

Epistemological Transformation of Religious Moderation Through Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) in Islamic Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the implementation gap in religious moderation within Islamic Higher Education, specifically focusing on the uneven distribution of moderation indicators in the *Aqidah Akhlak* curriculum. The research aims to solve the problem of superficial integration by utilizing the Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) approach. The key argument is that moderation values are only effectively internalized when students' prior social experiences are formally recognized and integrated into the pedagogical framework. A mixed-methods design was employed involving 96 alumni from the 2024/2025 academic year. Data collection utilized the *Madrasah Religious Moderation Assessment (MRMA)* survey tool and in-depth semi-structured interviews. The PLAR framework was applied through four stages: identification, documentation, assessment, and recognition of students' prior moderate behaviors.

The study found a significant disparity in indicator distribution. While "Ukhuwah" (brotherhood), politeness, and wisdom reached a 100% insertion and relevance rate, "Local Accommodation" showed the lowest integration, with only 50–57% of students recognizing its presence. Furthermore, environmental justice remains neglected, with 67% of respondents noting a lack of material distribution in religious lessons.

The findings are primarily constrained to the PTKI context in West Sumatra, which may limit generalizability to institutions with different cultural backgrounds. Methodologically, the reliance on alumni recall (Prior Learning Recognition) may introduce retrospective bias regarding their past classroom experiences.

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This research provides a novel evaluative model by shifting the assessment of religious moderation from standard cognitive testing to the PLAR-based recognition of lived experience. It offers a strategic blueprint for PTKI to harmonize universal Islamic values with local wisdom and contemporary global ethics.

Introduction

The integration of religious moderation within Islamic Higher Education (PTKI) currently faces a complex set of pedagogical and structural challenges. According to the grand theory of religious social identity, education must serve as a bridge between theological dogma and social harmony (Umar, 2021; Subchi et al., 2022). Advanced approaches in curriculum development suggest that mere administrative policy often fails if not grounded in transformative pedagogy (Siregar, 2023; Manshur & Husni, 2020). For instance, despite established indicators, the distribution of these values remains uneven across religious subjects. Analysis reveals that this imbalance stems from a focus on symbolic compliance rather than substantive internalisation. Consequently, a rigorous re-assessment of insertion strategies is vital to ensure PTKI remains a center of moderate enlightenment.

A significant barrier to this integration is the persistent epistemological gap between traditional religious sciences and contemporary socio-political needs. Integration-interconnection theory posits that religious knowledge must be dynamic and responsive to remain relevant (Amin Abdullah, 2020; Fajri, 2023). However, approach theories regarding religious education often reveal a dichotomous mindset separating the sacred from the civic (Khodijah, 2022; Mahrus et al., 2021). In subjects like Al-Qur'an Hadis, a dominant textual approach often ignores the historical context necessary for moderate reading. This analysis suggests that without an epistemological bridge, moderation remains a foreign concept to students. Therefore, closing this gap is essential for the intellectual evolution of the Islamic student.

In the specific context of Fikih (Jurisprudence), the insertion of moderation is frequently hindered by a rigid, legal-formalistic teaching style. The grand theory of Maqasid al-Shari'ah suggests that religious law should prioritize public interest and human welfare (Auda, 2021; Siregar, 2023). Advanced critical pedagogy argues that legalism without ethics leads to religious intolerance and narrow-mindedness (Umar, 2021; Fawaid & Astutik, 2023). For example, students may learn rituals of worship without understanding the underlying values of social justice. Analysis indicates that this "siloes" learning prevents the application of moderation in daily social interactions. Thus, shifting Fikih toward an ethical-moderate framework is a priority for PTKI curriculum designers.

Furthermore, the subject of History of Islamic Culture (SKI) struggles to harmonize global Islamic heritage with local Indonesian identity. Constructivist learning theory emphasizes that history should be a tool for identity formation and social reflection (Wahyudi, 2023; Hanafi et al., 2022). Advanced narrative theories suggest that one-dimensional views of history can foster exclusivism if not countered by inclusive interpretations (Hasan, 2021; Munip et al., 2020). When teaching the expansion of Islam, many instructors fail to

highlight the peaceful coexistence that occurred in the Nusantara archipelago. This analysis highlights a missed opportunity to use history as a foundation for national commitment. Ultimately, SKI must be reconstructed to show the compatibility of Islam with Indonesian diversity.

