

RESEARCH

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Meritocracy in Islamic Boarding School Tradition as Talent and Performance Based Human Resource Management in Islamic Higher Education Institutions

Ahmad Dzofron Abiyyu Tsaqib Muhes^{1*}, Siti Aimah²***Correspondence:**anakembahk Choir@gmail.com

¹ Management of Islamic Education Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, KH. Mukhtar Syafaat University, Indonesia.

² Management of Islamic Education Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, KH. Mukhtar Syafaat University, Indonesia.

Abstract

Meritocracy as a principle of fairness and reward for achievement is an important foundation in human resource management (HRM), and its application in the pesantren tradition contributes to strengthening management in Islamic Higher Education Institutions (PTKI). This study aims to examine how the application of meritocracy in the pesantren tradition can become a model for talent- and performance-based HRM in PTKI. The background of this study is the need for a fair and transparent HRM system to improve the quality of Islamic higher education. The research method used a qualitative approach with a case study at the Darussalam Blokagung Banyuwangi Islamic Boarding School, which is integrated with KH. Mukhtar Syafaat University. Data collection was carried out through interviews, participatory observation, and documentation, then analyzed using the Miles and Huberman interactive model. The results of the study show that meritocracy is reflected in the selection, training, and evaluation mechanisms for students through an emphasis on academic achievement, spirituality, and leadership. Integration with PTKI strengthens performance-based HR management, producing high-quality graduates. This study provides a new perspective that the pesantren tradition is relevant as a model of talent, performance, and fairness-based HR management.

Keywords: Meritocracy, Islamic Boarding School Tradition, Human Resources

Introduction

In the pesantren tradition, rewards are more often given in the form of trust or responsibility than material gifts. This is based on the belief that responsibility can shape the personality of santri more deeply, especially in terms of leadership, discipline, and honesty (Nuryadi et al., 2025; Karim et al., 2023). For example, students who study diligently, worship consistently, and maintain good character are usually given important roles, such as becoming organization administrators or prayer leaders. This trust is not only a symbol of respect, but also a learning tool that places students in strategic positions within the community. In this way, students learn to appreciate the trust given to them and are encouraged to maintain their integrity. Thus, trust-based rewards foster intrinsic

motivation and build strong character (Al Mansoori et al., 2025; Haesebrouck et al., 2021). Making it more effective than simply giving material gifts.

These trust-based values are then carried over into the academic world when pesantren alumni pursue careers at Islamic Higher Education Institutions (PTKI). Many of them now serve as lecturers, staff, and active students. Their pesantren educational background equips them with meritocratic values that emphasize achievement, discipline, and good character (Armstrong, 2024; Mujahid, 2021). So that this perspective is carried over into academic life. They are accustomed to trust-based rewards rather than material ones, so even at PTKI they value performance based on integrity, responsibility, and social contribution. This is evident in the academic guidance model, which emphasizes not only academic achievement but also student ethics and morals (Sato et al., 2023; Gamage et al., 2021; Taja et al., 2021). Thus, the presence of Islamic boarding school alumni in PTKI brings a new dimension to governance, promoting a participatory and fair academic culture that is oriented towards developing human resources who are intellectually superior and possess moral integrity.

Furthermore, Islamic boarding school values also encourage PTKI to emphasize strengthening human resources (HR) character. Education is not only directed at academic achievement, but also at shaping individuals with integrity (Ahsan, 2025; Sakti et al., 2024; Biesta, 2023). This is important because the academic world needs human resources who are not only intellectually intelligent, but also have moral fortitude in facing social and professional challenges (Domingo & Fernández Espinosa, 2025; Fuentes & Sánchez-Pérez, 2024). Many Islamic higher education institutions then adopted these values through various programs, such as leadership training, social activities, and the habit of praying in congregation. These efforts have proven to foster a sense of responsibility, social awareness, and discipline among students. Thus, strengthening character based on Islamic boarding school values has become a key strategy in producing PTKI graduates who not only excel academically but also possess noble character and strong integrity.

