

Change Management in Faith-Based University Transformation: A Case Study of Aisyiyah Higher Education

M. Aditya Salam¹, Saipul Annur², Afriantoni³

^{1,2,3}Universitas Islam Negeri Raden Fatah Palembang, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Institutional transformation in higher education has become unavoidable in response to regulatory changes, organizational demands, and socio-cultural developments in the Society 5.0 era. In Indonesia, private universities affiliated with faith-based organizations face additional challenges in governance, cultural integration, and institutional legitimacy. This study investigates the transformation process of Aisyiyah higher education institutions through a case study of Universitas Aisyiyah Palembang, which evolved from a health-focused college into a comprehensive university. The research aims to examine change management practices, identify internal and external challenges, and evaluate strategic initiatives undertaken during the transformation process. A qualitative approach was used, including in-depth interviews, observations, and document analysis, to explore organizational experiences and leadership strategies. The findings indicate that institutional change followed a structured process involving preparation, transition, and stabilization phases. Key obstacles included financial constraints, human resource readiness, regulatory compliance, and cultural adaptation. These challenges were addressed through collegial leadership, strategic institutional development, and the internalization of Al-Islam and Kemuhammadiyah values as a foundation for organizational sustainability. The study concludes that successful institutional transformation requires strong leadership commitment, cultural alignment, and long-term strategic planning.

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Corresponding Author:

M. Aditya Salam

Faculty of Tarbiyah and Teacher Training Master's Program in Islamic Education Management, UIN

Raden Fatah Palembang, Indonesia

Email: m.adityasalam15@gmail.com

1. INTRODUCTION

The global higher education sector is undergoing a profound transformation in the era of Society 5.0, requiring universities to become increasingly adaptive, resilient, and innovative in responding to technological advancement, social change, and regulatory demands [1]. Higher education institutions are no longer merely centers of knowledge

transmission but strategic organizations that must integrate multidisciplinary academic structures and professional governance systems to sustain competitiveness and institutional legitimacy. In Indonesia, this shift is reinforced by the Ministry of Education Regulation No. 7 of 2020, which mandates diversification of academic disciplines, strengthened governance arrangements, and robust quality assurance systems as prerequisites for university establishment.

Despite these regulatory incentives, the conversion of a specialized health college (Sekolah Tinggi Ilmu Kesehatan) into a comprehensive university constitutes a complex organizational transformation rather than a purely administrative procedure. Many private institutions encounter substantial internal constraints, including resistance to organizational change, entrenched institutional culture, limited managerial capacity, and financial vulnerability. Simultaneously, they face external pressures related to accreditation compliance, regulatory accountability, and intensifying competition in the higher education sector. Without systematic and strategic intervention, such dynamics may hinder institutional growth and compromise organizational sustainability.

Understanding organizational transformation, therefore, requires a strong theoretical foundation in change management. Lewin's three-stage model of unfreezing, changing, and refreezing offers a foundational framework for explaining how organizations destabilize existing structures, implement new practices, and institutionalize change to achieve long-term stability [2]. Complementarily, institutional theory explains that organizational change is frequently shaped by isomorphic pressures, in which institutions align with external norms, regulatory frameworks, and dominant organizational models to secure legitimacy and survival within their environments [3].

Although these perspectives have been widely applied in higher education research, empirical studies addressing institutional transformation in Islamic-based universities—particularly those led by women—remain scarce. Existing scholarship largely emphasizes governance reform, quality assurance systems, and managerial efficiency, with limited exploration of the cultural, ideological, and religious dimensions that shape organizational change processes within faith-based institutions affiliated with 'Aisyiyah. This gap highlights the need for context-sensitive inquiry that integrates change management theory with institutional and cultural analysis.

Responding to this gap, the present study examines the transformation of Universitas 'Aisyiyah (UNISA) Palembang from a health-oriented college into a comprehensive university. This case is distinctive for adopting a cross-institutional acquisition strategy, integrating another higher education institution to fulfill national requirements for establishing a multidisciplinary university, an approach that remains underreported in the existing literature. This strategy reflects strategic agility in navigating regulatory constraints while accelerating organizational development.

Accordingly, this study aims to analyze the institutional change process at UNISA Palembang, identify internal and external challenges encountered during the transformation, and evaluate the strategic mechanisms employed to address regulatory and organizational pressures. By doing so, this research provides empirical insights into change management in

Islamic-based higher education institutions and offers a strategic reference for private colleges undergoing similar structural transitions in the post-pandemic and Society 5.0 era.

Previous studies on higher education transformation have predominantly focused on governance restructuring, quality assurance reform, and managerial effectiveness within public and large private universities [4], [5]. Research applying change management frameworks highlights leadership roles, structural realignment, and regulatory adaptation as critical drivers of institutional change [6]. However, these studies primarily examine secular or state-affiliated universities, providing limited insight into faith-based organizational contexts.

