Research Article

The Problematics of The Muslim Community in Responding to The Life Challenges of Modern Society: A Case Study at Muhammadiyah University of Malaysia

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Abstract: Modern society faces multidimensional complexities, ranging from spiritual crises and technological disruption to social inequality. Muslims, with their theological and intellectual capital, are often perceived as suboptimal in responding to these challenges contextually and applicatively. This article aims to analyze the fundamental problems faced by Muslims in formulating answers to the problems of modern society and to explore the strategic role of Islamic higher education institutions, specifically the Muhammadiyah University of Malaysia (UMAM), in bridging this gap. This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study method at UMAM. Data was collected through literature study, observation, and structured interviews with academics and policymakers at UMAM. The findings indicate that the main problems lie in: (1) the dichotomy between naqli and aqli sciences, (2) a static approach to religious texts, and (3) a lack of integrative and innovative solution models. UMAM strives to address these issues through three main strategies: integration of knowledge in the curriculum, problem-based research, and empowering community engagement. This article concludes that UMAM has the potential to become a model social laboratory of Islam that combines the Muhammadiyah renewal ethos with the Malaysian socio-cultural context to produce relevant, humanist, and rahmatan lil 'alamin solutions.

Keywords: Muslim Problems; Modern Society; Integration of Knowledge; Contextual Solutions.

1. Introduction

The 21st century is characterized by an unprecedented acceleration of change, driven by the digital revolution, the flow of globalization, and shifts in social values. Modern society, including in Malaysia and other Muslim-majority countries, faces a series of paradoxical complexities. On one hand, technological advancements promise efficiency and connectivity; the World Bank (2023) notes that internet penetration in Malaysia has reached 96% of the population, opening access to vast information. However, on the other hand, this progress is shadowed by increasing economic inequality (where the richest 20% of Malaysia's population controls approximately 44.5% of national income according to the Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2022), the degradation of mental health (a 2021 study by the Malaysian Ministry of Health showed an increase in symptoms of anxiety and depression post-pandemic, especially among young adults), and a crisis of identity and meaning in life. Society lives in a state of "connected alienation," where virtual interactions often replace deep social bonds, while the pressures of materialism and consumerism erode spiritual and communitarian values [1],[2],[3].

In facing this wave of change, Muslims–with their civilizational heritage that once served as a beacon of knowledge and ethics for centuries–are often perceived as struggling and lagging behind. Religious discourse in the public sphere, both on social media and in formal sermons, is frequently characterized by responses that are reactive, defensive, and fragmented. Modern issues such as gender inequality, digital civility, ecological crises, and the global capitalist economy are often answered with normative formulas from the past that are not critically adapted to the current context. The result is the impression that Islam only serves as a guardian of private morality, not as a source of systemic and visionary solutions for complex

public problems. A Pew Research Center (2022) survey on the perceptions of Muslim youth in several countries indicates a tension between the desire to maintain religious identity and the demand to participate fully in modern society, with many feeling that traditional religious institutions inadequately understand their challenges [4].

This problem stems from several interrelated roots. **First, the epistemological problem**, namely the persistent dichotomy between religious (naqli) and secular (aqli) sciences. This dichotomy produces graduates who are experts in fiqh but ignorant of the global economy, or competent engineers who are detached from a holistic Islamic ethical framework. **Second, the methodological problem**, where the approach to religious texts is often literalistic and purely deductive, without being equipped with the contextual, historical, and sociological readings necessary to address new problems with no precedent in the past. **Third, the praxis problem**, a gap between the theoretical discourse developed in the academic ivory tower and the social reality on the ground. Many concepts, such as Islamic economics, integrative Islamic education, or civil society (madani), remain at the discourse level without broad and measurable impactful implementation [7],[8],[9].

This is where the strategic role of Islamic Higher Education becomes crucial. Islamic universities are urged not merely to be guardians of tradition, but to become **laboratories of civilization** actively designing solutions. Muhammadiyah University of Malaysia (UMAM) emerges in this context with a unique and potential position. It stands at the intersection of three major forces: (1) the **Muhammadiyah Ethos of Renewal (Tajdid)**, which has a historical track record of modernizing education and social services in Indonesia; (2) the **Socio-Cultural Context of Malaysia**, which is multi-ethnic, multi-religious, and possesses a vision of becoming a high-income developed nation; and (3) the **dynamic Global Current of Islamic Thought**. UMAM has the potential to become an experimental field to combine these three, transforming problems into opportunities for innovation [10],[11],[12].

