

Leadership as an Institutional Mechanism: Academic Quality Formation in State Islamic Higher Education Institutions

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ABSTRACT. Leadership studies in higher education remain largely dominated by perspectives that treat leadership as a set of individual styles, traits, or behavioural attributes. Such approaches often assume a relatively direct relationship between leadership and academic quality, while giving less attention to the institutional processes through which leadership is organised and sustained. This study examines how leadership operates as an institutional mechanism in shaping academic quality in State Islamic Higher Education Institutions in Indonesia. Using an explanatory mixed-methods design with a comparative case study orientation, the research was conducted at UIN Raden Intan Lampung and UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta. Quantitative survey data were used to map perceived leadership orientations. In contrast, qualitative interviews, observations, and document analysis were used to explain how leadership was enacted through governance, policy coordination, and quality assurance practices. The findings show that democratic, transformational, servant, and transactional orientations appear in hybrid and context-dependent forms, whereas authoritarian and laissez-faire orientations remain marginal. These patterns are better understood as institutional responses to organisational history, developmental phase, governance configuration, and strategic priorities than as expressions of leaders' personal preferences. Academic quality emerges not directly from particular leadership styles, but from leadership translated into governance arrangements, academic policies, internal quality assurance systems, and coordinated institutional routines. The comparison further indicates that leadership mediation takes different forms across the two institutions. The study thus shifts attention from personalistic and linear explanations toward a more contextual understanding of leadership in complex academic settings..

Keywords: *Institutional leadership, academic quality, higher education governance, religious higher education, State Islamic universities*



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INTRODUCTION

Academic quality has become a central concern in contemporary higher education governance because it is closely linked to institutional accreditation, academic reputation, research productivity, the satisfaction of the academic community, and the global competitiveness of universities (Hauptman Komotar, 2020; Neave, 2012; Shah et al., 2016). This concern has intensified as universities face rising demands for accountability, measurable performance, and continuous quality assurance across teaching, research, and institutional management (Chabibi et al., 2025; Husnaeni & Burga, 2024; Jannana et al., 2025; Madkan et al., 2025; Muslim et al., 2026). Within these policy and managerial pressures, university leadership is frequently positioned as a strategic factor in determining institutional capacity to respond to increasingly complex quality

demands. Empirical realities, however, indicate that the adoption of modern leadership models and advanced managerial practices does not necessarily translate into sustained improvements in academic quality (Ahyani et al., 2024; Amzat et al., 2022; Bodenhorn, 2020; Osseo-Asare et al., 2005; Sukarjono et al., 2026; Yuliana et al., 2025). This tension suggests that academic quality cannot be adequately explained by leadership styles or leaders' personal capacities alone, but must also be examined through the institutional systems that organise decision-making, academic policies, governance arrangements, and quality assurance processes.

Research on higher education leadership has largely focused on leadership styles, personal characteristics, and individual behaviours. The relationship between leadership and academic quality is commonly framed through a logic of direct influence, in which leadership is treated as an independent variable affecting academic staff performance, research productivity, academic satisfaction, and the effectiveness of internal quality assurance systems (Chami-Malaeb et al., 2024; Garwe, 2019; Hartati, 2021; Price et al., 2016; L. J. S. Serrano, 2020). Several studies also highlight the role of leadership in shaping academic culture, organisational climate, and institutional governance quality (Bodenhorn, 2020; Gilmore & Nguyen, 2024; Shah et al., 2016). In Islamic higher education, leadership research has often focused on values, organisational culture, and the prominence of authentic, democratic, or transformational leadership styles (Mulyono & Wekke, 2018; Shulhan, 2019; Walid et al., 2025). Although these studies offer important empirical insights, they tend to reduce leadership to individual attributes and to position academic quality as a direct outcome of leaders' personal preferences or capacities. What remains less well understood is how leadership is translated into academic policies, governance arrangements, and quality assurance practices that sustain academic quality across organisational units and leadership periods (Ahmad & Ahmed, 2023; Kantabutra, 2010; Kezar et al., 2011).