Within Indonesia, research on Islamic higher education institutions has mainly addressed curriculum development, accreditation processes, and organizational performance [7], while fewer studies have examined institutional transformation through comprehensive change management perspectives. Moreover, empirical investigations of female-led Islamic organizations, including universities affiliated with ‘Aisyiyah, remain limited. Existing scholarship also rarely documents cross-institutional acquisition strategies as a mechanism for meeting regulatory requirements in university establishment [8]. This study addresses these gaps by offering an in-depth case analysis of UNISA Palembang, demonstrating how collective–collegial leadership, cultural integration, and strategic institutional acquisition were mobilized to manage organizational change while sustaining ideological coherence.

2. METHOD

2.1. Research Approach and Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach using a case study design to explore the institutional transformation process at Universitas ‘Aisyiyah Palembang (UNISA Palembang). This design enabled an in-depth investigation of leadership dynamics, organizational culture, and regulatory adaptation within a real-life institutional context. In qualitative inquiry, the researcher functions as the primary research instrument, responsible for collecting, interpreting, and analyzing data throughout the research process [9], [10].

2.2. Research Place and Timeframe

The research was conducted at Universitas ‘Aisyiyah Palembang, located at Jl. Kol. H. Burlian Km. 7.5, Palembang, South Sumatra, Indonesia, as the social and organizational setting of the transformation process. Data collection took place over three months, from October to December 2025, covering research preparation, fieldwork, data analysis, and report writing.

2.3. Data Sources (Research Subjects/Objects)

Research participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that information-rich cases were included in the study [9]. Informants consisted of regional ‘Aisyiyah leaders, members of the Daily Management Board, members of the institutional transformation team, university executives, and lecturers who were directly involved in or affected by the transformation process. This selection strategy was intended to enhance the depth, relevance, and credibility of the data obtained.

2.4. Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, document analysis, and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). Semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted to capture participants' experiences, perceptions, and strategic responses to institutional change. Observations were used to examine organizational interactions and practices in natural settings, while document analysis involved reviewing strategic plans, institutional regulations, accreditation documents, and official decrees related to the establishment of UNISA Palembang. FGDs were selectively employed to validate emerging interpretations and enrich analytical insights [9].

2.5. Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis followed the interactive model developed by Miles and Huberman, which consists of data collection, data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification [10]. The collected data were systematically coded, categorized, and synthesized to identify patterns and themes relevant to institutional transformation. The results were presented in narrative descriptions and analytical matrices to support interpretation and strengthen analytical rigor.

2.6. Data Validation Techniques

The trustworthiness of the findings was ensured through triangulation of data sources, methods, and theoretical perspectives. Credibility was enhanced by cross-checking interview findings with observational records and documentary evidence, while dependability and confirmability were supported through systematic documentation, reflexive analysis, and transparent analytical procedures [11].

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Results

3.1.1. Institutional Background and Transformation Context

The findings show that the development of Universitas 'Aisyiyah Palembang (UNISA Palembang) occurred through a long-term and cumulative institutional evolution rather than a sudden organizational conversion. The institution originated from the establishment of the 'Aisyiyah Nursing Academy in 1993, followed by the Midwifery Academy in 2003, and later the consolidation of health education institutions into STIKES 'Aisyiyah Palembang in 2014. This gradual trajectory reflects continuous efforts to strengthen governance capacity, academic legitimacy, and service orientation in health education before pursuing broader institutional expansion.

The transition to university status was formally enacted on 10 January 2025 through a ministerial decree, marking a strategic reorientation from a single-discipline health institution toward a multidisciplinary university encompassing health sciences, technology, business, and law. This transformation was driven by both internal motivations and external pressures, including increasing societal demand, normative direction from 'Aisyiyah leadership, and national regulatory requirements governing higher education development.

These intersecting factors positioned institutional transformation as both a strategic necessity and a proactive organizational response to changing educational conditions.

3.1.2. Change Management Process in Institutional Transformation

The results indicate that the institutional transformation at UNISA Palembang followed a structured, sequential change management process aligned with Lewin's three-stage framework: unfreezing, changing, and refreezing. This approach facilitated a systematic transition from the former institutional configuration to a stabilized university governance system.

The unfreezing stage was characterized by the development of collective awareness regarding the urgency of organizational change. This awareness emerged through sustained communication and policy direction from both central and regional 'Aisyiyah leadership. Comparative narratives, particularly the experience of Universitas 'Aisyiyah Yogyakarta, served as reference points that strengthened perceptions of the limitations associated with maintaining school-based institutional status. This phase was instrumental in reshaping organizational mindsets and minimizing resistance to change.

