

## ISLAMIC EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP IN THE DIGITAL ERA: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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### Abstract

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*Educational leadership faces a critical dual challenge: leveraging the transformative potential of digital tools to enhance educational quality and accessibility while simultaneously preserving the integrity of Islamic values and core spiritual objectives. This study aims to identify and formally articulate the ideal characteristics required for Islamic Educational Leadership (IEL) to effectively manage organizational change and drive innovation within the digital age. The study utilizes a descriptive qualitative method supported by an in-depth literature review. This methodology was selected because it permits the conceptual analysis of various theoretical perspectives concerning leadership, Islamic education, and the digital environment, facilitating the synthesis of findings necessary to formulate a relevant and contextualized leadership framework. Effective IEL in the digital era must transcend conventional managerial skills. The study's findings articulate five ideal characteristics for successful digital leaders: (1) Mastering Technology, (2) Thinking Strategically, (3) Result-Oriented, (4) Having Integrity, and (5) Building Collaboration. While significant opportunities exist to increase global access and enhance the quality of religious learning, challenges such as the digital divide and issues of content value alignment necessitate that leaders and educators transform into digital educators capable of guiding students holistically and focusing on character development. The enduring success of IEL in the 21st century depends on strategic adaptation and firm commitment to core Islamic values.*

### Introduction

To understand education as a deliberate effort to create a curriculum environment and learning process that enables students to actively develop their abilities, they must first be engaged in activities that involve active participation. The goal is for them to possess spiritual strength rooted in religion, self-control,

good character, intelligence, noble behavior, as well as the necessary skills for themselves, society, the nation, and the state.(Fitriyani, 2019:36)

Education is a very important element in shaping a generation that is strong both morally and materially. Humans are born into this world in a natural state, but several factors influence individual development. The goodness or badness of a person is the result of various educational factors that they have received. Education is the right way to achieve this goal. Furthermore, as Muslims, Islamic education must be the path taken by every believer.(Kamsi, 2017: 23)

Despite its effectiveness, religious education in schools is believed to lack the necessary components to foster positive change and generate social cohesion. This is why we need to create a prototype of reality that must be designed—a reality prototype we seek to establish. It is a model of engagement that allows us to enjoy the learning process. If problems arise, they can be solved; if unsolved, they can still be managed; and if overlooked, they remain open to resolution. (Efendi, 2017:9).

Islamic education is an effort to elevate human nature through Islamic law so that human life may achieve prosperity and harmony. Development efforts are processes that must be carried out within Islamic education. Human nature is a central theme that should be nurtured through Islamic education. The teachings of Islamic law reflect the knowledge and values that should be transformed to shape human character. (Taufik, 2019:23).

Islamic religious education is envisioned to enable individuals to strengthen their faith, morals, and piety while actively contributing to the development of civilization in line with human dignity. Such individuals are expected to possess resilience in facing challenges, obstacles, and changes in social interactions at local, national, regional, and global levels. (Muhammad Amin, 2022:81).

Islamic religious education is carried out with the principle that religion is taught to humanity in order to create individuals who are obedient to God and uphold noble moral values. The aim is to produce individuals who are fair, honest, virtuous, ethical, respectful, disciplined, harmonious, and productive—both in personal and social contexts. (Budyono, 2023: 17)

The management of Islamic education plays a significant role in ensuring that teaching delivered in Islamic institutions aligns with Islamic values and principles. In today's digital era, new challenges and opportunities emerge, requiring adjustments and innovations in educational management. Digital technology provides tools and methods to improve educational quality, but it also presents various challenges that must be addressed to maximize its benefits. (Kristiawan, Yuniarsih, & Fitria, 2019:76)

The digital era has influenced almost every aspect of life, including education. This digital transformation compels educational leaders to adapt to new technologies, adjust learning methods, and manage change effectively. Educational leadership in the digital age is not only about mastering advanced technology but also about utilizing it to create better and more inclusive learning experiences. (Romandoni & Efendi, 2024:137)

Digitization in education covers many aspects, from learning processes and administration to communication between teachers, students, and parents. Information and communication technology (ICT) enables the learning process to become more interactive, flexible, and accessible anytime and anywhere.