This article argues that to answer the life problems of modern society, a paradigm shift is needed from a reactive and dichotomous approach towards an integrative, contextual, and solution-based one. Through a case study at UMAM, this research aims to: (1) **Critically analyze the concrete forms of epistemological and methodological problems** that hinder the optimal contribution of Muslims; (2) **Investigate and document the strategies, initiatives, and models developed by UMAM** in responding to these challenges through the Tri Dharma of Higher Education; and (3) **Formulate policy recommendations and a framework** that can be adopted by similar Islamic educational institutions to strengthen their role as problem-solving agents in the modern era. Thus, this article is expected to make an academic and practical contribution to strengthening the role of Islamic scholarship in shaping a more humane and just future [13],[14].

3. Proposed Method

This research uses a qualitative approach with an intrinsic case study design to explore the phenomenon at Muhammadiyah University of Malaysia (UMAM). Data was collected through: (1) **Documentation/Literature Study:** of UMAM's curriculum, publications, and activity reports; (2) **Participatory Observation:** of the learning processes and student activities; (3) **Semi-Structured Interviews:** with 10 informants consisting of lecturers, researchers, and program managers at UMAM. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, involving data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing.

4. Results and Discussion

Based on the research conducted, the findings indicate that the problems identified in the background–dichotomy of knowledge, static response to change, and the theory praxis gap–manifest concretely, yet are also being responded to through strategic initiatives at Muhammadiyah University of Malaysia (UMAM).

4.1 Confirmed Problematics: Dichotomy, Distance, Defensive Response, and Socio-Intellectual Distance

The research confirms that the three main problems are indeed operational challenges, both in campus discourse and in engagement with the wider community.

a) **Dichotomy of Knowledge in Curriculum Structure and Mindset**

Interviews with lecturers and analysis of initial curriculum documents show that despite a commitment to integration, in practice, **academic administrative structures and syllabi often still separate "religious" courses** (such as Usuluddin, Fiqh) from "professional" courses (such as Information Technology, Business Management). A lecturer from the Faculty of Economics stated, "Often, the Islamic Business Ethics course is placed as a 'complement' at the end of the semester, not as a comprehensive foundation in every case analysis." This reproduces the very dichotomy being criticized, where religious knowledge does not become the guiding paradigm, but merely an ethical add-on. The impact, as indicated in the background regarding pragmatic job market pressures, is that graduates may be technically excellent but weak in constructing narratives and solutions rooted in an Islamic worldview for complex problems like economic inequality or digital disruption [5],[6].

b) **Defensive and Uninnovative Response to Contemporary Issues**

Observation of seminar activities and teaching materials revealed a tendency towards a reactive **"fiqh-minded"approach**. For instance, in responding to digital economy issues (such as cryptocurrency or Islamic fintech), discussions often get stuck in highly technical debates about legal status (halal-haram), without prior deep philosophical economic analysis of justice, system stability, and public welfare (maslahah) within the digital ecosystem. This approach aligns with the background findings on responses that do not address the root of the problem. A researcher at UMAM's Center for Contemporary Studies admitted, "*We often come late. The issue has already developed in society, and then we look for answers from classical texts. What is needed is foresight research that predicts problems and prepares proactive solution frameworks.*"

c) **The Gap Between Academic Discourse and Social Reality**

Community service programs examined in the initial phase showed patterns that were still charitable-transactional, such as Ramadan social services or free health assistance. Although beneficial, this pattern does not address the root causes of social problems like the cycle of poverty, radicalization of thought among youth, or the ecological crisis mentioned in the background. There is a distance between the complexity of campus research and the simplification of action in the field. This reinforces the thesis of **"disintegration of theory and action,"** where contemporary Islamic discourse is often elitist and untested in solving the real problems of Malaysia's urban and rural communities [15].