The changing stage intensified in 2024 and involved concrete institutional actions, including the establishment of a dedicated Task Force, coordination of administrative and legal documentation, fulfillment of accreditation and land ownership requirements, and the adoption of a cross-institutional acquisition strategy through the integration of the Immanuel Technology Academy. This strategic initiative enabled the institution to meet multidisciplinary criteria for university establishment efficiently while accelerating the overall transformation process.

The refreezing stage emphasized institutional consolidation and stabilization following the formal establishment of UNISA Palembang. Key initiatives included the appointment of university leadership, restructuring of faculties and academic units, development of standardized operational procedures, and adjustment of academic and administrative systems. These measures ensured that organizational changes were embedded in daily institutional practices, thereby strengthening governance continuity and long-term organizational stability.

3.1.3. Organizational Structure and Academic Expansion

Following the transformation, UNISA Palembang experienced a fundamental reconfiguration of its governance system. The previously centralized and relatively simple administrative structure of STIKES was transformed into a more differentiated and decentralized university governance model. This new structure is anchored by a rectorate, faculty-level leadership, and supporting institutional units, including quality assurance, research, and community service bodies, reflecting increased organizational complexity and functional specialization.

In terms of academic development, the university diversified its program offerings by establishing two principal faculties: the Faculty of Health and Technology and the Faculty of Economics, Business, and Law. This academic expansion aligns with national regulatory standards while simultaneously responding to labor market demands and broader societal

needs. Despite this diversification, health sciences continue to represent the institution's academic core, preserving continuity with its historical strengths.

3.1.4. Human Resource Development

The findings reveal a substantial increase in both academic and administrative personnel following the institutional transformation. This growth reflects UNISA Palembang's commitment to strengthening human resource capacity in accordance with its expanded organizational scale and academic mandate. Alongside workforce expansion, efforts were undertaken to realign roles, responsibilities, and competencies to fit the evolving university structure.

Nevertheless, persistent challenges were identified regarding faculty qualifications, particularly the limited number of lecturers holding doctoral degrees. This issue emerged as a significant internal constraint in meeting university-level academic standards. In response, UNISA Palembang implemented strategic initiatives to facilitate advanced academic training, recruit qualified personnel, and strengthen collaboration with other Muhammadiyah and 'Aisyiyah higher education institutions. Within this framework, human resources were positioned not merely as operational actors but as central agents of change, contributing directly to sustaining the institutional transformation process.

3.2. Discussion

3.2.1. Leadership and Collective-Collegial Governance

The findings indicate that leadership played a pivotal role in enabling the institutional transformation of Universitas 'Aisyiyah Palembang (UNISA Palembang). The collective–collegial leadership approach adopted by the institution reflects a transformational governance model that emphasizes shared authority, participatory decision-making, and distributed responsibility across organizational levels. Rather than relying on rigid hierarchical control, leadership practices were implemented through collaborative mechanisms that facilitated active engagement from diverse institutional stakeholders.

This leadership orientation aligns with change management scholarship, which emphasizes the importance of guiding coalitions and shared leadership in navigating complex organizational change processes [12], [13]. Empirical studies have shown that transformational leadership enhances organizational readiness, strengthens staff commitment, and improves adaptability within higher education institutions [14], [15]. At UNISA Palembang, collective leadership arrangements promoted inclusive decision-making, strengthened institutional legitimacy, and fostered trust during periods of organizational uncertainty.

The involvement of the Daily Management Board, regional 'Aisyiyah leaders, and the institutional transformation Task Force illustrates how distributed leadership structures contribute to organizational coherence and continuity during reform initiatives. Leadership responsibilities were dispersed across institutional units rather than centralized in a single authority, enabling operational flexibility while preserving strategic alignment. Such collective leadership models have been associated with reduced resistance to change and increased shared ownership of reform agendas in academic organizations [16], [17].

3.2.2. Strategic Adaptation and Institutional Legitimacy

From an institutional theory perspective, the transformation of UNISA Palembang represents a strategic response to isomorphic pressures aimed at attaining organizational legitimacy within Indonesia's higher education system [18], [19]. Coercive isomorphism manifested primarily through compliance with government regulations governing university establishment, accreditation standards, and governance requirements. These regulatory imperatives required substantial structural restructuring and academic diversification beyond the institution's original mono-disciplinary orientation.

Mimetic isomorphism was evident in the benchmarking of Universitas 'Aisyiyah Yogyakarta as an institutional reference model within the same organizational network. Such imitation strategies are widely recognized as mechanisms for reducing uncertainty and facilitating organizational adaptation in complex environments [20], [21]. By adopting proven practices from peer institutions, UNISA Palembang enhanced both symbolic legitimacy and practical effectiveness in addressing regulatory challenges.

