



Navigating Curriculum Reform in Islamic Education: A Critical Review of Institutional Adaptive Capacity

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ABSTRACT

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Curriculum reform is widely used to improve educational quality and respond to social, technological, and changing competency demands. However, successful reform depends not only on policy design but also on educational institutions' capacity to implement and sustain change. This is particularly important for Islamic educational institutions, which must address contemporary educational demands while maintaining religious identity and institutional values. This study examines the adaptive capacity of Islamic educational institutions in responding to curriculum reform, identifies organizational factors shaping adaptation, and develops a conceptual model of institutional responsiveness. It employs a qualitative critical literature review. Relevant publications from Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and Google Scholar covering 2010–2025 were examined using thematic analysis. The synthesis identifies four interrelated dimensions of adaptive capacity: adaptive leadership, organizational learning, resource flexibility, and integration of Islamic values. These dimensions influence how institutions interpret policy changes, mobilize support, adjust practices, and maintain institutional legitimacy. The proposed model frames curriculum reform as an organizational process rather than merely a technical or pedagogical adjustment. Its implications include strengthening leadership, institutional learning, resource management, and value-sensitive change strategies, while providing a foundation for future empirical testing.

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INTRODUCTION

Curriculum reform is a strategic instrument for improving educational quality and preparing learners to respond to social, economic, and technological transformations. Its importance extends beyond schools because educational institutions influence human capital development, social mobility, and the

capacity of communities to adapt to changing demands. However, curriculum reform cannot achieve its intended outcomes through policy changes alone. Its effectiveness also depends on institutional readiness, leadership, professional learning, and the availability of adequate resources. Vanlommel and van den Boom-Muilenburg (2024) emphasize that sustainable educational change requires alignment among policy, school leadership, teaching practices, and research. Therefore, understanding institutional capacity to respond to curriculum reform is essential for ensuring that educational transformation produces meaningful and sustainable improvements in educational quality.

A major problem in curriculum reform is the gap between policy expectations and institutional implementation (Fitriani, 2025; Khomairoh et al., 2025; Asyari et al., 2025). Educational institutions are frequently expected to adopt new curricular frameworks while maintaining teaching quality, managing limited resources, and addressing diverse student needs. These demands can create difficulties when reform objectives are not aligned with institutional conditions and professional capacities. McLure and Aldridge (2022) identify coordination, policy coherence, contextual flexibility, and leadership capacity as important factors influencing educational change. Their findings suggest that uniform policy expectations may be difficult to implement when schools differ in organizational readiness and available support. Consequently, curriculum reform should be understood not merely as a regulatory process but also as an organizational challenge requiring institutions to develop the capacity to interpret, accommodate, and sustain change.

In Indonesia, successive curriculum reforms, particularly the Merdeka Curriculum, highlight the challenges of translating national policies into institutional practices (Haya & Syihab, 2025; Yakubu et al., 2025). Schools and Islamic educational institutions must interpret curricular requirements, adjust teaching strategies, strengthen teacher competencies, and allocate resources effectively. Research on Indonesian schools indicates that responding to policy instability requires institutional adjustment, effective communication, and resource mobilization (Muttaqin et al., 2026; Naimah & Sa'diyah, 2026; Awaliah et al., 2025). Studies of curriculum reform in madrasahs also emphasize the importance of aligning curricular development with the distinctive objectives and contexts of Islamic education (Adib et al., 2024; Ulfa & Aldin, 2026). Furthermore, research on educational autonomy highlights the need to consider institutional readiness when implementing curricular changes (Ainissyifa et al., 2024; Anwar, 2025; Azizah & Octarina, 2025). These developments indicate that successful reform requires context-sensitive strategies that connect policy expectations with institutional capabilities and educational missions.

Previous research has examined educational change through complementary perspectives. McLure and Aldridge (2022) identified barriers and supporting conditions influencing educational reform at the system level. Aldridge and McLure (2024) highlighted the importance of school climate, planning, and capacity building, while McLure and Aldridge (2023) emphasized shared leadership, professional learning, resource allocation, and stakeholder engagement in sustaining reform. Collectively, these studies explain important organizational conditions for implementing educational change. However, their primary focus is on educational organizations and reform processes in general. The interaction between organizational capabilities and the distinctive religious values of Islamic educational institutions remains insufficiently integrated within these perspectives. Consequently, further conceptual synthesis is needed to explain how organizational readiness, leadership, learning processes, and institutional identity jointly shape responses to curriculum reform.