(Sukardi, 2020:45) In fact, digital-based education has managed to reach remote areas that previously lacked access to quality education.

On the other hand, these changes demand adaptive and innovative leadership. Educational leaders must be able to guide institutions to be ready for change, ensure infrastructure readiness, and foster digital literacy among teachers and students. They are also required to address challenges such as the digital divide, limited internet access, and data privacy issues. (Fauzan Ismael, 2023: 79) Therefore, the role of leadership in the digital era is crucial. Effective leadership can optimize technology to create an inclusive, safe, and sustainable learning environment.

### **Research Methods**

This research employs a descriptive qualitative approach combined with a literature review method. The qualitative method was chosen because it allows the researchers to explore the meaning, processes, and dynamics occurring in the field, especially in the context of Islamic educational leadership in the digital era. This approach emphasizes understanding phenomena in a natural setting, interpreting meanings from participants' perspectives, and providing a holistic description of leadership practices in Islamic educational institutions (Armanto & Kartika, 2023:64).

The literature review method supports this study by analyzing and synthesizing theories and findings from previous research related to educational leadership, digital transformation, and Islamic education. Data were collected from various journal articles, books, and credible online sources relevant to the topic. The collected materials were then analyzed thematically to identify challenges, opportunities, and ideal characteristics of Islamic educational leadership in the digital age (Latifah, 2024:129). The integration of qualitative analysis and literature review provides a comprehensive understanding of how digitalization impacts leadership practices and how Islamic values can guide these transformations.

### **Discussion**

#### **The Concept of Educational Leadership**

The definition of leadership encompasses the ability and purpose of an individual or group to influence, motivate, invite, guide, and direct people to accept such influence so that they can jointly create something that supports the achievement of specific goals, (Afandi, 2013:86) a leader is crucial for the needs of an institution or organization to achieve its goals, a process referred to as leadership. Therefore, leadership is the act of a leader in striving to achieve the outcomes of an institution or organization.

In general, leadership is defined as the ability of a person to influence, motivate, invite, guide, direct, mobilize, and, if necessary, persuade individuals or groups to accept influence so they can contribute to achieving the set goals. Therefore, educational leadership is primarily the ability to influence, manage, and implement the teaching process so that objectives can be achieved effectively and efficiently.

Leadership can be defined as the ability to mobilize and influence people. Leadership functions as a tool or means of influencing individuals to act willingly.

Several factors can motivate people, including threats, rewards, authority, and persuasion. (Rivai, 2003:46)

Leadership is a process of influencing people and guiding them to achieve certain goals. Leaders utilize their influence—whether through communication, motivation, or action to encourage groups or organizations to operate efficiently and effectively. George R. Terry stated that leadership is the process of influencing individuals so they are willing to cooperate in achieving expected outcomes.

From an Islamic perspective, leadership is a duty and responsibility that must be accounted for not only to the members being led but also to God. Therefore, leadership responsibility in Islam is not only horizontal and formal among humans but also has a vertical moral dimension—accountability to God in the hereafter. (Bashori, Mardivta Yolanda 2020: 114)

Education is a means to improve individual abilities through teaching, training, and various experiences. Education involves three aspects: cognitive, affective, and psychomotor, which include the development of knowledge, attitudes, and skills. Education takes place not only in formal institutions such as schools and universities but also in non-formal and informal learning processes in everyday life. In management principles, leadership is a crucial element because it serves as the foundation for all managerial activities. At the management level, administrative activities begin and end with leadership. A leader bears the greatest responsibility for achieving organizational goals.