This omission is especially important in State Islamic Higher Education Institutions, where academic quality is shaped by the interplay of regulatory demands, normative commitments, and institutional culture, yet these dimensions are seldom analysed as part of how leadership works institutionally (Hasbi et al., 2025; Shulhan, 2019). Even in recent quality assurance scholarship, leadership is more often treated as a supporting condition than as part of the institutional arrangements through which quality systems operate (Garwe, 2019; O. M. E. Serrano et al., 2025). This study therefore examines how leadership functions as an institutional mechanism in shaping academic quality in State Islamic Higher Education Institutions. Rather than asking whether particular leadership styles are more effective than others, the analysis focuses on the processes and institutional arrangements through which leadership shapes academic quality (Almahdi, 2025; Hauptman Komotar, 2020; Katsikas, 2025; Owusu-Agyeman & Moroeroe, 2023). The study contributes by re-framing leadership as a mediating and processual institutional mechanism rather than as an individual style variable, thereby shifting attention away from personal leadership typologies toward the institutional processes through which academic quality is shaped (Brooks & Ezzani, 2022; Fettahlioglu et al., 2025; Hariadi et al., 2024; Hermawan et al., 2025).

It argues that variations in leadership styles are better understood not as expressions of personal preference, but as context-specific expressions of institutional strategies, organisational development, and configurations of academic governance. From this perspective, leadership practices can be read as responses to normative, regulatory, and cognitive pressures within the higher education field, such that leadership reflects shared institutional logics as much as individual dispositions (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Academic quality, in turn, is understood as an institutional outcome produced through policy stability, internal quality assurance systems, and academic cultures that endure across leadership periods (Neave, 2012; Olsen, 2007; Scott, 2014). In this way, the study extends the literature on higher education leadership, particularly in faith-based institutional contexts, by offering a more contextual and system-oriented account of how academic quality is produced and sustained. It also provides an analytical framework that may help leaders of State Islamic Higher Education Institutions design and manage academic quality in a more sustainable and context-sensitive way. This study reconceptualises leadership as a mediating

institutional process through which academic quality is produced and sustained, moving beyond style-based explanations centred on individual leaders. It offers a more contextual understanding of leadership in faith-based higher education and a useful basis for designing and managing academic quality in a sustainable and context-sensitive way.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employs an explanatory mixed-methods design with a comparative case study orientation to examine leadership as an institutional mechanism in the formation of academic quality (Creswell, 2013). Leadership is approached not as an individual variable, but as an organisational process through which values, policies, and governance arrangements are translated into academic practice. The study was conducted from April to November 2025 at two State Islamic Higher Education Institutions, namely Universitas Islam Negeri (UIN) Raden Intan Lampung and Universitas Islam Negeri (UIN) Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta. The design was selected because the study first required a broad mapping of perceived leadership orientations and then an in-depth explanation of how those orientations were enacted through institutional governance and quality assurance processes. The study does not seek to test statistical causal relationships, but to explain how leadership processes operate and mediate academic quality outcomes. A comparative case study design is therefore used to analyse leadership mechanisms across different institutional contexts, with the resulting generalisation intended to be analytical rather than statistical.

Research Sites and Case Selection

The research was conducted at UIN Raden Intan Lampung and UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta. The selection of these sites was based on considerations of theoretical and empirical relevance rather than statistical representativeness or simple performance comparison. Both institutions belong to the same category of State Islamic Higher Education Institutions, which makes them comparable in terms of formal regulatory framework, institutional mandate, and broad organisational function. At the same time, they differ in how leadership is organised, how governance coordination is carried out, and how academic quality assurance is embedded in institutional practice. This combination of institutional comparability and organisational variation makes the two cases analytically suitable for tracing how leadership operates through different institutional mechanisms. The cases were therefore selected not to determine which institution performs better, but to examine how variation in institutional configuration shapes the production and maintenance of academic quality across different contexts.

Data Sources and Types

This study draws on quantitative and qualitative data, as well as supporting documentary materials, all aligned with the research questions and objectives. Quantitative data were used at the initial analytical stage to identify dominant leadership styles within each institution through a Likert-scale survey distributed via Google Forms across institutional units. The survey participants were selected purposively to represent major institutional elements considered relevant to leadership and academic quality processes. Based on the research report, the survey involved 28 respondents, consisting of 14 respondents from UIN Raden Intan Lampung and 14 respondents from UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta. These respondents represented key institutional elements, including the rectorate, deanery, undergraduate, master's, and doctoral study programs or departments, quality assurance units, research and community service units, lecturers, students, and administrative personnel. The survey measured perceptions of six leadership dimensions, namely transformational, transactional, democratic, authoritarian, laissez-faire, and servant leadership. In this study, the survey functioned as an institutional mapping tool rather than as a basis for testing causal relationships between variables.