Research on Islamic education has examined curriculum transformation, pedagogical innovation, and the integration of religious and general knowledge. Sholeh et al. (2023) discussed transformations in Islamic education through curriculum change, while Adib et al. (2024) examined competency-based curriculum reform in madrasahs. Other studies have explored curriculum development in pesantren, madrasahs, and schools (Wahyuni et al., 2024). These contributions demonstrate the importance of curricular alignment and contextual adaptation. Nevertheless, curriculum design and implementation remain more prominent than the organizational capabilities that sustain institutional responses to changing policies. The interaction between adaptive leadership, organizational learning, resource flexibility, and Islamic values therefore requires further examination. Addressing this gap can provide a more comprehensive explanation of why institutions facing similar reforms may differ in their readiness, adaptation strategies, and capacity to sustain curricular change.

This study advances a conceptual perspective that positions adaptive capacity as a central foundation of curriculum reform in Islamic educational institutions. Rather than treating institutional adaptation as a collection of separate managerial practices, it conceptualizes adaptation as an interconnected process involving leadership, organizational learning, resource flexibility, and the integration of Islamic values. This perspective recognizes that effective adaptation requires institutions to respond to external policy demands while maintaining the continuity of their educational identity. The proposed framework brings organizational responsiveness and value-based institutional development into a unified analytical model. Its distinctive contribution lies in explaining how these dimensions may reinforce one another to support sustainable curriculum reform, rather than assuming that policy adoption alone

demonstrates successful institutional adaptation.

The central research problem concerns how Islamic educational institutions develop the adaptive capacity required to respond to curriculum reform while maintaining their institutional values. This study argues that effective adaptation depends on the interaction of four dimensions: adaptive leadership establishes direction, organizational learning supports continuous reflection, resource flexibility enables practical implementation, and the integration of Islamic values provides institutional coherence. These dimensions are expected to operate interdependently rather than as isolated factors. Accordingly, this study aims to identify the principal dimensions of adaptive capacity, examine organizational challenges affecting institutional responses, and develop a conceptual model explaining how these dimensions support curriculum reform. The resulting framework is intended to clarify the organizational foundations of adaptive responses and provide a basis for future empirical investigation.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research design using a critical literature review approach. This design was selected to critically examine existing scholarly publications, identify recurring patterns and conceptual gaps, and develop a conceptual model of the adaptive capacity of Islamic educational institutions in responding to curriculum reform. A critical literature review enables researchers to move beyond descriptive summaries by evaluating conceptual arguments, methodological limitations, contradictions, and relationships across studies (Al Naabi et al., 2026). The unit of analysis consisted of scientific publications rather than individuals or specific educational institutions. The review focused on adaptive capacity, organizational change, educational leadership, curriculum reform, and Islamic education to establish a comprehensive conceptual understanding of institutional adaptation.

As a document-based study, this research did not involve a specific geographical research location. Data were collected through literature searches in Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and Google Scholar. The search covered publications from 2010 to 2025 using keywords including adaptive capacity, organizational adaptation, curriculum reform, educational change, Islamic education, madrasah, and pesantren. Publications were purposively selected based on their relevance to the research objectives, source credibility, and conceptual or empirical contributions. The initial search identified 186 documents. Following duplicate removal and title and abstract screening, 78 articles were retained for further consideration. Full-text assessment subsequently resulted in 42 publications meeting the inclusion criteria.

Transparent reporting of database selection, search boundaries, and inclusion criteria is essential to strengthen the rigor and reproducibility of critical literature reviews (Al Naabi et al., 2026).

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis through an iterative process involving data condensation, data display, and verification. Data condensation involved familiarization with the selected publications, coding relevant information, and grouping recurring concepts into preliminary themes. Data display involved organizing findings into thematic categories and comparative summaries to identify relationships among adaptive leadership, organizational learning, resource flexibility, and the integration of Islamic values. Verification involved comparing evidence across sources, reviewing thematic consistency, and refining interpretations to ensure that conclusions were supported by the reviewed literature. This process was informed by established approaches to qualitative data analysis and the importance of methodological consistency in thematic analysis (Miles et al., 2020; Braun & Clarke, 2024). The resulting themes were synthesized to develop a conceptual model explaining how these organizational dimensions may interact to support institutional responses to curriculum reform.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Adaptive Capacity as the Foundation of Educational Curriculum Reform