Leaders and organizational leadership in the era of globalization must face increasingly complex and uncertain demands. This situation requires leaders to possess the ability and skills to manage changes in the organization's strategic environment, which affect organizational survival through effective leadership. (Mauludah, Ma'sum, dan Iswanto 2023:197)

According to Law No. 20 on the national education system, education is defined as a conscious and planned effort to create an educational environment and learning process that enables students to actively develop their abilities. One of its primary objectives is to strengthen spiritual and religious aspects, self-discipline in areas such as eating and drinking, character development including empathy and coping with stress, intelligence with positive attitudes toward good actions, and mastery of skills needed for oneself, society, the nation, and the state. Ki Hajar Dewantara believed that education is an effort to develop character (inner strength, personality), intellect (intelligence), and the physical body of children, so they can achieve optimal levels of security and happiness as human beings and members of society.

Educational leadership carried out by principals or other heads of educational institutions involves influencing teachers, staff, students, and related stakeholders (school committees and parents). This influence aims to encourage others to act as desired, taking place within the school organization to manage learning activities. Principals are officially appointed by an education office official or by a foundation in the field of education. The objective of this leadership process is to achieve educational goals that produce graduates with strong character and quality. Leadership activities tend to focus more on interpersonal relationships than on managing material resources. (Hayati, Armanto, dan Kartika 2023:108)

Leadership in education is the ability to influence, organize, and motivate individuals involved in the development of education with the goal of achieving effective and efficient academic outcomes. (Soetopo and Soemanto, 1982) explained that educational leadership is the ability to influence and motivate others to voluntarily achieve predetermined educational goals. Educational leadership includes supervising and directing others so they can carry out tasks to achieve the goals and objectives of the educational institution..

### **The Concept of Educational Leadership**

Educational leadership is a process of influencing, guiding, and directing all elements within the educational environment to achieve predetermined goals effectively and efficiently. This form of leadership is not limited to official positions such as principals or rectors but also includes the ability of individuals to influence the behavior of others in the educational context in order to improve learning quality and institutional management

According to Owens and Valesky, leadership in education requires the ability to formulate a vision, build strong teams, and manage change in an ever-evolving educational environment. The concept of educational leadership also emphasizes the importance of vision and mission, collective participation, and strategic decision-making processes.(Leithwood, K., Day, C., Sammons, P., Harris, A., & Hopkins 2006:125) emphasized that effective educational leaders are those who can provide clear direction, build a positive school culture, and empower all members of the school community. In this context, leadership is not authoritarian but transformational, encouraging comprehensive change and improvement.

In the era of globalization and digitalization, educational leadership must be able to adapt to ongoing changes. Information technology, curriculum reforms, and social dynamics compel educational leaders to be responsive and visionary. This indicates that 21st-century educational leaders must act as agents of change, focusing not only on results but also on processes and relationships within educational institutions.

The following are some educational leadership concepts often applied in the field of education; Transformational Leadership: Transformational leaders inspire and motivate school members to achieve shared goals by creating positive change. They focus on developing individual potential and fostering innovation in teaching. Key traits clear vision, encouragement, charismatic appeal.

Transactional leadership, this leadership style focuses on the exchange relationship between leaders and followers. Leaders provide rewards or punishments based on performance. Key traits emphasis on structure, rules, and short-term results. Example a principal who evaluates teachers only based on attendance and student test scores.

Instructional leadership this approach emphasizes improving the teaching and learning process. Educational leaders play an active role in curriculum development, classroom supervision, and teacher professionalism. Servant leadership Here, the leader's main focus is on meeting the needs of teachers, students, and staff. Leaders listen, build community, and empower others. Key traits empathy, listening, social awareness.

Distributed leadership responsibilities are shared among teachers and staff rather than being held solely by the principal. Key traits collaborative,

participative, team-based. Benefit increased sense of ownership and engagement among all school staff. Charismatic leadership based on a leader's personal appeal, charismatic leaders inspire and influence through their personality and beliefs. Criticism: sometimes overly dependent on the individual leader. Visionary leadership a visionary leader has a clear view of the school's future direction and inspires school members to pursue that vision with dedication and enthusiasm. The concept of educational leadership refers to the ability of a leader to create, motivate, and direct a supportive environment for all members of the educational institution, with the goal of achieving shared objectives.(Siswadi n.d.)