Qualitative data constitute the primary analytical basis for addressing the core research objective by explaining how leadership practices operate as institutional mechanisms and mediate the formation of academic quality. The qualitative phase involved semi-structured interviews with

8 participants across the two institutions, comprising university leaders, faculty leaders, lecturers, quality assurance managers, and related administrative actors. These participants were selected purposively on the basis of their institutional roles and their direct involvement in leadership, governance, and academic quality processes. Additional qualitative and contextual evidence was obtained through observation and document analysis. The documents examined included academic governance documents, internal quality assurance records, accreditation reports, institutional evaluation documents, and other relevant archives. These multiple sources were used to capture both formal institutional arrangements and actual leadership practices over time.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection followed a sequential explanatory design implemented in a structured and interrelated sequence. The first stage involved collecting quantitative data through an online survey administered via Google Forms to purposively selected respondents representing major institutional units in each university. This survey aimed to map collective perceptions of dominant leadership styles within each institution and to provide an initial institutional profile of leadership orientation. The second stage consisted of qualitative data collection conducted after the quantitative results had been obtained and reviewed. Semi-structured interviews were then used to explore how the leadership orientations identified in the survey were enacted in practice, particularly in decision-making processes, governance coordination, and academic quality assurance. The interview protocol was therefore informed by the survey mapping and directed toward explaining the institutional meaning of the quantitative patterns rather than merely repeating them. Observation was conducted to understand how leadership was performed in selected academic and administrative settings, while document analysis was undertaken in parallel to assess the consistency between leadership narratives, formal policies, and institutional quality systems. In this way, the qualitative phase was directly informed by the quantitative mapping rather than conducted independently from it.

Data Analysis Strategy

The data analysis strategy was aligned with the epistemic role of each data type. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, particularly percentages and mean tendencies, to map the distribution and dominant patterns of leadership styles within each institution. These descriptive results were used to identify which leadership orientations appeared most prominent in each case and to indicate where deeper qualitative explanation was required. These quantitative findings were not used as causal evidence, but as an initial analytical map that helped sharpen the focus of subsequent qualitative inquiry. Qualitative data from interviews, observation, and documents were analysed through thematic coding conducted inductively through data reduction, coding, thematic clustering, interpretation within each case, and cross-case comparison (Cohen et al., 2018). The analysis focused on identifying how leadership visions and values were translated into policies, routines, governance coordination, and academic quality systems. Integration occurred at the interpretive stage, where survey patterns were used to indicate dominant leadership orientations, and qualitative evidence was used to explain how and why these orientations were institutionalised differently across the two cases. In other words, the survey findings informed the focus of interviews and document review, while the qualitative analysis clarified the institutional processes through which the quantitative patterns became meaningful. Thus, the quantitative findings supported and guided qualitative interpretation, while the qualitative analysis provided the explanatory depth required by the study's institutional focus.

Trustworthiness, Research Rigour, and Ethical Considerations

Research trustworthiness and methodological rigour were ensured through triangulation of data sources, informant roles, methods, and documentary evidence. The consistency of findings was assessed through cross-informant and cross-data comparison, particularly between survey patterns, interview accounts, observational evidence, and institutional records. All stages of analysis were systematically documented to create a clear audit trail, thereby ensuring transparency, traceability, and analytical accountability throughout the research process. Ethical considerations

were addressed in accordance with established principles of academic research ethics, with all participants providing informed consent prior to data collection, informant identities kept confidential, and institutional data used solely for academic purposes. The study did not involve any intervention in institutional policies or practices and therefore did not interfere with ongoing governance structures or decision-making processes.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

Leadership Styles as Contextual Expressions of Institutional Mechanisms

Survey data from the first analytical stage were used to map perceived leadership orientations across the two institutions. Rather than reflecting leaders' personal preferences, the patterns point to leadership as something shaped by governance needs, academic culture, and institutional development in each setting. At UIN Raden Intan Lampung, the distribution of perceived leadership styles appears in Table 1.