Adaptive capacity refers to an educational institution's ability to recognize environmental changes, interpret policy demands, mobilize resources, and adjust organizational practices while maintaining its core educational functions. It extends beyond formal compliance because effective adaptation requires coordination among leadership, organizational structures, professional capabilities, and institutional culture. Vanlommel and van den Boom-Muilenburg (2024) emphasize the importance of aligning educational policy, professional practice, organizational capacity, and evidence-informed decision-making. Similarly, Muttaqin et al. (2026) examine how Indonesian schools respond to policy instability through institutional adjustment, communication, and resource mobilization. These perspectives suggest that adaptive capacity enables educational institutions to interpret external demands and translate them into context-sensitive organizational responses. Accordingly, understanding adaptive capacity is essential for explaining how institutions prepare for, implement, and sustain curriculum reform.

The literature synthesis identifies four interrelated dimensions of adaptive capacity: adaptive leadership, organizational learning, resource flexibility, and integration of institutional values. Adaptive leadership establishes strategic

direction and coordinates responses to change. Organizational learning facilitates professional reflection, knowledge exchange, and continuous improvement. Resource flexibility enables institutions to adjust personnel, time, funding, and learning facilities according to implementation needs. Integration of institutional values ensures that organizational adjustments remain consistent with the institution’s educational mission. McLure and Aldridge (2023) highlight the importance of shared leadership, professional learning, resource allocation, evaluation, and stakeholder engagement in sustaining educational reform. Research on Islamic religious education teachers further emphasizes the importance of professional competencies in responding to changing educational and technological demands (Arif et al., 2025). Astuti et al. (2024) also discuss the relevance of the Merdeka Curriculum to improving Islamic education quality. Together, these studies provide contextual support for examining adaptive capacity as an interconnected organizational process.

Table 1. Synthesis of Adaptive Capacity Dimensions in Educational Curriculum Reform

Dimension	Main organizational function	Contribution to curriculum reform	Supporting literature
Adaptive leadership	Establishes direction, communicates priorities, and coordinates change	Builds shared understanding and supports coordinated implementation	McLure & Aldridge (2023)
Organizational learning	Facilitates reflection, knowledge sharing, and professional learning	Enables institutions to evaluate practices and adjust implementation strategies	McLure & Aldridge (2023); Vanlommel & van den Boom-Muilenburg (2024)
Resource flexibility	Supports the adjustment of personnel, time, funding, and learning facilities	Helps align implementation demands with available institutional resources	McLure & Aldridge (2023); Muttaqin et al. (2026)
Integration of Islamic values	Connects institutional decisions with religious commitments and educational identity	Supports context-sensitive adaptation while maintaining institutional coherence	Suhayib & Ansyari (2023); Muttaqin et al. (2026)

Source: Author’s synthesis of the reviewed literature.

As shown in Table 1, adaptive capacity cannot be adequately explained by a single organizational factor. Instead, it emerges from the interaction of leadership, learning processes, resource management, and institutional values. Leadership and organizational learning help institutions interpret reform requirements, while resource flexibility provides operational support for implementation. Institutional values influence how changes are evaluated and

incorporated into existing practices. These dimensions are therefore analytically distinct but functionally interdependent. Their interaction provides a basis for understanding why institutions facing similar curricular demands may respond differently according to their organizational readiness, available resources, and educational priorities. In Islamic educational institutions, this interaction is particularly relevant because organizational adaptation must also account for the continuity of religious commitments and institutional identity.

Adaptive capacity influences curriculum reform by shaping how institutions translate policy objectives into sustainable organizational practices. Although curriculum policies may introduce new pedagogical expectations and greater institutional flexibility, implementation requires educators to interpret these expectations, develop appropriate competencies, coordinate resources, and evaluate outcomes. McLure and Aldridge (2023) identify professional learning, resource allocation, evaluation, and stakeholder participation as important conditions for sustaining reform. In the context of Indonesian madrasahs, Ainissyifa et al. (2024) emphasize the importance of educational management, stakeholder engagement, adequate facilities, and flexible learning approaches in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. Similarly, Muttaqin et al. (2026) examine institutional responses to policy instability through communication, resource mobilization, and organizational adjustment. These findings suggest that curriculum implementation should not be assessed solely through formal compliance or administrative completion. Institutional responsiveness also depends on whether new expectations become embedded in everyday educational practices and can be sustained through continuing organizational learning and adjustment.