In a recent study that highlights how to explore the application of meritocracy principles from the pesantren tradition in the recruitment and development of lecturers at religious universities, where performance evaluation is used as the main benchmark for promotion and training (Chen et al., 2022). Thereby improving the quality of human resources through an intrinsic talent-based approach that emphasizes individual potential. This approach is continued and expanded in analyzing how the pesantren tradition is applied ethnically in the management of lecturers (Mujahid, 2021; Setiawan et al., 2025), with a focus on talent development through meritocracy-based performance to improve the overall quality of Islamic education in similar institutions. Meanwhile, in the discussion on meritocracy, Islamic boarding schools are utilized to build a holistic performance evaluation system (Wijaya Mulya & Sakhiyya, 2021), integrating spiritual and professional aspects to develop lecturers' talents in facing the challenges of globalization in Islamic education, so that these three studies collectively demonstrate the evolution of pesantren values integration in adaptive and achievement-oriented human resource management.

This study presents a model that combines the principles of meritocracy in Islamic boarding schools with a more comprehensive human resource management system in Islamic Religious Higher Education Institutions (PTKI), based on talent and performance. Unlike previous studies that focused more on performance evaluation, talent development, and spiritual integration, this study attempts to unify these three approaches. Its added

value lies in its simultaneous focus on three dimensions: fair selection and promotion, the development of lecturers' intrinsic potential, and performance evaluation encompassing academic, managerial, and spiritual aspects. With this synthesis, the study not only addresses the limitations of the literature on meritocracy in Islamic boarding schools and PTKI but also presents a more relevant and adaptive model to address the challenges of the globalization of Islamic education today.

This research is important because Islamic boarding schools (PTKI) are expected to compete in the global era without losing their traditional roots in Islamic boarding schools. Lecturer recruitment and promotion are often influenced by personal relationships, thus hindering the full implementation of meritocratic principles. However, the quality of Islamic education relies heavily on talent management, which assesses not only academic achievement but also spiritual integrity and managerial ability. By integrating the values of Islamic boarding school meritocracy into a talent- and performance-based system, this research aims to implement meritocracy within the Islamic boarding school tradition as a model for talent- and performance-based human resource management in Islamic Religious Higher Education Institutions (PTKI).

Method

This research was conducted at the Darussalam Blokagung Islamic Boarding School in Banyuwangi, East Java, which was founded on January 15, 1951, by KH. Mukhtar Syafaat. This Islamic boarding school is known as an influential center of traditional Islamic education in East Java, playing a major role in producing scholars and leaders. Its integration with KH. Mukhtar Syafaat University makes it a unique model of a blend of Islamic boarding school and formal education. This location was chosen because it represents the application of meritocracy in talent- and performance-based human resource management. Student selection is carried out through academic, spiritual, and leadership evaluations, supported by accessibility and historical data that support in-depth research.

This research is a qualitative case study (Cole, 2024; Setiawan et al., 2024). This approach was chosen because it is suitable for exploring in-depth the practice of meritocracy within the Islamic boarding school tradition, integrated with talent- and performance-based human resource management at Islamic Religious Higher Education Institutions (PTKI). Case studies allow researchers to understand phenomena contextually through direct observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis. This type of research emphasizes understanding the meaning, values, and practices of meritocracy, thus providing a holistic picture of how Islamic boarding schools contribute to establishing a fair, transparent, and merit-based human resource management model.

The informants in this study were selected based on their direct involvement and experience in understanding and implementing meritocratic practices within the Islamic boarding school tradition and human resource management at Islamic Religious Higher Education Institutions (PTKI). Key informants included the Principal of the Darussalam Blokagung Islamic Boarding School, a central figure in the practice of values-based leadership. Furthermore, PTKI leaders, such as deans, heads of study programs, and study program staff, were involved to explore performance-based policy and management practices. Lecturers and students also served as informants to provide experiential perspectives related to the ongoing selection, coaching, and development processes. The involvement of these various parties enabled the researcher to obtain a comprehensive, in-depth, and contextualized picture of the phenomenon under study.