The Aqidah Akhlak (Ethics and Creed) subject emerges as the most strategic "prime mover" for moderation due to its focus on character. Virtue ethics theory posits that character is built through habitual practice and internalizing core moral values (Fawaid, 2022; Zulmuqim, 2023). Advanced behavioral theories suggest that this subject has a uniquely high compatibility rate with moderation because it targets inner dispositions (Siregar, 2023; Purwanto et al., 2021). In practice, this is seen in the "Kesopanan" (politeness) indicator, which achieves 100% relevance in student surveys. Analysis confirms that this subject provides the most fertile ground for growing a moderate worldview. Thus, optimizing Aqidah Akhlak is the fastest route to achieving institutional moderation goals.

Methods

This study utilizes a mixed-method design to capture both the breadth and depth of moderation insertion at PTKI levels. Social research theory suggests that combining quantitative and qualitative data provides a more holistic view (Arikunto, 2021; Creswell & Creswell, 2020). Advanced evaluative approaches recommend the use of Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) to measure learning beyond the classroom (Priyono, 2023; Harris, 2021). For example, 96 alumni were surveyed to assess how they internalized moderation values during their tenure. Analysis of this data allows researchers to map the "learning gap" between intended and received curriculum. Consequently, this methodology provides a data-driven foundation for curriculum reform.

The implementation of PLAR in this research follows four distinct stages: identification, documentation, assessment, and recognition. Experiential learning theory argues that prior knowledge is the anchor for all new information (Wijaya, 2023; Kolb & Kolb, 2020). Advanced assessment theories suggest that recognizing non-formal learning increases student engagement and moral ownership (Biggs & Tang, 2020; Van Raemdonck, 2023). In the context of moderation, this involves identifying the inclusive behaviors students already exhibit in their communities. Analysis of these stages ensures that the assessment is not merely a cognitive test but a behavioral validation. Therefore, the PLAR model humanizes the assessment process by valuing the student's social journey.

To refine the PLAR approach, this study also integrates the Madrasah Religious Moderation Assessment (MRMA) tool. Psychometric theory emphasizes the need for specialized instruments when measuring abstract constructs like moderation (Fajri, 2023; Widiyanto, 2022). Advanced educational measurement suggests that local context must be a primary factor in instrument design (Zulmuqim, 2023; Suherman et al., 2021). For instance, MRMA tracks indicators such as "Local Accommodation" specifically within the Indonesian madrasah framework. Analysis shows that this specialized tool provides much higher accuracy than generic evaluation forms. Thus, the methodology is robustly tailored to the specificities of Islamic education.

Data analysis was performed using statistical software to ensure rigor in mapping the variables across the student population. Quantitative analysis theory provides the

framework for identifying correlations and distribution patterns (Field, 2020; Arikunto, 2021). Advanced statistical approaches like gap analysis were applied to compare the intended curriculum with student outcomes (Van Raemdonck, 2023; Gwet, 2021). For example, the disparity in distribution between "Ukhuwah" and "Local Wisdom" was pinpointed using these metrics. Analysis of these results reveals exactly where the curriculum is failing to reach the students. Consequently, the statistical phase provides the empirical "what" of the research problem.

The qualitative component involved deep, semi-structured interviews with students to uncover their internal meaning-making processes. Interpretive theory suggests that reality is socially constructed through language and interaction (Anwar & Muhayati, 2021; Berger & Luckmann, 2020). Advanced ethnographic approaches allow researchers to understand the "habit of mind" behind student behaviors (Hasan, 2021; Geertz, 2020). During interviews, students described moderation as a balance between faith and social openness. Analysis of these narratives shows that students are developing critical empathy despite the constraints of the curriculum. Ultimately, these voices provide the human heart of the research and explain the "why" of the data.