A comparison of the reviewed literature reveals complementary perspectives on educational adaptation. McLure and Aldridge (2023) emphasize the organizational conditions required to sustain reform, particularly leadership, resources, professional learning, and evaluation. Vanlommel and van den Boom-Muilenburg (2024) adopt a systems perspective, highlighting the relationships among policy, organizational capacity, professional practice, and evidence use. Meanwhile, Muttaqin et al. (2026) examine how Indonesian schools adjust their internal arrangements and organizational relationships in response to policy instability. Collectively, these perspectives demonstrate that educational adaptation involves coordinated responses across multiple organizational dimensions. However, their primary analytical emphases differ, ranging from sustained implementation to system alignment and institutional responses to policy change. Synthesizing these perspectives provides a foundation for examining how organizational capabilities operate alongside the religious values and educational traditions characteristic of Islamic educational institutions.

Despite these contributions, an important conceptual limitation remains: the reviewed perspectives do not establish how adaptive leadership, organizational learning, resource flexibility, and Islamic value integration interact as a unified framework across different types of Islamic educational institutions. Research on educational change provides explanations of organizational readiness and implementation, while studies of Islamic education address curricular transformation, inclusion, and institutional values. For example, Nurdin et al. (2024) examine the development and implementation of Islamic religious education curricula in inclusive schools and madrasahs, while Wahyuni et al. (2024) discuss curriculum development across pesantren, madrasahs, and schools. These studies offer important insights into curricular contextualization but do not directly validate the four-dimensional adaptive capacity model proposed here. The distinction between adopting a curriculum and developing the organizational capacity to implement it sustainably therefore requires further conceptual clarification. This study addresses the gap by integrating organizational change perspectives with research on Islamic education into a context-sensitive conceptual framework.

The Tension Between Islamic Educational Identity and Curriculum Transformation

Islamic educational institutions operate within traditions that connect knowledge transmission with religious values, moral development, and personal character formation. Madrasahs and pesantren maintain distinctive learning practices, institutional arrangements, and educational priorities that shape how they interpret curricular change. These traditions can guide decisions about educational objectives, teaching practices, and the relationship between religious and general knowledge. Wahyuni et al. (2024) examine curriculum development across pesantren, madrasahs, and schools, emphasizing the importance of responding to students' needs and sociocultural contexts. Sholeh et al. (2023) likewise discuss transformations in Islamic education through curriculum change. Together, these perspectives indicate that institutional identity is relevant to understanding how reforms are interpreted and implemented. Religious values should therefore be considered part of the institutional context through which educational change is evaluated, rather than automatically treated as barriers to modernization.

Curriculum reform introduces demands for pedagogical innovation, competency development, contextual learning, and stronger alignment with national educational standards. These expectations may require Islamic educational institutions to revise learning objectives, teaching methods, assessment practices, and the allocation of instructional resources. Such changes

also require professional preparation and the capacity to interpret policy flexibility in relation to institutional needs. Ainissyifa et al. (2024) highlight the importance of educational management, stakeholder engagement, adequate facilities, and flexible learning approaches in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in madrasahs. Astuti et al. (2024) examine the curriculum's relevance to improving Islamic education quality, while Arif et al. (2025) discuss teacher competencies in responding to educational demands in the digital era. Collectively, these studies suggest that reform requires more than curricular compliance. Institutions must develop the organizational and professional capacities needed to translate policy expectations into meaningful educational practices while responding to learners' needs and community contexts.

The interaction between tradition and reform can generate organizational tensions when established educational priorities appear inconsistent with new curricular expectations. Islamic educational institutions may need to accommodate contemporary competencies, digital learning, and national standards while preserving religious instruction and established pedagogical commitments. Such tensions should not automatically be interpreted as resistance to modernization; they may reflect concerns about educational priorities, instructional time, professional readiness, and institutional identity. Sholeh et al. (2023) discuss curriculum transformation as part of broader changes in Islamic education, while Wahyuni et al. (2024) emphasize contextual considerations in curriculum development across different educational institutions. These studies suggest that reform involves more than technical adjustments because institutions must reconsider how new practices relate to their existing missions. Understanding these tensions is important for explaining why similar reforms may generate different institutional responses and why implementation strategies need to account for organizational context rather than assume uniform readiness.