4.2 UMAM Initiatives and Strategies: Concrete Efforts to Bridge the Problematics

However, the research also documented several innovative initiatives consciously designed to address these very problems.

a) **Tearing Down the Dichotomy through Problem-Based Learning (PBL) Curriculum**

UMAM responds to the dichotomy problem not merely by adding religious courses, but by **designing project-based learning modules grounded in real-world problems**. A concrete example is the cross-faculty course "Islam, Science, and Environmental Welfare." In this module, students from Environmental Engineering, Economics, and Islamic Studies collaboratively analyze a river pollution case in a district in Selangor. Engineering students collect chemical data, Economics students analyze the impact on community livelihoods, while Islamic Studies students explore the concepts of mizan (balance), khalifah (stewardship), and himā (conservation) to build value based narratives and policy recommendations. This approach directly addresses the challenge of knowledge disintegration and prepares graduates with holistic thinking skills.

b) **From Defensive Response to Proactive and Solution-Oriented Research**

To overcome the defensive tendency, several research centers at UMAM developed anticipatory and applied research gendas. For example, the UMAM Center for Family and Digital Studies does not only research "the negative impacts of social media" but develops a "Digital Parenting Protocol for Urban Muslim Families" that integrates

developmental psychology, digital communication theory, and the Islamic concepts of ma'rifah (knowledge/gnosis), muwāṣah (gentleness) and ḥifẓ al-'aql (preservation of intellect). This protocol was piloted with parent communities in Kuala Lumpur and produced training modules adoptable by schools and family clinics. This is a concrete example of how UMAM attempts to address the anxieties of mental health and family crises mentioned in the background, with integrated solutions, not merely prohibitions.

c) Transforming Community Service from Charitable to Empowering
Responding to the theory-praxis gap, UMAM launched the **"Integrated Model Village"** program. This program does not merely provide aid but **applies a model of "Sharia socio-entrepreneurship."** In one location, a team of lecturers and students from various disciplines helped the community develop an agro-tourism product based on local fruit orchards. The economics team helped establish a cooperative, the law team drafted profit-sharing contracts (mushārakah), the communications team branded the product, and the Islamic studies team ensured that the entire process and profit distribution adhered to principles of justice. As a result, within two years, community income increased by 40%, and this model began to be replicated. This is a concrete form of addressing economic inequality while simultaneously building community resilience–a crucial issue in modern society [16].

4.3 Critical Analysis: Between Great Potential and Ongoing Challenges

The initiatives above demonstrate that UMAM, leveraging Muhammadiyah's social capital and its strategic position in Malaysia, has significant potential to become a prototype of a relevant Islamic university. The integrative learning and empowering community service models directly attempt to break the chain of classical problems identified [17].

However, the analysis also reveals **ongoing challenges**:

1. Institutional Challenges: Cross-disciplinary initiatives often encounter obstacles from faculty bureaucracy and lecturer incentive systems that remain traditional, valuing publications in narrow specialist journals more than applied interdisciplinary work.
2. External Challenges: Pressure from the job market and parents who are still oriented to wards conventional degrees and professional certifications, sometimes overlooking the added value of this integrative approach.
3. Ideological Challenges: UMAM must continuously maintain a dynamic balance between commitment to Islamic values, openness to modern scientific methods, and respect for Malaysia's multicultural context. The tension between religious conservatism and secular liberalism persists.

UMAM's efforts substantively address the background problems by shifting the paradigm. Fro mdichotomy to integration, from reactive to proactive, and fro charitable to transfor m mative. Its long-term success will heavily depend on the institution's ability to consolidate these sporadic initiatives into a syste mic framework and embed them into UMAM's academic DNA, as well as build strategic alliances with government and industry stakeholders to amplify its social impact [18],19].