Table 1. Distribution of Perceived Leadership Styles at UIN Raden Intan Lampung

No	Leadership Style	Percentage
1	Authoritarian	4.57%
2	Democratic	24.57%
3	Laissez-Faire	4.00%
4	Transformational	24.00%
5	Transactional	20.00%
6	Servant	22.86%

The distribution suggests a relatively balanced configuration, with democratic, transformational, and servant orientations occupying the most prominent positions. Rather than indicating a single dominant leadership model, this pattern points to an institutional context in which participation, strategic direction, and service-oriented leadership are combined with a still-significant need for coordination and performance control. The relatively strong presence of transactional leadership further suggests that academic quality consolidation at UIN Raden Intan Lampung is closely linked to monitoring, procedural compliance, and the achievement of institutional targets. At the same time, the low proportions of authoritarian and laissez-faire orientations indicate that leadership is neither highly centralised nor weakly coordinated.

At UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta, the distribution of perceived leadership styles appears in Table 2.

Table 2. Distribution of Perceived Leadership Styles at UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta

No	Leadership Style	Percentage
1	Authoritarian	3.96%
2	Democratic	19.80%
3	Laissez-Faire	8.91%
4	Transformational	29.70%
5	Transactional	18.80%
6	Servant	18.82%

In this case, transformational leadership appears more dominant than in UIN Raden Intan Lampung, while democratic, servant, and transactional orientations remain present in relatively balanced proportions. This pattern suggests a more mature institutional setting in which leadership is oriented less toward structural consolidation and more toward strategic direction, innovation, and academic development. The comparatively higher proportion of laissez-faire leadership should not be read simply as an absence of leadership, but more plausibly as an indication of greater autonomy at the unit level within an already established academic system.

Read across the two cases, the differences in leadership composition are better explained by institutional context than by leaders' personal capacities. UIN Raden Intan Lampung shows a configuration oriented toward structural strengthening, policy coordination, and academic quality

consolidation. UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta, by contrast, shows a configuration more strongly oriented toward transformation, broader strategic vision, and the expansion of academic autonomy. The survey results therefore function as an empirical map of how each university responds to its own governance demands, organisational trajectory, and academic priorities. Their significance lies less in causal explanation than in guiding the qualitative account of how leadership works as an institutionalised practice.

Leadership as an Institutional Mechanism in Shaping Academic Quality

Qualitative findings show how the leadership orientations identified in the survey are enacted in practice. In both institutions, leadership works less through personal intervention than through policy coordination, internal quality assurance, research support, academic digitalisation, and the alignment of priorities across organisational units. What emerges is a shared institutional logic: leadership becomes consequential when values and strategic direction are translated into stable academic practices that extend beyond individual leadership periods.

At UIN Raden Intan Lampung, leadership is understood as a collective function institutionalised within the academic structure. Interviews with the Head of the Internal Quality Assurance Unit indicate that strategies for improving academic quality are not driven by leaders' personal preferences but by an institutional vision that is deliberately internalised at the faculty and study program levels. The strengthening of democratic and transformational leadership is directed toward ensuring cross-unit participation in academic decision-making, so that resulting policies gain institutional legitimacy and can be implemented consistently. The Head of the Quality Assurance Unit emphasised this position by stating:

“A single leader cannot sustain academic quality. What we build is collective leadership at the faculty and program levels so that the academic direction remains consistent.”

This quotation indicates that democratic and transformational leadership styles are not understood as individual preferences but as institutional mechanisms to ensure the internalisation of the university's vision. Faculty and program leadership are positioned as extensions of the institutional system rather than merely administrative executors of central policies.

In research and publication, leadership operates through policy design that makes scholarly productivity an institutional target. The establishment of collaborative research centres, the provision of publication incentives, and the strengthening of mentoring systems indicate that academic quality is understood as an aggregate institutional achievement. The Head of the Quality Assurance Unit articulated this logic as follows:

“If research is left to individuals, the results are sporadic. That is why we promote research centres and mentoring so that productivity becomes an institutional achievement.”

This statement illustrates that leadership functions to coordinate resources and direct research activities so that they are not fragmented at the individual level but are accumulated into sustainable institutional performance.

The utilisation of learning technologies and academic digitalisation at UIN Raden Intan Lampung further demonstrates the institutional character of leadership. The integration of blended learning, the strengthening of digital infrastructure, and training in digital pedagogy for lecturers position technology as part of the learning quality assurance system. Technology is not treated as an additional facility but as an academic policy instrument directly linked to quality standards and learning evaluation.