The literature suggests that adaptation does not necessarily require the complete replacement of established traditions. Selective adaptation offers an approach through which institutions evaluate which educational practices require revision and which values should remain central to their mission. This approach does not assume that every inherited practice must be preserved or that every innovation should be adopted without critical assessment. Instead, institutions consider curricular requirements, organizational capabilities, educational objectives, and the compatibility of proposed changes with religious and pedagogical commitments. Nurdin et al. (2024) highlight the importance of contextualizing Islamic religious education curricula according to the needs of diverse learners, while Mukhibat (2024) examines curriculum development and evaluation in religious moderation education. These studies provide

complementary perspectives on curricular responsiveness and value integration. Selective adaptation can therefore help conceptualize how institutions balance educational continuity with innovation, although its practical effectiveness and applicability across different institutional settings require further empirical investigation.

A Conceptual Model of Adaptive Capacity in Islamic Educational Institutions

Synthesizing the preceding discussions, adaptive capacity can be understood as the organizational mechanism connecting external curriculum reform with an institution's ability to respond while maintaining its educational mission. Organizational capabilities determine how institutions implement change, while institutional values influence how change is interpreted and accepted. Research on Indonesian school adaptation highlights the importance of institutional identity, communication, resource mobilization, and organizational adjustment (Muttaqin et al., 2026). Research on Islamic education also emphasizes the importance of contextual curriculum development across pesantren, madrasahs, and schools (Wahyuni et al., 2024). These perspectives suggest that adaptive capacity in Islamic educational institutions must account for both organizational responsiveness and the continuity of religious and educational values. The proposed model therefore integrates organizational capabilities with value-based institutional adaptation to explain how educational institutions may respond to curriculum reform.

The proposed conceptual model comprises four interconnected dimensions: adaptive leadership, organizational learning, resource flexibility, and integration of Islamic values. Adaptive leadership establishes strategic direction, communicates reform objectives, and coordinates institutional responses. Organizational learning facilitates professional reflection, knowledge exchange, and the evaluation of implementation practices. Resource flexibility enables institutions to adjust personnel, time, funding, and learning facilities to changing requirements. Integration of Islamic values provides a basis for evaluating curricular changes in relation to institutional identity and educational objectives. These dimensions are informed by research identifying leadership, professional learning, resource allocation, and institutional alignment as important conditions for educational change (McLure & Aldridge, 2023; Vanlommel & van den Boom-Muilenburg, 2024). Their integration constitutes the conceptual contribution of this study rather than an empirically validated measurement framework.

The four dimensions are expected to interact through reciprocal relationships rather than operate as independent factors in a fixed sequence.

Adaptive leadership establishes priorities and facilitates coordination, while organizational learning enables institutional members to interpret new requirements and evaluate implementation outcomes. Resource flexibility supports the translation of organizational decisions into practice, whereas Islamic values inform decisions about the appropriateness and direction of change. These values may also influence leadership priorities, professional learning, and resource allocation. Feedback from implementation can subsequently inform organizational learning, leadership decisions, and resource adjustments. This interpretation is consistent with systems-oriented perspectives that emphasize the interdependence of educational policy, organizational capacity, professional practices, and institutional context (Vanlommel & van den Boom-Muilenburg, 2024). Adaptive capacity is therefore conceptualized as an iterative process of interpretation, coordinated action, evaluation, and organizational adjustment.

Based on this synthesis, the conceptual model connects curriculum reform demands with four dimensions of adaptive capacity, followed by institutional adaptation and responsiveness. The process begins with changing policy expectations, new competency requirements, and pedagogical demands. Adaptive leadership and organizational learning help institutions interpret these demands, while resource flexibility supports implementation and evaluation. The integration of Islamic values operates throughout the process, informing institutional decisions and preserving alignment with the educational mission. Ainissyifa et al. (2024) highlight the role of educational management and institutional flexibility in curriculum implementation, while Mukhibat et al. (2024) illustrate the importance of incorporating religious values into curriculum development and evaluation. These studies provide contextual support for the proposed model, although they do not empirically validate its complete structure. Figure 1 illustrates the proposed relationships and presents institutional responsiveness as the expected outcome of coordinated organizational adaptation.