5. Conclusions

Based on the analysis of research data at Muhammadiyah University of Malaysia (UMAM), it can be concluded that the problems faced by Muslims in responding to the challenges of modern society–as reflected in issues of digital disruption, mental health crises, economic inequality, and environmental degradation–stem from three structural gaps: the epistemological gap (the naqli-aqli dichotomy), the methodological gap (a static and reactive approach to texts), and the praxis gap (the distance between academic discourse and transformative social action).This research confirms that these three gaps are concretely manifested in the Islamic higher education ecosystem, including at UMAM, in the form of compartmentalized curricula, religious discussions that tend to be defensive towards contemporary issues, and community service programs that are still charitable in nature. However, a more important finding is that UMAM actively and critically responds to these problems through **innovative socio-scientific engineering strategies.** First, UMAM

addresses the epistemological gap through an interdisciplinary, **Problem- Based Learning (PBL) curriculum design**, as seen in the course "Islam, Science, and Environmental Welfare." This approach effectively demolishes the walls of dichotomy by making real societal problems the starting point for knowledge integration. Second, to overcome the methodological gap, UMAM develops a proactive-solution research paradigm oriented, as demonstrated by the Center for Family and Digital Studies, which not only critiques the negative impacts of technology but produces concrete protocols like Islamically-grounded "Digital Parenting." Third, in addressing the praxis gap, UMAM transforms community service into a **"Sharia socio-entrepreneurship"** model, exemplified by the Integrated Model Village program, focusing on sustainable economic empowerment and community development. Thus, UMAM has the potential to become a **model contemporary Islamic civilization laboratory** functioning as a **bridge-builder**: bridging the Islamic intellectual heritage with modern challenges, bridging academic theory with social action, and bridging Muhammadiyah's renewal ethos with Malaysia's plural socio-cultural reality. The success of these initiatives demonstrates that the problems are not a dead end, but challenges that can be answered with integrative, contextual, and impact-driven approaches.

6. Recommendations

Based on the conclusions above, this research recommends a series of strategic steps to consolidate and expand the impact of existing initiatives:

A. **For Muhammadiyah University of Malaysia and Similar Islamic Educational Institutions**:
    1. **Institutionalization of the Integrative Model:** Transform PBL curriculum initiatives, which are still pilot projects, into a **core curriculum framework** mandatory for all study programs. Establish a **Council for Knowledge Integration and Social Innovation** specifically tasked with designing, funding, and evaluating cross-faculty programs.
    2. **Strengthening the Applied Research Ecosystem:** Allocate special funds and incentives for **collaborative lecturer-student-community research** oriented towards solution oriented products (such as policy briefs, protocols, social business models, or appropriate technology). Establish a **research downstreaming unit** to ensure academic findings can be adopted by government, industry, or communities.
    3. **Formation of Strategic Networks:** Build a **consortium of progressive Islamic universities** in Southeast Asia to share best practices, conduct comparative research, and engage in joint policy advocacy. Specifically, strengthen partnerships with Malaysia's Ministry of Rural Development, Ministry of Health, and Ministry of Communications to align community service programs with national development agendas.

B. **For the Government and Higher Education Policymakers:**
    1. **Revision of Accreditation and Funding Schemes:** Develop **new accreditation indicators** that place high value on interdisciplinary curricula, socially impactful research, and university-community partnerships. Funding schemes (such as national research grants) should be preferentially allocated to consortia addressing specific social problems using an integrative knowledge approach.
    2. Facilitate Tripartite Dialogue: Establish reg**ular forums between the Ministry of Education, associations of Islamic universities, and industry leaders** to continuously map skill gaps and formulate graduates who are not only technically competent but also competitive with strong leadership character and ethics.

C. **For Communities and Civil Society:**
    1. **From Beneficiaries to Collective Partners:** Community organizations and local communities need to be encouraged to play an active role not only as **objects of service** but as **co-creation partners** from the problem identification phase, solution design, to program evaluation. This will ensure the relevance and sustainability of initiatives.
    2. **Building a Documentation and Dissemination System:** Encourage communities to document the changes and successes achieved through empowerment programs in the form of narratives, simple data, or creative media.

The results of this documentation will serve as **evidence-based** material for advocacy and model replication.

Closing:
The problematics of the Muslim community in responding to modernity is a call for **bold** knowledge reconstruction. Muhammadiyah University of Malaysia has shown concrete and promising initial steps. The next step is to transform these scattered and sporadic initiatives into a **coherent, reputable, and impactful system.** Thus, the Islamic university will not only be an answerer of problems, but further become a **future-maker** contributing to the realization of a superior, just, and *rahmatan lil 'alamin* civilization amidst the vortex of the modern age.

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