Table 1. Research Informant

Informant Criteria	Informant Code	Total Informants
Head of islamic boarding scholl	Hib	2
Faculty dean	Fd	1
Departement head	Dh	1
Program staff	Ps	2

This study employed three primary data collection methods (Ajayi, 2023; Richardson et al., 2023; Arifianto et al., 2025). First, in depth interviews were conducted with Islamic boarding school principals, faculty deans, study program heads, and study program staff to obtain information related to meritocratic practices and human resource management. Second, observation was used to directly observe the selection, coaching, and evaluation processes taking place at Islamic boarding schools and PTKI (Institute of Islamic Education). Third, documentation included a review of Islamic boarding school historical archives, academic guidelines, HR regulations, and other relevant policy documents. The combination of these three techniques is expected to provide comprehensive and in-depth data on the implementation of talent- and performancebased meritocracy.

The data analysis in this study used Miles and Huberman's interactive model, which includes three main stages. First, data reduction, which is the process of selecting, simplifying, and focusing important data from interviews, observations, and documentation to ensure its relevance to the theme of meritocracy in Islamic boarding school traditions and human resource management at PTKI. Second, data presentation is carried out in narrative form, tables, and matrices to facilitate understanding of patterns and relationships between findings. Third, conclusion drawing and verification, which is the in-depth formulation of the meaning, values, and implications of meritocracy by examining the consistency of the data to produce valid and meaningful findings.

The validity of the data in this study was maintained through triangulation techniques (Donkoh & Mensah, 2023; Setiawan & Ekaningsih, 2025). First, source triangulation, which compares information from various informants, such as Islamic boarding school administrators, PTKI leaders, lecturers, and students, to ensure data consistency. Second, technical triangulation, which combines the results of interviews, observations, and documentation studies to ensure more accurate findings. Third, time triangulation, which collects data at different points in time to assess the stability of the information (Kazu & Kuvvetli, 2023). Furthermore, member checking was conducted by confirming the interview results with relevant informants. These efforts aim to ensure the validity, reliability, and objectivity of the research results.

Result and Discussion

The Meritocratic Culture of Islamic Boarding Schools

The meritocratic culture in Islamic boarding schools basically places people according to their abilities, hard work and morals (Shah & Inamullah, 2025). In Islamic boarding schools, students who study diligently, are disciplined, and possess specific skills are usually trusted to hold important roles, such as becoming organizational administrators, room leaders, or assisting the kiai in teaching. This proves that that position in Islamic boarding schools is not determined

by descent or social background, but rather by real achievements and personal integrity(Karim et al., 2025; Roqib, 2021). This is often seen in Islamic boarding schools, where students from humble backgrounds can attain respected positions by demonstrating skills and good morals. These values are highly relevant to modern human resource management, which emphasizes transparency, professionalism, and rewards for performance. For Islamic Religious Higher Education Institutions, implementing a culture of meritocracy in Islamic boarding schools will strengthen the human resource management system, making it more just, egalitarian, and grounded in moral values (Budiharso et al., 2023; Kumar et al., 2022). The following is a comparison table between the meritocratic culture of Islamic boarding schools and PTKI.

Table2. Comparison of Meritocracy

Aspect	Islamic Boarding Schools	PTKI
Reward System	Based on morals, discipline, and the abilities of the students	Based on academic achievements and lecturer performance
Transmission Mechanism	Through deliberation and recommendations from religious leaders	Through formal selection and administrative assessment

This table illustrates how the culture of meritocracy in Islamic boarding schools continues into Islamic Higher Education Institutions (PTKI). While in boarding schools, rewards often take the form of trust from the kiai or social recognition, in PTKI they are more formal, such as scholarships, promotions, or performance allowances. Similarly, in terms of leadership, outstanding students can be trusted to become pondok leaders or administrators, while at PTKI, outstanding lecturers and students have the opportunity to hold strategic academic positions. The basic values also evolve: pesantren emphasize knowledge, manners, and trustworthiness, while PTKI emphasize professionalism, transparency, and accountability. These differences in form actually reflect the same essence, namely recognition of talent and performance. This is in line with Merit System Theory, which asserts that opportunities, positions, and rewards should be given based on achievement and competence (Fernandez & Cheema, 2025; Mun & Kodama, 2022; Konrad et al., 2021). In this way, both Islamic boarding schools and PTKI build traditions that are fair and quality-oriented.