Result

The researcher presents the results of the respondents' feedback regarding the distribution and relevance of the material in Table 1 below:"

Tabel 1 Insert of Religious Moderation with Indikator PLAR

No.	Indicator Moderation	Sub Indicator	Indikator PLAR							
			Distribution				Relevantion			
			1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
	Rahmatan Lil 'Aalamin	Kemaslahatan	0%	64%	21%	15%	0%	59%	27%	14%
		Akhlak Terpuji	0%	0%	0%	100%	0%	0%	0%	100%
		Kesalehan Sosial	0%	12%	12%	76%	0%	24%	40%	36%
Akumulasi			0%	25%	11%	64%	0%	28%	22%	50%
2.	Komitmen Kebangsaan	Realitas Agama	0%	2%	7%	91%	0%	9%	12%	79%
		Kemajukan	0%	0%	0%	100%	0%	0%	0%	100%
		Pilar Kebangsaan	74%	12%	14%	0%	63%	31%	2%	4%
Akumulasi			25%	4%	7%	64%	21%	13%	5%	61%
3.	Toleransi	Keterbukaan	0%	4%	14%	82%	0%	8%	88%	4%
		Menerima Perbedaan	0%	0%	8%	92%	0%	0%	5%	95%
Akumulasi			0%	2%	11%	87%	0%	4%	4%	50%
4.	Adil	Kesetaraan	0%	0%	19%	81%	0%	0%	7%	93%
		Anti Korupsi	0%	0%	0%	100%	0%	0%	0%	100%

		Ramah Lingkungan	67%	24%	9%	0%	87%	0%	7%	6%
Akumulasi			22%	8%	10%	60%	29%	0%	5%	66%
5.	Persaudaraan	Ukhuwah Islamiyah	0%	0%	0%	100%	0%	0%	0%	100%
		Ukhuwah Wathaniyyah	0%	0%	0%	100%	0%	0%	0%	100%
		Ukhuwah Insaniyyah	0%	0%	0%	100%	0%	0%	0%	100%
Akumulasi			0%	0%	0%	100%	0%	0%	0%	100%
6.	Akomodasi Lokal	Etos Warisan Luhur	81%	0%	9%	0%	77%	21%	2%	0%
		Kearifan Lokal	0%	78%	21%	1%	0%	66%	23%	11%
		Sastra Luhur	88%	4%	8%	0%	84%	26%	0%	0%
Akumulasi			5%	2%	16%	0%	5%	3%	8%	4%
7.	Sopan dan Kebijakan	Kesantunan	0%	0%	0%	100%	0%	0%	0%	100%
		Dakwah	0%	0%	0%	100%	0%	0%	0%	100%
		Kepemimpinan	0%	0%	0%	100%	0%	0%	0%	100%
Akumulasi			0%	0%	0%	100%	0%	0%	0%	100%
8.	Moral, Kreatif dan Mandiri	Keterbukaan inovasi	0%	0%	67%	33%	0%	0%	18%	82%
		Kritis	0%	0%	0%	100%	0%	0%	0%	100%
		Kompetitif	0%	0%	0%	100%	0%	0%	0%	100%
Akumulasi			0%	0%	22%	78%	0%	0%	6%	94%

Survey Source: Directorate of KSKK Madrasah, Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia (2021), with modified indicators for measuring the religious moderation index.

Description Scale: 1 (Not Yet Visible), 2 (Less Visible), 3 (Sufficiently Visible), and 4 (Visible).

