes from Respondent Reflections

Thematic analysis of the 28 qualitative responses in the impressions and recommendations data revealed four dominant impression themes and four dominant

recommendation themes. In terms of impressions, respondents consistently reported: (1) the enrichment of Islamic knowledge and perspective through PAI learning; (2) the positive interpersonal qualities of tutors (described as friendly, patient, humorous, and inspirational); (3) the flexibility and supportiveness of UT's online learning environment for working educators; and (4) the perceived benefit of the Affirmation Scholarship program for older and experienced teachers. In terms of recommendations, the most frequent themes were: (1) hopes for the continued advancement and success of UT; (2) wishes for tutor health and continuation of guidance; (3) hope that PAI learning would continue to yield broad societal benefit; and (4) requests for greater flexibility in assignment deadlines and improved service quality.

Geographically, the 28 respondents providing qualitative data represented locations spanning West Nusa Tenggara (Lombok, Bima), Lampung, South Tangerang, North Kalimantan (Nunukan), the Riau Archipelago (Bintan), and Bangka Tengah a distribution illustrating the national reach of UT's PAI online program and the geographic diversity of the Affirmation Scholarship cohort. This spatial diversity is itself a multicultural dimension of the learning environment, as students from different regional, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds engage collaboratively in discussion forums and shared learning activities, enacting the multicultural principles that constitute the content of their PAI studies.

Discussion

The findings of this study make three principal contributions to the scholarship on multicultural Islamic education, online learning, and PAUD teacher professional development. First, they demonstrate empirically that online delivery of PAI at Universitas Terbuka successfully integrates multicultural values into Islamic education content and reaches teachers across Indonesia's geographic, ethnic, and cultural diversity. Second, they reveal that PAUD teachers receiving Affirmation Scholarships perceive online PAI as accessible, enriching, and well-supported perceptions that facilitate the multicultural professional development of educators who directly shape the earliest stages of children's socialization. Third, they illuminate the structural conditions specifically, the Affirmation Scholarship program, UT's open access model, and the LMS-supported learning environment that enable these outcomes.

The overwhelming accessibility ratings recorded in Item 1 (78.3% Strongly Agree) reflect the structural advantages of UT's open distance learning model, which eliminates the geographic and scheduling barriers that typically exclude teachers in remote regions from university-based professional development. This finding extends the argument made by Nurkholis (Nurkholis, 1970) that technology-enabled education is a critical mechanism for advancing equity in Indonesia's educational system, confirming that this argument applies specifically to the domain of Islamic religious education for PAUD teachers. It also resonates with the international literature documenting the democratizing potential of online multicultural education when

delivered through accessible institutional platforms (O'Donnell et al., 2025; Rohartati et al., 2024).

The finding that 92.7% of respondents agreed that PAI learning enriched their Islamic understanding in ways relevant to PAUD teaching (Item 2) speaks directly to the curriculum design principles underlying UT's PAI course. The integration of Islamic content with pedagogically relevant applications exemplifies what Banks (Banks, 1993) termed the content integration dimension of multicultural education the process by which disciplinary knowledge is used to illustrate and explore multicultural concepts. In the PAI context, Islamic theological and ethical content functions as the vehicle for exploring values of tolerance, compassion, and respect for diversity that are foundational to multicultural coexistence. This approach is consistent with what Muhajir et al. (2025) describe as the integration of multicultural values to foster tolerance and inclusivity in Islamic religious education, and with Syafi'i's (Imam Syafi'i, 2025; syafi'i, 2024) ethnographic documentation of multicultural values in interfaith lecturer cooperation as a model for institutional practice.

The effectiveness of tutor support, LMS, and discussion forums reported in Item 3 (91.2% agreement) highlights the critical role of interpersonal and technological mediation in sustaining online multicultural education. This finding converges with Choi and Lee's (Choi & Lee, 2020) systematic finding that professional development specifically structured to enhance multicultural competencies including through interactive online modalities significantly improves teacher self-efficacy in diverse classroom contexts. The qualitative descriptions of tutors as inspirational, humorous, and capable of connecting Islamic content to everyday life suggest that effective PAI tutors embody the relational dimensions of multicultural pedagogy that Shannon-Baker (Shannon-Baker, 2018) identify as essential: cultural responsiveness, affective engagement, and the ability to make abstract multicultural principles tangible through lived examples.

From a wasathiyah perspective, the online PAI program at UT can be understood as a practical instantiation of what Syafi'i and Sariyani (Imam Syafi'i & Sariyani, 2025) describe as the integration of spirituality, diversity, and digital literacy within an al-wasathiyah framework. By bringing together PAUD teachers from across Indonesia's archipelago into a shared online learning community structured by Islamic ethical principles of moderation, respect, and service, the program enacts the wasathiyah ideal of inclusive Islamic identity that affirms rather than negates cultural and regional diversity. This finding adds empirical weight to the theoretical arguments advanced by Syafi'i ((Syafi'i & Rofi'i, 2023) regarding the reinterpretation of inclusive education from a classical Islamic perspective in the digital era, and by Syafi'i regarding the mosaic of inclusivity and the transformation of wasathiyah values in the global era (Syafi'i, 2025).

The geographic distribution of respondents across thirteen provinces also invites reflection on what Thomas et al. (Thomas et al., 2025) describe as "authentic multicultural

education" education that goes beyond symbolic cultural representation to genuine engagement with lived diversity. The online discussion forums and collaborative activities of UT's PAI course create a virtual multicultural community in which PAUD teachers from Lombok, Lampung, Kalimantan, Riau, and Bangka encounter and interact with peers whose regional cultures, languages, and local Islamic practices may differ substantially from their own. This encounter mediated by shared Islamic values and pedagogical purpose models the kind of intercultural competency development that Arphattananon (Arphattananon, 2021) identifies as the most educationally significant outcome of multicultural education: not merely cognitive knowledge of diversity, but experiential engagement with difference within a supportive institutional framework.