With that, meritocracy in Islamic boarding schools shows that appreciation and leadership are given to those who are knowledgeable, have good character, and are high achievers. This value can be used as a basis for human resource management in Islamic Higher Education Institutions (PTKI). Although the form of recognition differs pesantren emphasize social recognition, while PTKI give formal recognition both emphasize the importance of performance and talent. If the meritocracy values of pesantren are adopted, PTKI will be able to build a system that is fair, professional, and spiritual.

Morally Based Reward System

In the Islamic boarding school tradition, awards are given more in the form of social and moral legitimacy than material gifts(Bitektine & Song, 2023). Students who study diligently, are disciplined in their worship, possess specific skills, and consistently maintain good character are often trusted to hold important roles, such as serving as organizational administrators, prayer leaders, or role models for other students. This demonstrates that this type of reward system is more effective in shaping character because it fosters a sense of responsibility, mutual recognition, and intrinsic motivation. Students' achievements are

judged not only on academic achievement, but also on integrity, character, and contribution to the social environment (Boud & Bearman, 2024; Crawford et al., 2024; Ossai et al., 2023). Thus, awards based on social and moral legitimacy play an important role in instilling values and serve as an effective mechanism for forming human resources with strong character (Demir et al., 2023).

This is based on the results of an interview with the Head of the Darussalam Blokagung Islamic Boarding School, Mr. Dimas Arisandi, S.E., who stated

"We usually appoint students who are diligent and active in pesantren activities and have special skills to become daily administrators, either as room leaders or in other administrative positions. This is more valuable than giving them money, because they feel respected and trusted by all the other students."

From the description above, it can be concluded that traditions in Islamic boarding schools emphasize social and moral legitimacy over material rewards. The following are some of the students who won international book competitions and were then entrusted with the task of mentoring book competitions at Islamic boarding schools throughout Banyuwangi Regency. Students who study diligently, are disciplined in their worship, and possess good character are often trusted to occupy leadership positions, such as becoming administrators, imams, or role models for their peers. This pattern has been shown to shape character through a sense of responsibility, social recognition, and internal motivation. This aligns with Herzberg's Motivation Theory, which emphasizes the importance of motivators such as achievement, recognition, and responsibility in fostering individual development (Loo et al., 2024; Yener, 2021). Thus, the reward system in Islamic boarding schools is an effective and consistent character education mechanism (Buanaputra et al., 2022).

Integration of pesantren meritocracy into PTKI governance

The application of Islamic boarding school meritocratic values in the management of Islamic Religious Higher Education Institutions (PTKI) has given rise to a management style that emphasizes achievement, discipline, and character as the main benchmarks (Haniffah et al., 2023). The reward system based on social and moral legitimacy that applies in Islamic boarding schools has been adapted to the PTKI environment, where the assessment of lecturers and students is not only based on academic achievement, but also on social contribution, ethical attitudes, and institutional responsibility (Alam & Mohanty, 2023; Waltzer et al., 2023). It appears that alumni of Islamic boarding schools who are active in PTKI tend to use integrity and exemplary behavior as measures of performance (Kanagasundaram & Solaiyan, 2023). It appears that alumni of Islamic boarding schools who are active in PTKI tend to use integrity and exemplary behavior as measures of performance. The implementation of this pattern can encourage favoritism practices while simultaneously increasing trust among the academic community. For example, in lecturer recruitment and promotion practices, lecturers who actively write scientific works, are disciplined in teaching, and demonstrate moral exemplary behavior are prioritized in academic position selections. This imitates the pesantren pattern that entrusts exemplary santri. Thus, the integration of pesantren meritocracy can become an important instrument to strengthen character and professionalism in the management of PTKI (Mulaphong, 2023). For more clarity, it can be seen in the table below.



Figure 1. Applying Pesantren Meritocracy in PTKI

This figure illustrates a moderate governance model in Islamic boarding schools, which is built on three main pillars: integrity and transparency of behavior, legitimacy-based actions, and recognition of exemplary individuals. These three elements form a crucial foundation for realizing a moderate governance system in Islamic Higher Education Institutions (PTKI). Integrity and transparency foster strong accountability; legitimacy-based actions ensure alignment with social and legal norms; while recognition of exemplary figures fosters trust and moral leadership. Conversely, when these aspects are neglected, governance tends to become immoderate, characterized by weak trust and declining professionalism. This model is in line with the Good Governance Theory which emphasizes the importance of transparency, accountability, participation, effectiveness, and the rule of law (Almaqtari et al., 2024; He et al., 2024; Koeswayo et al., 2024). These principles are in line with the values of meritocracy and the ethics of Islamic boarding school leadership which place honesty, responsibility and trust as the main foundations in managing Islamic educational institutions.