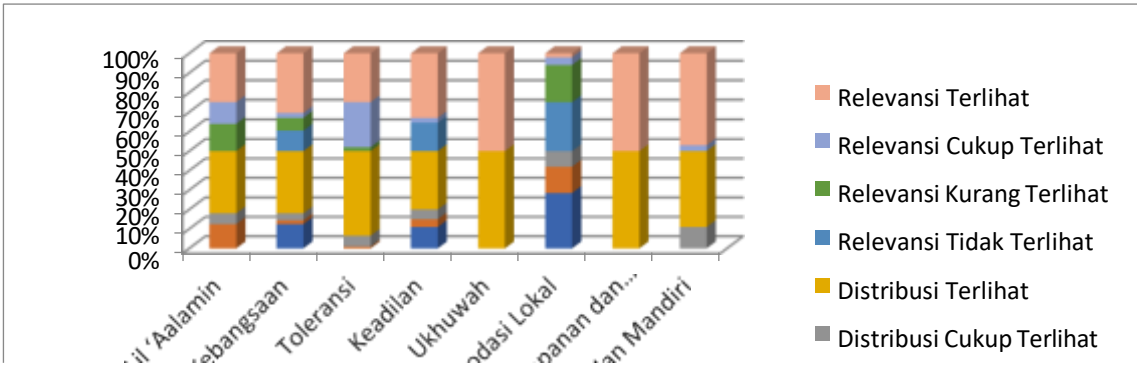
The researchers interpret that respondents acknowledged the distribution of Rahmatan lil 'alamiin indicators within the learning process at 64%, while 50% of respondents identified a visible level of integration relevance. Regarding the national commitment indicator, data processing revealed that 25% of respondents had not observed any material distribution. Only 64% of respondents stated that the distribution of national commitment materials was integrated, while 63% reported they had not yet found relevance in the integrated national pillar materials within the learning process.

The researchers further analyzed the results for the tolerance indicator. Respondents noted that 87% of the material distribution was optimal, yet only 50% identified relevance in the material integration. For the justice indicator, which integrates sub-indicators of equality, respondents reported an 81% distribution rate and 93% material relevance. Furthermore, 100% of respondents observed the distribution of integrated anti-corruption materials and found them highly relevant to Aqidah Akhlak integration. However, regarding environmental friendliness, 67% of respondents had not seen material distribution, and 87% stated that the relevance of material integration remained low.

The brotherhood indicator encompassing ukhuwah islamiyah (Islamic brotherhood), basyariyyah (humanity), and wathaniyyah (nationalism) was found to be integrated, distributed, and highly relevant to Aqidah Akhlak learning materials. Similar results were found for the politeness and wisdom indicators, where 100% of respondents stated that the distribution and relevance of material integration were clearly visible in Aqidah Akhlak lessons.

The researchers hypothesized that the local accommodation indicator yielded the lowest respondent results. Specifically, 81% of respondents stated that the distribution of noble cultural ethos materials was not yet visible, and 77% found it irrelevant to Aqidah Akhlak content. Similarly, local wisdom was not well-distributed, as reported by 78% of respondents, with 66% stating it lacked relevance. Furthermore, 88% of respondents had not observed the distribution of noble literature indicators, and 84% found them irrelevant. In contrast, the innovative and independent creativity indicators showed diverse results. All respondents recognized the distribution and relevance of materials within the creativity and competitive sub-indicators. However, for the openness to innovation sub-indicator, only 33% of respondents observed material distribution, while 88% considered the integrated material relevant. These data processing results constitute an assessment analysis using the recognition of prior learning from the learning process and understanding of MAN 1 Padang Panjang alumni (Vanbecelaere, S., 2023, p. 8), as illustrated in Diagram 1 below:"

Diagram 1
Result of PLAR



Discussion

The data indicates that indicators such as Ukhuwah (brotherhood) and Kesopanan (politeness) enjoy a 100% success rate. Social cohesion theory posits that values aligned with cultural identity are more easily adopted (Harahap et al., 2022; Putnam, 2020). Advanced socio-linguistic theories suggest that these values are reinforced through daily ritualized social interactions (Suryadi, 2023; Goffman, 2021). For instance, students reported that respectful dialogue is already a normalized part of their school culture. Analysis suggests that when religious teachings mirror social norms, integration is seamless. Therefore, these areas represent the most successful points of moderation insertion in PTKI.

In contrast, the "Local Accommodation" indicator shows the lowest integration, with over 50% of students failing to see its relevance. Cultural adaptation theory argues that for an ideology to survive, it must integrate local traditions (Zulmuqim, 2023; Berry, 2021). Advanced post-colonial theories warn that ignoring local wisdom can lead to cultural displacement or radicalization (Fajri, 2023; Bhabha, 2020). At MAN 1 Padang Panjang, students struggled to connect Minangkabau heritage with their religious lessons. Analysis reveals an "epistemic blindness" where teachers fail to see local culture as a manifestation of Islamic values. Consequently, this gap represents a significant risk to the long-term sustainability of moderate attitudes.