The study also raises important questions about the relationship between online PAI learning and the broader challenges of social cohesion in Indonesia. As documented by Sánchez (2025), Indonesian social media is saturated with negative content including hate speech, hoaxes, and content that exploits SARA (ethnicity, religion, race, and inter-group) divisions. PAUD teachers who develop multicultural competency through online PAI learning are uniquely positioned to counter these trends at the grassroots level: by modeling tolerance and critical thinking in their own teaching practice, they can influence the social dispositions of the next generation of Indonesian citizens during the formative early childhood years. This finding lends empirical support to the urgency argument advanced in the introduction and highlights the strategic importance of continuing and expanding the Affirmation Scholarship program at UT.

These patterns also clarify why the findings emerged as they did and what they contribute beyond existing scholarship. The residual disagreement recorded in Item 1 (7.2% combined at options 4 and 5) is not evidence against the accessibility of UT's model but reflects genuine infrastructural constraints network connectivity and time availability that persist for teachers in remote locations, a pattern also raised in the qualitative data and consistent with Idris and Adawiyah's (2023) observation that online Islamic education platforms serve diverse populations well only when institutional support structures compensate for such constraints. Similarly, the complete absence of "Disagree" responses in Item 2, with dissenting respondents choosing either Neutral or Strongly Disagree, suggests that variation in outcomes traces to differences in respondents' baseline Islamic knowledge rather than to dissatisfaction with the course itself, extending Mukhsin et al.'s (2024) finding that embedding Islamic values in practical educational frameworks enhances retention regardless of learners' starting points. The qualitative descriptions of tutors as inspirational, patient, humorous, and able to connect religion to everyday life (Item 3) help explain the 91.2% agreement on tutor and LMS effectiveness: these are precisely the relational attributes that Choi and Lee (2020) associate with professional development that builds teacher self-efficacy, and that Shannon-Baker (2018) identify as markers of culturally responsive, multicultural pedagogy.

Taken together, these findings contribute to the literature in a way that has not previously been documented for Indonesia's PAUD-Islamic education intersection: they show that an open-and-distance-learning model can simultaneously deliver religious content, cultivate multicultural competency, and reach teachers who are otherwise excluded from face-to-face professional development because of geography. This is the study's central novelty prior work has examined multicultural Islamic education in classroom or pesantren settings (Muhajir et al., 2025) or online learning in general terms (Idris et al., 2023), but not the combination of online delivery, multicultural PAI content, and an affirmative-action teacher cohort spread across Indonesia's most peripheral regions. Practically, the findings suggest that Universitas Terbuka and similar institutions should treat tutor training as a multicultural-pedagogy intervention in its own right, since tutors' interpersonal qualities appear to do much of the work of sustaining motivation; that PAUD teacher-training policy should give explicit weight to religious-education modules as vehicles for early tolerance education, given how directly PAUD teachers shape children's earliest social dispositions; and that continued investment in connectivity infrastructure in remote regions such as Lombok, Kalimantan Utara, and Kepulauan Riau remains a precondition for equitable access, notwithstanding the programme's overall success.

The limitations of this study should also be acknowledged. The survey sample, while nationally distributed, was limited to 69 respondents who were all enrolled in a single PAI course at UT during a specific three-month period, limiting the generalizability of findings to other cohorts, courses, and institutions. The library research methodology, while appropriate for theoretical synthesis, does not permit causal inferences about the relationships between online PAI delivery and multicultural competency outcomes. Future research should employ longitudinal designs to track changes in multicultural competency among PAUD teachers over the duration of their PAI studies, and should compare outcomes between online and face-to-face modalities to assess the added value of the online format specifically.

Conclusion

This study has investigated the implementation of multicultural values in online Islamic Religious Education for PAUD teachers receiving Affirmation Scholarships at Universitas Terbuka. Drawing on library research methodology and survey data from 69 respondents across Indonesia, the study has demonstrated that online PAI at UT is perceived by the overwhelming majority of respondents as accessible (91.3% agreement), enriching of multicultural Islamic understanding relevant to PAUD teaching (92.7% agreement), and well-supported by tutors, LMS, and discussion forums (91.2% agreement). These findings establish that UT's online PAI program successfully integrates multicultural principles into Islamic educational content and delivers these effectively to a geographically, culturally, and socioeconomically diverse national cohort of PAUD educators.

The study contributes to international scholarship on multicultural education by documenting how the wasathiyah framework of moderate, inclusive Islam provides a culturally specific but globally resonant model for embedding multicultural values in religious education. It demonstrates that online learning, when supported by responsive tutors and well-designed LMS infrastructure, can function not merely as a mode of content delivery but as a multicultural learning community in its own right one in which diversity of geographic origin, regional culture, and local Islamic practice becomes a pedagogical resource rather than an obstacle to learning.

The policy implications are significant. The Affirmation Scholarship program at UT represents a high-impact investment in multicultural Islamic teacher education that reaches educators in the most underserved regions of Indonesia. Policymakers and educational administrators should consider expanding this program, deepening the integration of multicultural content in the PAI curriculum, and investing in the technical infrastructure particularly reliable internet connectivity in remote regions necessary to sustain equitable access. Future research should extend this study through longitudinal tracking of multicultural competency development, comparative analysis across PAI cohorts and institutions, and in-depth ethnographic investigation of the online learning communities that emerge within UT's virtual PAI classroom.

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