In conclusion, the application of pesantren meritocracy values at PTKI has resulted in a management pattern that balances academic achievement with moral and social values. While in pesantren, santri are valued through trust and responsibility, at PTKI this approach has developed into a more comprehensive assessment, covering integrity, ethics, and social contribution. This approach has been proven to reduce favoritism, encourage a more participatory work culture, and strengthen mutual trust among the academic community. Thus, the values of pesantren meritocracy are not only relevant but also form an important foundation for PTKI in producing professional, character-driven, and integrity-based human resources

The Influence of Pesantren Meritocracy on PTKI Leadership

The integration of Islamic boarding school meritocratic values into the governance of Islamic Religious Higher Education Institutions (PTKI) has brought about real positive changes to the quality of academic leadership (Clarke et al., 2024). When promotions and appointments to leadership positions at PTKI are based on achievement, integrity, and character, as the religious leaders (kyai) entrust to high-achieving students (santri), the work environment becomes healthier and more participatory. This demonstrates that in many Indonesian universities, nepotism and favoritism remain major obstacles to human resource development (Sahrodi & Karim, 2025). However, the implementation of

meritocratic principles in Islamic boarding schools can suppress these practices, strengthen leadership legitimacy, and build a transparent and accountable organizational culture. Thus, leadership born of a meritocratic system not only increases internal trust but also fosters an innovative and collaborative academic environment (Laufer et al., 2025; Anheier & Knudsen, 2023; Leithwood, 2021). which is very important for the advancement of education in the modern era. For more details, see the image below.

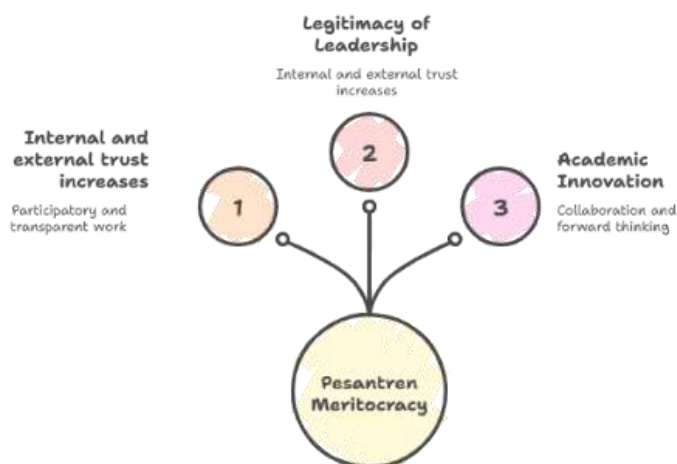


Figure 2. Pesantren Meritocracy Enchases PTKI Leadership

The figure illustrates the relationship between a culture of meritocracy in Islamic boarding schools and three important outcomes: increased internal and external trust, strengthened leadership legitimacy, and increased academic innovation. Meritocracy, here, is understood as a system that assesses and places individuals based on their abilities, achievements, and character, rather than their background or personal connections. When this value is implemented, a participatory and transparent work environment is created, fostering trust both inside and outside the institution. This trust, in turn, strengthens the position of leaders who are perceived as fair and professional. This aligns with Robert Putnam's Social Capital Theory, which asserts that trust, social networks, and collective cooperation are key to increasing the effectiveness and innovation of educational institutions (Baka et al., 2024; Li & Ergenc, 2024; Mikiewicz, 2021). In addition, an environment that is open to achievement also encourages collaboration and creativity in the academic field.

It can be concluded that the application of Islamic boarding school meritocracy values in PTKI leadership plays an important role in creating fair, transparent, and performance-based governance. This system fosters internal and external trust, strengthens leadership legitimacy, and drives academic innovation. By placing integrity and competence as the basis for promotion, PTKI can build a healthy, collaborative, and quality-oriented organizational culture, enabling it to face the challenges of higher education in the modern era in a sustainable manner.