Academic internationalisation and the enhancement of graduate quality further reinforce the role of leadership as a mechanism linking external demands with internal policies. The development of English medium programs, support for international students, academic mobility, and the implementation of outcome-based education curricula show how a vision of global competitiveness is translated into institutionalised operational policies. Graduate quality is shaped by curricular systems, the strengthening of soft skills, and alumni engagement, rather than by leaders' personal interventions.

The main patterns at UIN Raden Intan Lampung are summarised in Table 3.

Table 3. Strategies for Enhancing Academic Quality at UIN Raden Intan Lampung

Strategic Domain	Form of Strategy	Orientation of Institutional Mechanism
Academic Leadership	Strengthening democratic and transformational leadership	Collective leadership based on a shared vision across faculties and programs
Research and Publication	Collaborative research centres and publication incentives	Scholarly productivity as an institutional target
Academic Digitalization	Blended learning and digital infrastructure	Technology as a system for enhancing learning quality
Internationalization	English medium programs and academic mobility	Internationalisation as an instrument of academic reputation
Graduate Quality	OBE curriculum and strengthening of soft skills	Alignment of graduate outcomes with external needs
Quality Assurance	Strengthening internal quality assurance and data-based monitoring	Quality as a measurable and continuous process
Student Research	Research grants and joint publications	Students as part of the institutional research ecosystem

A similar logic of institutional leadership is also evident at UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta, although on a broader scale and with greater institutional complexity. Interviews with the Head of the Quality Assurance Unit indicate that academic quality is understood holistically as the result of the integration of education, research, student development, the campus environment, and governance. The Head of the Quality Assurance Unit emphasised this view by stating: “*Academic quality is not only about classes and research, but also about systems, campus culture, and clean governance.*”

This statement indicates that leadership at UIN Sunan Kalijaga functions as an integrative mechanism that unifies the academic, cultural, and administrative dimensions. The integration interconnection approach is institutionalised within the curriculum and learning processes, so that it does not depend on the personal interpretations of individual lecturers or leaders.

Student development at UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta demonstrates that institutional leadership does not separate academic achievement from character formation. Creativity programs, national and international mobility, and the strengthening of moderation and inclusivity reflect a holistic understanding of academic quality. The Head of the Quality Assurance Unit emphasised this as follows: “*Students must excel academically, but also be moderate and inclusive. That is part of institutional quality.*”

This quotation indicates that academic quality is framed as an institutional value outcome that extends beyond purely cognitive indicators. The strengthening of lecturers and educational staff through remuneration systems, publication incentives, simplification of research bureaucracy, and increased academic mobility further underscores that leadership operates through institutionalised regulations and reward systems. The dimensions of governance and readiness toward Public Service Agency Legal Entity status at UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta demonstrate that institutional leadership also operates at structural and financial levels. Agendas of transparency, accountability, funding diversification, and the development of business units and collaborative research are positioned as long-term strategies to ensure the sustainability of academic quality.

The main patterns at UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta are summarised in Table 4.

Table 4. Strategies for Enhancing Academic Quality at UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta

Strategic Domain	Form of Strategy	Orientation of Institutional Mechanism
Teaching and Learning	Integration, interconnection, and adaptive curriculum	Institutionalisation of multi- and transdisciplinary approaches
Internationalization	Joint degree and global programs	Internationalisation as academic architecture
Student Development	Creativity, achievement, and religious moderation	Students as academic and moral subjects

Academic Environment	Green, religious, and scholarly campus	Physical and cultural ecosystem supporting quality
Academic and Administrative Staff	Publication incentives and academic mobility	Human resources are the main drivers of institutional quality
Governance	Transparency and preparation for Public Service Agency Legal Entity status	Governance as the foundation of sustainable quality

Across both institutions, leadership operates through institutional arrangements rather than personal authority alone. The difference lies in the mechanism that becomes most prominent in each setting. At UIN Raden Intan Lampung, leadership is oriented toward coordination, consolidation, and the alignment of policy implementation across units. At UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta, it is oriented toward integration, academic autonomy, and the expansion of institutional capacity. Leadership styles become meaningful, then, only when read through the institutional mechanisms that organise academic quality in each context.

Cross-Case Patterns of Academic Quality as an Institutional Outcome

Academic quality in both institutions appears as an institutional outcome of sustained governance, policy continuity, and internal quality assurance rather than of leaders' personal intervention alone. The cross-case patterns are most visible in five domains: accreditation, research productivity, human resource capacity, student and graduate outcomes, and internationalisation. Table 5 presents the main cross-case patterns of academic quality.