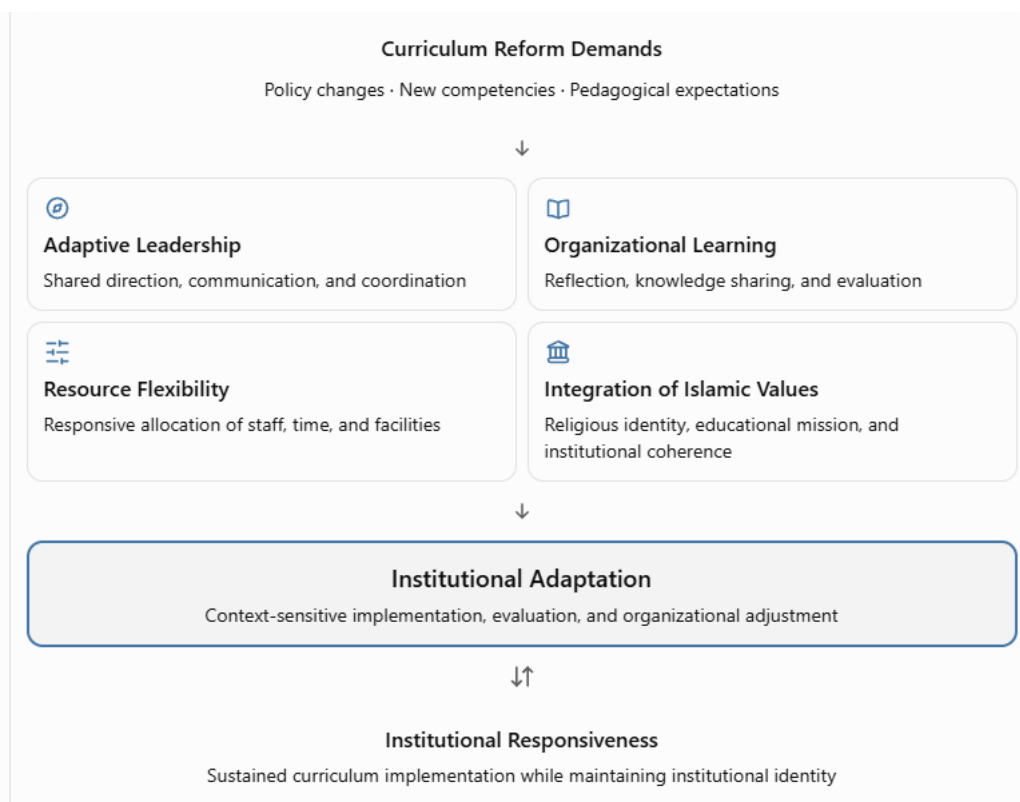


Figure 1. Conceptual Model of Adaptive Capacity in Islamic Educational Institutions

Feedback from implementation informs organizational learning, leadership decisions, resource allocation, and subsequent adaptation. Islamic values guide decisions throughout the process.

Source: Author's conceptual synthesis based on the reviewed literature.

As illustrated in Figure 1, the proposed model frames institutional adaptation as an iterative process rather than a linear sequence of independent activities. Its theoretical contribution lies in connecting organizational capabilities with the value commitments that shape institutional responses to curriculum reform. In practical terms, educational leaders can use the framework to assess organizational readiness, strengthen collaborative learning, allocate resources according to implementation needs, and evaluate curricular changes against institutional objectives. Policymakers may also use this perspective to recognize differences in institutional readiness and provide context-sensitive support. Nevertheless, the model remains a conceptual synthesis derived from a critical literature review and has not been empirically validated. Its applicability may vary across madrasahs, pesantren, and other Islamic educational institutions. Future research should examine the model through comparative case studies, surveys, or mixed-methods designs to refine its dimensions and investigate how institutional contexts influence adaptive responses to curriculum reform.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that adaptive capacity is essential for Islamic educational institutions to respond effectively to curriculum reform while maintaining their educational mission and religious identity. The principal lesson is that successful adaptation requires the interaction of four dimensions: adaptive leadership, organizational learning, resource flexibility, and the integration of Islamic values. The implications of the findings highlight the importance of strengthening institutional readiness, promoting collaborative learning, allocating resources responsively, and aligning curricular innovation with institutional values. The study contributes to educational management scholarship by integrating organizational adaptive capacity with value-based institutional adaptation into a conceptual framework for understanding curriculum reform in Islamic education. However, the study is limited by its reliance on a critical literature review, and the proposed model has not yet been empirically validated across different institutional contexts. Future research should examine the model through comparative case studies, surveys, or mixed-methods approaches to assess its applicability, refine its dimensions, and investigate how institutional conditions influence adaptive capacity and sustainable curriculum implementation.

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