### **Islamic Educational Leadership in the Digital Era**

The word *digital* originates from the Greek word *digitus*, meaning finger, and usually refers to something that uses numbers, particularly binary numbers. Binary language is the foundation of digital communication, using 1s and 0s arranged in various codes to facilitate the exchange of information. These 1s and 0s, known as bits (binary digits), represent the smallest unit of information in digital systems. Advances in digital technology have driven the development of new communication channels, information processing techniques, and enhanced existing communication tools. These channels and devices have also been influenced, becoming one of the driving forces of this communication revolution..

The digital era is a time when people can communicate with each other very closely despite being far apart. Information can be obtained quickly and even instantly. The digital era is also associated with globalization. Globalization is the process of international integration that occurs due to the exchange of viewpoints, goods, ideas, and cultural aspects. This phenomenon is mainly driven by advancements in telecommunications, transportation, and the internet.

In today's digital era, technology has become a key source of knowledge and reference in the educational process. Technology is therefore applied in education with the aim of promoting more diverse learning methods and showing students how to utilize technology to complete their learning tasks.

Information and communication technology has advanced alongside globalization, enabling rapid interaction and information exchange. The impact of globalization can bring both positive and negative outcomes for a country. Competition in the digital era pushes nations to compete, requiring improvements in the quality of human resources. Education is one of the most important factors in human resource development. For Indonesia, this is a challenge to enhance educational quality. Digital learning refers to methods of delivering lessons to students through multimedia, including computers, laptops, smartphones, videos, audio, and visual materials. (Kristiawan, M., Yuniarsih, Y., & Fitria 2019:116) In education, the focus is not on a single technology but on a variety of technologies tailored to learning needs.

The design of digital learning involves not only software but also hardware such as audiovisual tools and electronic media, making education more efficient. This method is distinctive in that students are given opportunities to interact and create.

Digital-based education is learning that uses electronic tools to improve quality. These tools, products of information and communication technology (ICT), are developed through the internet and the web.(Kristiawan, 2014:45)

Educational leadership in the digital era involves using technology to enhance the quality and accessibility of education while promoting innovation in teaching and learning. Educational leaders today must possess strong digital skills, be able to motivate, and create supportive learning environments. Students now take advantage of technological advancements to learn and gather resources online. However, many traditional games that foster brotherhood, closeness, and creativity are increasingly being forgotten. (Budiyo, 2023:23)

Islamic-based educational leadership must emphasize understanding all aspects of the individual not only intellectual, but also religious, emotional, social, and spiritual dimensions. Comprehensive educational policies require leaders to create learning environments that enable growth and support for all students. A learner-centered approach is essential to ensure that every individual reaches their full potential. (Efendi, 2017:56)

Teachers in the digital era must transform into digital educators, as their students are part of a generation shaped by technology. As guides in the learning process, teachers are expected to direct, motivate, and engage students in learning activities. Their duties include guiding students at every stage of learning, treating all fairly, using engaging methods, understanding new concepts, exploring and developing student abilities, and monitoring character development. Teachers, as school leaders, play a vital role in maintaining close relationships with students. (Khausar, 2020: 85)

According to (Latifah, 2024:119), leadership in Islamic education in the digital era must be able to address challenges and seize opportunities offered by information and communication technology. Leaders must recognize the importance of integrating Islamic values with technological progress to ensure that education remains relevant and of high quality. Islamic education not only provides comprehensive religious understanding but also prepares students with necessary technological skills. In Islamic religious education (PAI), digital technology has simplified the learning process through audiovisual media, such as videos demonstrating worship practices in *fiqh* lessons or recitation practices in Hadith lessons, along with other digital aids. (Ilham Yahya Romandoni, Sulistyorini, 2024:271)

Islamic education must be structured to align with students' interests in today's era. If Islamic religious education continues to rely on outdated methods without adapting to digital trends, it risks losing students' interest and failing to meet learning objectives. The abundance of digital platforms today provides new opportunities for developing educational potential while ensuring equal access for all without discrimination. (Muhammad Amin 2022:34).