Meritocracy in Islamic Boarding Schools and Motivation of PTKI Civitas

The application of meritocratic values originating from the Islamic boarding school tradition has had a real impact on increasing the motivation of academics at Islamic Higher Education Institutions (Arroisi et al., 2024). The principles of achievement-based rewards, work ethic, and noble morals have succeeded in creating a fair, healthy, and competitive work environment (Öztürk & Arun, 2025) Lecturers and educational staff feel more

enthusiastic because promotions and awards are given objectively, based on actual performance, not personal connections. From a social perspective, the impact is evident in increased lecturer participation in research, community service activities, and a culture of mutual respect for individual and team achievements. The academic environment becomes more open and collaborative because all members feel they have equal opportunities to develop. This indicates that PTKIs that implement a meritocratic system in Islamic boarding schools demonstrate higher levels of satisfaction, commitment, and work productivity compared to institutions with traditional leadership patterns (Situmorang, 2022). For more details, see the table below.

Tabel 3. Impact of Meritocracy

Observed Aspects	Findings	Impact
Academic Promotion	Lecturers with top publications earn promotions objectively.	Enhancing the spirit of achievement and a sense of fairness
Leadership and Governance	Leaders are chosen through open, merit-based selection	Increasing trust and participation among the community
Organizational Culture	A supportive and respectful work environment	Improving intrinsic motivation and work ethic

The table shows that the implementation of meritocracy principles has a strong positive impact on the motivation and performance of academics at Islamic Higher Education Institutions (PTKI). In terms of academic promotion, lecturers who are promoted based on the number and quality of their publications feel more valued because the system is transparent and free from personal intervention. This fosters a sense of fairness and encourages them to continue achieving. In terms of leadership and governance, an open and performance-oriented leadership selection process fosters trust, increases participation, and strengthens a sense of ownership of the institution. Meanwhile, an organizational culture of mutual respect creates a positive work environment that fosters intrinsic motivation and strengthens work ethic. These findings align with J. Stacy Adams' Equity Theory, which asserts that individuals are motivated when they perceive fair treatment in the distribution of rewards and opportunities (Tarigan et al., 2025; Coco et al., 2023). In the context of meritocracy, performance-based promotion and recognition creates a sense of fairness that enhances the satisfaction and performance of the academic community (Ferede et al., 2025).

This study concludes that the integration of meritocratic values rooted in the pesantren tradition effectively enhances motivation, fairness, and productivity within Islamic Higher Education Institutions (PTKI). Transparent promotion systems, performance-based leadership selection, and a culture of mutual respect foster a healthy and trustworthy academic environment. Consistent with Equity Theory, when lecturers and staff feel fairly treated in rewards and opportunities, their satisfaction and commitment rise significantly. Thus, meritocracy not only strengthens work ethic and collaboration but also serves as a vital foundation for academic excellence and sustainable institutional growth within PTKI.

Conclusion

This study concludes that the meritocracy culture in Islamic boarding schools plays an important role as a moral foundation and human resource management model for Islamic Higher Education Institutions (PTKI). The pesantren tradition, which emphasizes the values

of achievement, discipline, integrity, and social responsibility, is in line with modern meritocracy principles based on performance and fairness. The results of the study show that the application of pesantren meritocracy values has a positive impact on three main aspects: leadership, reward systems, and organizational culture. The selection of leaders based on competence and integrity discourages nepotism; a reward system that combines morality and performance increases motivation; while an organizational culture that values achievement fosters a healthy and professional work environment. Thus, pesantren meritocracy has proven to be relevant and effective in strengthening the governance of PTKI, which is transparent, participatory, and oriented towards quality and integrity, while bridging spiritual values with modern professionalism.

This study has a number of limitations that need to be considered. The scope of the study is still limited to several Islamic boarding schools and Islamic higher education institutions, so the findings do not fully represent all Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia. The qualitative approach used also emphasizes in-depth understanding rather than quantitative measurement, while external factors such as national education policy, organizational culture, and social dynamics in each institution have not been fully explored. Therefore, the researcher hopes that future research will expand the scope of study by involving more Islamic boarding schools and Islamic higher education institutions from various regions so that the results are more comprehensive.

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