Table 5. Core Academic Quality Indicators Across Cases

Domain	Indicator	UIN Raden Intan Lampung	UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta
Accreditation and Quality Assurance	Institutional accreditation	Excellent	Excellent
	Total study programs	37 programs	44 programs
	Programs with Excellent accreditation	19 programs	33 programs
	International accreditation/certification	None	FIBAA, ASIIN, AUN-QA
Research and Publication	Scopus-indexed journals	1 journal	5 journals
	Scopus publications (2022–2024)	334 documents	598 documents
	Scopus citations	4,501 citations	7,470 citations
	Collaborative publications	329 documents	557 documents
Human Resource Capacity	Total academic staff	512 persons	696 persons
	Doctoral degree lecturers	152 persons	215 persons
	Professors	48 persons	95 persons
	Student satisfaction	79.5%, very satisfied	77.42%, very satisfied
Student and Graduate Outcomes	Lecturer satisfaction	81.75%, very satisfied	76.35%, very satisfied
	Overall average GPA	3.62	3.72
	Average waiting period for employment	1.5 months	4.8 months
	Active international collaborations	35 MoUs	27 MoUs
Internationalisation	International students	210 students	9 students
	International lecturers	8 lecturers	39 lecturers

Table 5 points to several cross-case patterns. Both institutions have achieved Excellent institutional accreditation, suggesting that academic quality is sustained through formal systems of governance and quality assurance rather than episodic leadership action. UIN Sunan Kalijaga

Yogyakarta shows a stronger profile in program accreditation breadth, international accreditation, research productivity, citation performance, and academic staff capacity. This profile fits the qualitative evidence that leadership in this institution is tied to strategic expansion, institutional maturity, and academic reputation. UIN Raden Intan Lampung presents a different, but still important, quality profile. Its research and international accreditation indicators are lower, yet it records stronger levels of academic community satisfaction and a shorter graduate waiting period for employment. This points to a form of academic quality shaped less by international visibility and more by institutional cohesion, internal coordination, and the alignment of academic processes with local and organisational needs.

Table 5 should not be read merely as demographic data or an institutional profile. Instead, it provides evidence that academic quality in both cases has been embedded in organisational structures rather than left dependent on the personal initiative of individual leaders. The comparative differences are therefore more meaningful as indications of how each university stabilises quality through a specific configuration of governance, policy coordination, academic capacity, and strategic orientation than as simple markers of institutional ranking. In this sense, the table reinforces the argument that leadership exerts its influence primarily through institutionalised systems rather than through personal visibility alone.

Another pattern appears in the dominance of collaborative publications in both institutions. Academic performance here seems to depend less on isolated individual productivity than on organised institutional support. The qualitative findings help explain this pattern: leadership contributes to academic quality by building the policy environment, incentives, and governance mechanisms through which academic actors can work collectively.

The comparison also shows that a similar logic of institutional leadership can produce different quality profiles depending on structural and cultural context. Resource capacity, academic traditions, and patterns of participation affect how leadership mechanisms work in practice. Academic quality therefore appears not as a linear product of leadership design alone, but as the result of how institutionalised systems are aligned with lived academic practice.

Figure 1 draws these cross-case findings together. It presents leadership not as a personal attribute of individual leaders, but as an institutional mechanism linked to contextual conditions, governance arrangements, mediating processes, and academic quality outcomes.