Characteristics of Ideal Islamic Educational Leadership in the Digital Era include: Mastery of Technology – Islamic education must be organized in ways relevant to students' needs today. Outdated teaching methods risk diminishing student engagement. Digital platforms offer new perspectives for developing educational potential and ensuring equal access to learning. (Sukardi, 2020:175)

Strategic thinking involves integrating technology to strengthen Islamic values, enhance learning quality, and prepare students for global challenges. This includes embedding technology in curricula, fostering digital literacy, and emphasizing ethics and Islamic principles in technology use.

Result oriented islamic education must focus on outcomes relevant to current needs while preserving Islamic values. This includes developing tech-

integrated curricula, improving learning quality, and using technology for *da'wah* and the spread of Islamic principles.

Integrity to be whole in Islamic education means applying noble Islamic values in both learning and technology use, shaping morally upright individuals capable of using information wisely. This includes strengthening faith, character building, and using technology for good.

Collaboration Building Requires comprehensive approaches that involve technology to improve teaching quality, expand educational access, and reinforce religious values. Cooperation among teachers, students, and stakeholders, coupled with innovative strategies, is key to transforming Islamic education in the digital age. Islamic education in the digital era aims to shape Muslim generations who are skilled in both knowledge and practice so they can live prosperous, safe, and harmonious lives. Its framework is designed to nurture individuals proficient in Islamic faith and practice, while also mastering practical knowledge for managing resources and meeting life's needs.

To achieve this noble mission, education stakeholders, especially in Islamic education, must maximize digital opportunities while minimizing negative impacts. Teachers must adapt learning designs to digital realities. Since digital tools now permeate almost all aspects of youth life, shielding children from the virtual world is impractical. Yet, leaving them unchecked risks dependency. The best strategy is to harness digital opportunities for educational growth, creating digital-based content strategies and learning models with a strong vision to nurture comprehensive Muslim generations.

### **Challenges of Islamic Educational Leadership in the Digital Era**

Leaders of Islamic education must adapt to these changes while maintaining the fundamental values and principles of Islam. Some of the challenges in Islamic educational leadership include finding a balance between cultural heritage and modern progress. Islamic education, rooted in the Qur'an and Hadith, must be integrated with modern educational systems that emphasize science and technology. Leaders of Islamic education must wisely combine religious knowledge with general knowledge without compromising the essence of Islamic education. (Taufik, 2019:45)

To address these challenges, principals and educational leaders must enhance their knowledge and skills in educational technology. They need to explore opportunities provided by technological advancements to improve teaching quality in schools. One approach is through collaboration with experts in both technology and education. Such cooperation is a key step in ensuring Islamic education continues to develop and remain relevant in the digital era.

Moral and ethical issues are also significant concerns. In a digital age that often promotes materialism and hedonism, Islamic education is tasked with safeguarding morality. Leaders in Islamic education are not only expected to deliver knowledge but also to nurture good character and moral values. A greater challenge is confronting cultural influences that may conflict with Islamic principles. (Ramadan,, 2021:215)

Islamic education in the digital era faces many challenges but also provides great opportunities. Digital technology can serve as an efficient tool for improving accessibility, enhancing learning methods, and deepening religious understanding. However, strict content monitoring and strategies to address accessibility issues



and the digital divide are necessary so that Islamic education can thrive. By effectively and sustainably utilizing digital technology, Islamic education can become more accessible, creative, and relevant to the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century. (Indriani dan Firdian, 2021: 12)

Leadership in Islamic education during the digital era faces various obstacles, including the digital divide, alignment of Islamic values with technology, and the need for curriculum adaptation. In addition, concerns exist about the quality and authenticity of content, as well as potential negative impacts of digitalization on Islamic values. Digital divide not all teachers, students, and parents have sufficient access or skills to use technology effectively. (Romandoni dan Efendi 2024:433) This inequality appears in internet access, device ownership, digital skills, and the ability to utilize technology for different needs.