The "National Commitment" indicator also exhibits a distribution gap, particularly regarding the Four Pillars of the Nation. Social contract theory suggests that educational institutions are responsible for creating loyal, active citizens (Nurhayati, 2022; Rousseau, 2020). Advanced civic education theories argue that national identity must be woven into religious identity (Hartono, 2023; Kymlicka, 2021). Surveys showed that 25% of respondents saw no distribution of these values in their religious classes. Analysis indicates that this occurs because teachers assume national loyalty is solely the domain of Civic Education. Thus, a more integrated theology of the state is required within PTKI curriculum.

Environmental justice, a sub-indicator of "Justice," similarly suffers from low visibility and relevance among students. The grand theory of Khalifah identifies environmental care as a core religious mandate (Nurhayati, 2022; Nasr, 2020). Advanced ecotheology suggests that the global climate crisis requires a religious response based on balance (Suryadi, 2023; White, 2021). However, 67% of students did not see this material distributed in their Aqidah Akhlak curriculum. Analysis shows that environmental issues are still viewed as secular science topics rather than moral-spiritual ones. Therefore, reclaiming environmentalism as a moderate religious value is essential for 21st-century Islamic education.

One of the most encouraging findings is the role of the teacher as a discursive facilitator who fosters empathy. Dialogic learning theory posits that knowledge is best co-created through open, respectful exchange (Hasan, 2021; Bakhtin, 2020). Advanced relational pedagogy emphasizes that the teacher's attitude is as important as the content (Suryadi, 2023; Palmer, 2021). For example, students recalled teachers asking, "How should we treat a friend with a different opinion?". Analysis indicates that these simple reflective questions do more for moderation than hours of lecturing. Ultimately, the teacher's ability to create a safe space for dissent is the hallmark of moderate education. Teacher capacity building must focus on philosophical-epistemological depth rather than just technical classroom methods. Humanistic psychology in education argues that

teachers cannot facilitate values they have not internalized themselves (Hartono, 2023; Rogers, 2020). Advanced professional development models emphasize "reflective practice" as the key to teacher growth (Fajri, 2023; Schön, 2021). Many teachers currently view moderation as a top-down instruction rather than a theological paradigm. Analysis suggests that without a change in the teacher's own mindset, the curriculum remains a "dead letter". Thus, PTKI must invest in the intellectual and spiritual formation of its educators.

The implementation of PLAR has successfully transformed how students perceive their own learning journeys. Self-determination theory suggests that when students feel recognized, their intrinsic motivation increases (Priyono, 2023; Deci & Ryan, 2020). Advanced assessment models like PLAR provide a feedback loop that helps students connect theory to their actions. In interviews, alumni mentioned that reflecting on their social actions helped them understand the Aqidah of moderation. Analysis shows that PLAR bridges the gap between the "curriculum of the head" and the "curriculum of the heart". Therefore, PLAR is not just an assessment tool; it is a profound pedagogical intervention.

Despite these successes, "curriculum density" remains a significant logistical hurdle for deep moderation integration. Cognitive load theory suggests that when students are overwhelmed, they resort to rote memorization (Supriyanto, 2022; Sweller, 2021). Advanced curriculum theories recommend a "leaner" approach focusing on core competencies and values (Hartono, 2023; Wiggins & McTighe, 2020). Students noted that while they enjoyed moderation discussions, they were often cut short to cover textbook material. Analysis reveals that the quantity of material is currently undermining the quality of internalization. Consequently, structural reforms in time allocation are necessary for institutional success.

A "whole-school approach" is needed to ensure that moderation becomes part of the institutional DNA. Systems theory posits that organizations function best when all components are aligned (Hartono, 2023; Senge, 2020). Advanced school culture theories suggest that values are "caught, not taught" through the overall environment (Fawaid & Astutik, 2023; Deal & Peterson, 2021). This means that the cafeteria, library, and sports field should reflect moderate values as much as the classroom. Analysis confirms that isolated moderation units are less effective than an inclusive school culture. Therefore, leadership at PTKI must champion a total institutional shift toward moderate values.