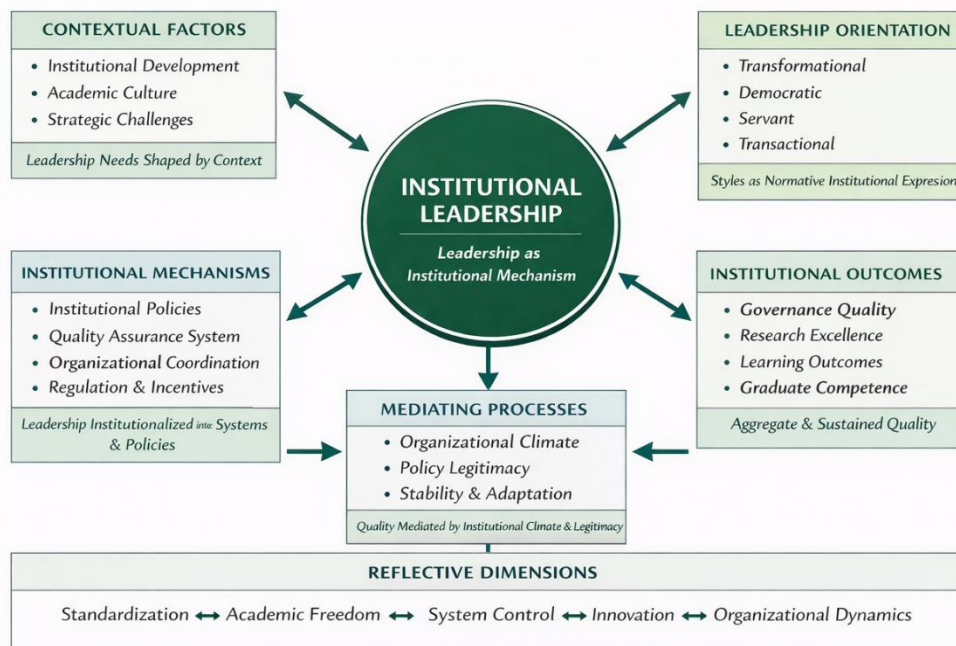


Figure 1. Institutional Leadership as a Mediating Mechanism in the Formation of Academic Quality

The figure synthesises the empirical patterns identified across the two institutions. It indicates that leadership becomes effective only when it is embedded in governance arrangements, quality assurance systems, organisational coordination, and policy instruments. In this sense, academic quality does not arise from leadership style in isolation, but from the ways leadership is institutionalised in everyday academic practice. The figure also suggests that similar leadership logics may produce different outcomes depending on organisational capacity, academic culture, and patterns of participation. It should therefore be read as an analytic summary of the findings rather than as a fixed model of institutional leadership.

Discussion

Leadership in State Islamic Higher Education Institutions is better understood in this study as a mediating institutional mechanism than as a collection of individual traits or preferred styles. The findings indicate that leadership becomes effective when strategic direction is translated into governance arrangements, academic policies, and internal quality assurance routines that organise institutional action across units and across time. Academic quality, therefore, does not appear as the immediate product of individual intervention, but as the outcome of leadership that works through institutional structures and sustained academic practices (Abidin & Sirojuddin, 2024; Cahyono et al., 2025; Desmiati et al., 2023; Hidayah et al., 2024). This interpretation is consistent with higher education governance scholarship that locates leadership within institutional architecture rather than within a single actor alone (Osseo-Asare et al., 2005; Shah et al., 2016; Sziegat, 2022). It also supports the argument that academic quality should be read as a collective and cumulative institutional achievement rather than the direct effect of formal leaders' personal actions (Garwe, 2019; Hauptman Komotar, 2020).

The findings also clarify more concretely how leadership mediates academic quality in practice. Across the two cases, leadership influences quality by coordinating policy implementation, stabilising organisational priorities, embedding evaluative routines, and aligning academic units around shared institutional expectations. What matters, therefore, is not the visibility of leadership as personal authority, but its capacity to institutionalise direction in ways that endure beyond episodic intervention. This interpretation departs from studies that assume a relatively direct relationship between leadership style and academic quality, especially those centred on transformational, democratic, or servant leadership as predictors of institutional performance (Chami-Malaeb et al., 2024; Hartati et al., 2019; Price et al., 2016). The findings here instead point to leadership influence operating through quality cultures, institutionalised policies, and evaluative mechanisms that regulate relations among academic subsystems (Asy'Ari et al., 2025; Hauptman Komotar, 2020; Kasmalinda et al., 2025; O. M. E. Serrano et al., 2025; Sholihah & Lailiyah, 2025).

The variation of leadership styles identified in this study is more convincingly interpreted as an institutional pattern than as evidence of leaders' psychological preferences. Democratic, transformational, servant, and transactional orientations appear less as fixed personal dispositions than as responses to normative expectations, governance demands, and strategic pressures within each university. This helps explain why several styles appear in hybrid and overlapping forms rather than as separate and competing models. A style-based reading alone would miss the extent to which leadership practices are shaped by what institutions consider legitimate, functional, and necessary in a given context (Mandefro et al., 2025; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2025). Such an interpretation is in line with institutional perspectives showing that organisations adopt practices not only because they are effective, but also because they are contextually appropriate and normatively recognised (Hunter et al., 2021; Rado Zuniga et al., 2025). Accordingly, leadership styles operate in hybrid and simultaneous forms aligned with institutional strategic needs. This interpretation extends the dialogue in leadership literature, which continues to privilege style as the primary analytic category.