Alignment of Islamic values with technology a challenge lies in ensuring that technology use aligns with Islamic values, such as avoiding inappropriate content and harmful social media practices. Islam encourages the pursuit of knowledge and the use of technology for the greater good, provided it aligns with Sharia principles. Technology can aid in spreading Islamic teachings, facilitating worship, and improving community welfare. However, ethical Islamic values such as social responsibility, integrity, and communal benefit must guide its use.

Curriculum adjustment islamic education curricula must be updated regularly to remain relevant. Educational leaders must take an active role in designing curricula that not only teach religious knowledge but also provide essential life skills for the modern era. A comprehensive and integrated curriculum is vital to ensuring students acquire both religious and practical knowledge.

Islamic learning in the digital era seeks to prepare Muslim generations with sufficient knowledge and skills to live safe, prosperous, and harmonious lives. Its purpose is to nurture individuals who understand and practice Islam in daily life while mastering practical knowledge to manage resources responsibly. Through this education, students are introduced to inner aspects related to faith and ethics, as well as outer aspects related to skills and work, as part of their personal responsibility to themselves, their families, and society.

### **Opportunities in Islamic Education in the Digital Era**

Islamic educators today have the opportunity to collaborate with digital experts in creating curricula that are appropriate for contemporary needs. Leaders should utilize social media platforms as centers for expanding the dissemination of Islamic educational information. By taking advantage of these opportunities, leaders in Islamic education can ensure that religious principles are widely spread. (S. S. Fauzan Ismael, 2023: 29)

In this era, Islamic education offers many opportunities to expand networks, create innovative learning methods, and deepen religious understanding. The use of digital technology can be an effective way to reduce disparities in education and enhance religious knowledge within increasingly interconnected societies across the world.

Digital technology also facilitates more effective evaluation and monitoring in Islamic education. Through online platforms, teachers can track individual student progress, provide immediate feedback, and identify areas for improvement. This contributes to increasing the effectiveness of the learning

process and gives educators opportunities to adapt and refine instructional materials.(Hajri, 2023:83)

When used wisely, digital technology also provides opportunities to improve global access, implement creative and interactive learning strategies, foster innovation and creativity, and strengthen research and evaluation. Addressing these challenges requires gradually applied counseling strategies and relevant theories such as digital literacy, enrichment learning, and curriculum development.

Some opportunities include increased access by intelligently leveraging digital technology, there is potential to expand global accessibility, employ interactive and creative learning strategies, encourage innovation and creativity, and improve research and assessment processes. Innovative learning Islamic education today offers many opportunities to improve and develop teaching techniques while expanding understanding of religion. The use of technology serves as an effective means to address inequality in education and to deepen religious understanding in an increasingly global society. One of the most significant advantages of Islamic education in the digital context is its wide and global reach. With the presence of digital technology, everyone in the world can now easily access quality materials for Islamic learning. Greater Effectiveness Technology can contribute to more effective learning by providing engaging content, improving assessment methods, and personalizing the learning experience.(S. Fauzan Ismael, 2023:63)

One of the most significant benefits of Islamic education in the digital era is its broad and global reach. With digital technology, people around the world can now easily access quality materials for Islamic learning.

## **Conclusion**

Teachers in the digital era need to transform into technology-based educators because the students they face today are part of the digital generation. As leaders in the learning process, teachers have the ability to guide, motivate, and develop students' willingness to engage in learning activities. A teacher must accompany students through every stage of learning, treat all students fairly without discrimination, deliver lessons using a variety of engaging methods, understand new developments, explore and develop students' potential, and monitor as well as understand their character development.

Leadership in Islamic-based education should emphasize the development of all aspects of individuals—not only intellectual, but also emotional, social, and spiritual. A good educational system requires all school leaders to create and sustain a learning environment that supports the holistic growth of every student. In this situation, a learner-centered approach is essential to ensure that every individual can develop their abilities optimally.

Islamic education in the digital era holds vast opportunities to create significant positive impacts. By utilizing technology wisely, Islamic education can reach more people, improve the quality of learning, and strengthen religious understanding. However, challenges such as unequal access and the spread of invalid information must be addressed through innovative solutions and effective strategies.

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