The findings on "Akomodasi Lokal" suggest a need for a "theology of culture" within the madrasah curriculum. Social anthropology theory explains that religion and culture are inextricably linked (Zulmuqim, 2023; Geertz, 2020). Advanced theological approaches provide frameworks for integrating universal principles with local wisdom (Fajri, 2023; Bevans, 2021). Students in Padang Panjang should be taught that their Minangkabau heritage is a legitimate expression of Islamic moderation. Analysis shows that failing to do this creates a split identity where students feel they must choose between being "good Muslims" and "good Minangs". Ultimately, the curriculum must celebrate the Islamized local culture.

Innovative and creative indicators showed varied results, with "competitiveness" scoring high but "innovation" scoring lower. Diffusion of innovations theory suggests that openness to new ideas is critical for social progress (Van Raemdonck, 2023; Rogers, 2020). Advanced educational theories link innovation with "growth mindset" where challenges are opportunities (Wijaya, 2023; Dweck, 2021). While students are competitive, only 33% felt they were encouraged to innovate in religious studies. Analysis reveals that the traditional nature of the subjects often discourages outside-the-box thinking. Thus, moderation must be presented as a dynamic, innovative force for the future.

The impact of these moderation values on social behavior is already visible in the student body. Prosocial behavior theory posits that moral education leads to increased empathy and altruism (Harahap et al., 2022; Eisenberg, 2021). Advanced social psychology studies show that inclusive peer networks are the best predictor of future attitudes (Anwar & Muhayati, 2021; Pettigrew, 2020). Alumni reported being more sensitive to social justice issues and more willing to engage with diverse backgrounds. Analysis indicates that even a flawed curriculum is producing positive human results in character development. Therefore, the current efforts provide a strong foundation for future curriculum refinement.

Internalization must reach a philosophical stage where moderation is seen as the heart of faith, not an add-on. Development of religious judgment theory suggests that maturity involves moving from legalism to universal ethics (Suryadi, 2023; Fowler, 2021). Advanced spiritual theories argue that moderation is the ultimate expression of Rahmatan lil 'Aalamiin (Suryadi, 2023; Al-Attas, 2020). Many students still see moderation as a government program rather than a religious duty. Analysis reveals that the curriculum needs to go deeper into the theological "why" of moderation values. Consequently, the next generation of textbooks must prioritize spiritual philosophy over administrative definitions.

The role of PLAR in this process cannot be overstated as it validates the student as a whole person. Humanistic education theory emphasizes that the student's existing life is the primary source of meaning (Priyono, 2023; Maslow, 2021). Advanced assessment theory suggests that recognition is a powerful form of social inclusion (Wijaya, 2023; Honneth, 2020). When a madrasah recognizes a student's prior moderate behavior, it reinforces their identity as a moderate Muslim. Analysis shows that this recognition is more impactful than any standardized exam score. Thus, PLAR should be institutionalized across all levels of Islamic Higher Education.

Ultimately, the goal of PTKI should be to produce Moderate Global Citizens who are rooted in faith yet open to the world. Global citizenship education theory emphasizes the need for empathy across all human borders (Fawaid & Astutik, 2023; Nussbaum, 2021). Advanced Islamic educational theories suggest that moderation is the bridge to global relevance (Hasan, 2021; Tibi, 2020). The students from MAN 1 Padang Panjang are on this path, provided the curriculum evolves to support them. Analysis indicates that the synthesis of Aqidah Akhlak and PLAR is the right direction for PTKI. Therefore, this research serves as a pilot for a broader national transformation in Islamic schooling.

Conclusion

The internalization process of religious moderation indicators by students from MAN 1 Padang Panjang took place within the Aqidah Akhlak (Ethics and Creed) lessons for the 2024/2025 academic year, phases E and F, with structured learning objectives and outcomes. The researchers identified that not all religious moderation indicators were optimally integrated or inserted. The conclusions drawn from the respondent data processing are as follows:

1. The highest insertion was found in the indicators of *ukhuwah* (brotherhood), politeness, and wisdom, with 100% of respondents recognizing the distribution and relevance of the integrative materials.
2. The lowest insertion was in the area of local accommodation. Approximately 57% of respondents had not seen the distribution of the material, and 50% had not yet perceived the relevance of the material."

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