In addition, adopting a cross-institutional acquisition strategy demonstrates a high degree of strategic flexibility. Strategic management literature emphasizes that institutional sustainability increasingly depends on the capacity to align internal resources with external demands through innovative and adaptive responses [22], [23]. In this case, institutional acquisition enabled UNISA Palembang to meet multidisciplinary requirements efficiently while managing constraints related to infrastructure, academic staffing, and organizational readiness. These findings support the view that legitimacy is strengthened not only through compliance but also through proactive strategies that integrate regulatory alignment with organizational innovation and value coherence [24], [25].

3.2.3. Cultural Integration and Ideological Stability

A central contribution of this study is to highlight the role of ideological values as stabilizing forces during organizational transformation. The integration of Al-Islam dan Kemuhammadiyah (AIKA) values served as a cultural anchor, mitigating uncertainty, anxiety, and resistance among institutional members throughout the change process. Rather than framing transformation as a rupture from established identity, institutional change was interpreted as a continuation and expansion of the organization's religious mission and educational purpose.

This value-oriented approach corresponds with organizational culture theory, which emphasizes that shared beliefs and values shape how organizational members interpret and respond to change initiatives. Empirical studies indicate that cultural alignment enhances organizational cohesion, reduces resistance, and strengthens commitment, particularly in mission-driven institutions such as faith-based universities [24], [25].

At UNISA Palembang, AIKA values were embedded into leadership practices, academic programs, and institutional routines, enabling ideological continuity alongside structural and functional transformation.

3.2.4. Long-Term Institutional Resilience

The findings further suggest that UNISA Palembang's transformation strategy reflects a deliberate balance between short-term regulatory compliance and long-term institutional positioning. The formulation of strategic planning instruments and prioritization of continuous human resource development demonstrate a forward-looking orientation toward organizational sustainability. Strategic management research emphasizes that durable organizational change requires not only structural realignment but also sustained investment in institutional capacity, leadership development, and organizational learning [22], [23]

The emphasis on human capital development aligns with studies demonstrating that faculty qualifications, professional growth, and academic competence are central determinants of institutional quality and competitiveness in higher education [14], [15]. By positioning human resources as active agents of change rather than merely operational components, the institution strengthened its capacity to internalize reform and respond effectively to evolving academic and regulatory environments.

Support from the broader 'Aisyiyah organizational network further reinforced institutional resilience. Organizational network scholarship highlights that inter-organizational relationships provide access to resources, legitimacy, and strategic guidance, thereby strengthening adaptive capacity during periods of uncertainty [20], [21]. In this case, the 'Aisyiyah network offered normative direction, organizational support, and moral reinforcement, enabling UNISA Palembang to navigate regulatory complexity and competitive pressures more effectively.

Collectively, these findings indicate that long-term resilience in higher education transformation is fostered by integrating adaptive leadership, strategic innovation, cultural alignment, and sustained investment in human capital, enabling institutions to achieve not only compliance but also durable organizational development in dynamic educational environments [24], [25].

4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that institutional transformation within faith-based higher education requires a multidimensional change management approach that integrates leadership, organizational culture, and strategic adaptability. The transformation of Universitas 'Aisyiyah Palembang demonstrates that structural change alone is insufficient without the alignment of ideological values, collective leadership, and long-term institutional vision. Change management grounded in participatory governance and value internalization enables institutions to navigate complex regulatory and organizational pressures more effectively.

The findings imply that higher education leaders, particularly within Islamic-based institutions, should view transformation as a continuous process rather than a singular administrative objective. The integration of ideological values such as Al-Islam dan Kemuhammadiyah can serve as a strategic resource to maintain organizational cohesion and reduce resistance during periods of change. Additionally, innovative strategies such as

cross-institutional acquisition highlight the importance of strategic agility in achieving institutional legitimacy within rigid regulatory environments.

Despite its contributions, this study is limited by its single-case design, which may constrain the generalizability of findings across different institutional and cultural contexts. The reliance on qualitative data also emphasizes depth of understanding rather than comparative measurement across institutions. Future research is therefore encouraged to adopt comparative or mixed-methods approaches involving multiple faith-based or private universities to validate further validate and expand the applicability of these findings.

Overall, this research contributes to educational management scholarship by offering empirical insight into change management practices within Islamic-based higher education institutions. Beyond academic relevance, the study provides practical guidance for university leaders, policymakers, and educational organizations seeking sustainable pathways for institutional transformation. By demonstrating how regulatory compliance, cultural identity, and strategic planning can be harmonized, this research offers broader societal value in strengthening the resilience and quality of higher education in the post-pandemic and Society 5.0 era.

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