The comparison between UIN Raden Intan Lampung and UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta shows that leadership effectiveness is contingent on organisational history, developmental phase, and governance configuration. In UIN Raden Intan Lampung, leadership is more visibly associated

with coordination, consolidation, and the alignment of implementation across units, suggesting that academic quality is sustained through collective policy coherence and organisational strengthening. In UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta, leadership works more through integration, academic autonomy, and the expansion of institutional capacity, indicating a configuration in which leadership supports broader strategic development. The point of comparison is not to identify a superior leadership model, but to show that institutional mediation takes different forms across different organisational settings (Hasbi et al., 2025; Sziegat, 2022). This weakens assumptions in the leadership literature that continue to search for a universally optimal model detached from institutional context.

Academic quality emerges here as an accumulated institutional effect rather than as the immediate output of individual leadership action. Across both institutions, quality is sustained through governance continuity, policy institutionalisation, internal quality assurance, and coordinated academic support systems. This explains why accreditation performance, research productivity, staff development, and graduate outcomes are more plausibly linked to institutional consistency than to charismatic leadership alone (Mtitu, 2025; Mulyono & Wekke, 2018; Shah et al., 2016). The argument resonates with higher education management scholarship suggesting that long-term quality stability depends more on systemic coherence than on the personal strength of leaders (Garwe, 2019; Osseo-Asare et al., 2005). Leadership, in this sense, serves less as a heroic source of excellence than as a mechanism that maintains continuity and enables academic actors to work within durable organisational arrangements.

A more critical issue emerges in the tension between quality system standardisation and academic freedom. Standardisation is often justified in quality management literature as necessary for accountability, comparability, and institutional control, yet the findings here indicate that excessive rigidity may constrain academic discretion and narrow the space for intellectual and pedagogical innovation. Leadership must therefore be read not only as a regulatory force, but also as a site of negotiation between external demands for measurable performance and internal commitments to academic autonomy (Alharthi, 2024; Hashim & Mahmood, 2012). This tension matters because institutional quality can shift from substantive academic improvement to procedural compliance when standardising instruments become too dominant. The central question is not whether standardisation should exist, but how leadership can maintain standards without weakening the reflexive and creative dimensions of academic life.

Leadership in this sense is more productively located within the institutional processes through which academic quality is organised, stabilised, and contested. Individual agency remains important, but its effects become consequential only when translated into institutional arrangements that endure across units, roles, and leadership periods. The analysis therefore shifts attention away from leadership style as the primary explanatory variable and toward the organisational mechanisms through which quality is produced and maintained. This perspective is especially relevant in State Islamic Higher Education Institutions, where leadership operates within regulatory, normative, and cultural environments that are structurally complex and historically layered. What emerges is a more grounded account of how leadership shapes academic quality beyond personalistic and linear models of explanation.

CONCLUSION

Leadership in State Islamic Higher Education Institutions is shown here to shape academic quality less through personal authority or preferred leadership style than through institutional processes that organise academic life over time. Academic quality develops when strategic direction is translated into governance arrangements, academic policies, internal quality assurance, and coordinated routines across units. The comparison between UIN Raden Intan Lampung and UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta also indicates that leadership does not operate through a single ideal model, but through institutional configurations shaped by organisational history, developmental phase, and strategic priorities. This shifts the discussion in higher education leadership studies away

from personalistic and linear assumptions and toward a closer understanding of how leadership works as an institutional mechanism in complex academic settings.

The practical relevance of these findings lies in the need for leaders and policymakers in State Islamic Higher Education Institutions to strengthen governance coherence, policy continuity, quality assurance capacity, and cross-unit coordination rather than relying too heavily on individual leadership figures. The findings also underline that quality systems need to be managed with care, since excessive standardisation may narrow academic discretion and reduce quality to procedural compliance. This study is limited to two institutional cases and does not examine in equal depth other possible influences such as disciplinary variation, demographic factors, or wider sectoral differences. Further research could extend this institutional mechanism perspective by examining a broader range of institutions, tracing leadership mediation across different organisational settings, and exploring how institutional arrangements interact with academic culture, policy change, and leadership transition over time.

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