

Rethinking Accreditation Policy in *Ma'had Aly*: Toward a Decolonization of Islamic Higher Education in Indonesia

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Abstract

This study critically examines the accreditation policy of *Ma'had Aly* (traditional Islamic higher education) in Indonesia within the broader discourse of decolonizing Islamic higher education. It aims to assess whether state-regulated accreditation standards, mandated by the *Pesantren* Law and implemented by the *Majelis Masyayikh*, align with the foundational epistemological and pedagogical traditions of *pesantren*. Employing a qualitative research design based on systematic document analysis, the study investigates primary legal sources, including Law No. 18 of 2019, *Majelis Masyayikh* regulations, and the Minister of Religious Affairs Regulation No. 941 of 2024. These are analyzed alongside seminal scholarly works on Islamic education. The analysis identifies four key findings. First, current accreditation policies heavily prioritize managerial and technocratic indicators such as administrative governance, standardized curricula, and data compliance while marginalizing the intellectual traditions of *turats* (classical texts) scholarship and embodied pedagogy. Second, the framework exhibits epistemic dependence by adopting Western quality assurance logic focused on institutional documentation and global competitiveness. Third, the system perpetuates colonial legal paradigms, emphasizing documentary legality as the primary basis for institutional legitimacy. Fourth, from a sociological perspective, public trust in *Ma'had Aly* remains rooted in scholarly lineage (*sanad*), the authority of the *kyai*, and intellectual reputation rather than formal accreditation status. Ultimately, the study advocates for a decolonial accreditation framework that authentically integrates discursive traditions, embodied Islamic knowledge, and the traditional scholarly authority of *pesantren*.

Keywords: *Ma'had Aly*, Accreditation Policy, Discursive Tradition, Embodied Knowledge, Public Trust

INTRODUCTION

The institutionalization of *Ma'had Aly* within the Indonesian higher education system represents an important milestone in the recognition of *pesantren*-based scholarship (Gazali & Malik, 2009; Yasin, 2012). The enactment of the *Pesantren* Law No. 18 of 2019 formally acknowledged *pesantren* as part of the national education system and opened a pathway for the institutional development of *Ma'had Aly* as an advanced Islamic learning institution rooted in *pesantren* traditions (Halim, 2022; Wajidi & Aulia, 2019). However, the integration of *Ma'had Aly* into the national regulatory framework has simultaneously introduced new challenges, particularly regarding accreditation and quality assurance mechanisms (Munifah dkk., 2025).

Accreditation is commonly framed as an instrument to guarantee educational quality, institutional accountability, and public trust. In modern higher education systems, accreditation functions as a technocratic mechanism that evaluates academic institutions based on measurable standards such as governance structures, curriculum frameworks, quality assurance procedures, and administrative compliance (Abdurahman, 2026; Umam et al., 2024). While such mechanisms are widely adopted globally, their application within *pesantren*-based higher education institutions raises critical questions about epistemological compatibility.

Ma'had Aly emerged from the intellectual traditions of *pesantren*, which historically developed their own mechanisms of scholarly legitimacy (Niam et al., 2025). Unlike modern universities that rely heavily on formal accreditation systems, *pesantren* have long maintained public trust through scholarly lineage (*sanad*), the authority of kyai, and the transmission of classical Islamic texts (*turats*) (Ahmad, 2012; Asrohah, 2011; Kadi, 2017). Knowledge in *pesantren* is not merely transmitted cognitively but embodied through disciplined practices, ethical formation, and long-term engagement with scholarly communities.

This raises a fundamental question: to what extent do contemporary accreditation policies align with the epistemological and pedagogical traditions of *pesantren*? The debate surrounding the modernization of Islamic education in Indonesia has long attracted scholarly attention. Azumardi Azra highlights the historical transformation of Islamic educational institutions in response to modern state structures. (Dhofier, 1983; Bruinessen, 1995) emphasize the resilience of *pesantren* traditions despite pressures from modern educational reforms. Meanwhile, scholars such as Asad (2015) and Hefner (2008) critically examine how modern institutional frameworks reshape religious knowledge and authority.

Existing studies have extensively examined the development of *Ma'had Aly* and the transformation of *pesantren*-based higher education in Indonesia. Research by Juandi & Yasid (2016) highlights the shift in Islamic jurisprudence discourse within *Ma'had Aly* from *taqlidi* to *manhajy* approaches, while studies by Wahidul et al., (2024). Analyze the epistemological transformation of hadith studies in *pesantren* through the framework of Al-Jabiri's epistemology. Meanwhile, research by Niam et al., (2025), on *Ma'had Aly* and Islamic higher education in contemporary Indonesia emphasizes the intellectual contributions of *Ma'had Aly* in strengthening the scholarly capacity of *pesantren* and promoting the intellectualization of Islamic studies. Complementing these works, systematic reviews by Arif et al., (2024) demonstrate that recent scholarship on *pesantren* largely focuses on themes of educational modernization, curriculum integration, and the institutional contribution of *pesantren* to Islamic education. Other studies, such as Ubaidila et al., (2025), emphasize the importance of academic independence and the decolonization of Islamic education within *Ma'had Aly* institutions.

However, despite this growing body of literature, limited attention has been given to how state regulatory frameworks, particularly accreditation systems, shape the epistemological legitimacy of *pesantren*-based higher education (Wahid, 2001). Existing studies tend to focus on internal intellectual dynamics, curriculum transformation, and institutional development within *pesantren*, while the broader governance structures of higher education, including accreditation policies and quality assurance mechanisms, remain underexplored (Mas'ud et al., 2019). As a result, the interaction between modern accreditation frameworks and the epistemological traditions of *pesantren* scholarship has not been adequately addressed.

This article addresses this gap by examining the accreditation policy of *Ma'had Aly* within the broader discourse of decolonizing Islamic higher education. It analyzes how accreditation standards; derived from modern quality assurance systems; interact with *pesantren* epistemologies such as *turats* scholarship, scholarly lineage (*sanad*), and the authority of kyai. By situating accreditation policy within a decolonial analytical framework, this study contributes to the understanding of how institutional governance influences the recognition and transformation of Islamic knowledge traditions in contemporary higher education.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design based on systematic document and policy analysis to examine the epistemological implications of state-regulated accreditation policies applied to *Ma'had Aly* (traditional Islamic higher education institutions) in Indonesia (Bradley, 1993; Mann, 2015). Specifically, the research investigated the interaction between formal accreditation standards and the intellectual traditions of *pesantren*-based (Islamic boarding school) education systems.

Data Sources

Data were derived from both primary and secondary sources. The primary data consisted of official legal and regulatory documents, including Law No. 18 of 2019 on *Pesantren*, regulations issued by the *Majelis Masyayikh* (the national quality assurance board for *pesantren*), and the Minister of Religious Affairs Regulation No. 941 of 2024 concerning quality assurance standards for *Ma'had Aly*. These documents constituted the main unit of analysis, with a specific focus on provisions relating to institutional governance, curriculum design, quality assurance, and accountability. Secondary sources encompassed seminal scholarly works on *pesantren* traditions, Islamic higher education reform, and the transformation of Islamic knowledge systems. Key theoretical contributions from scholars such as Talal Asad, Martin van Bruinessen, Azyumardi Azra, Robert Hefner, Karel Steenbrink, Zamakhsyari Dhofier, and Ronald Lukens-Bull were utilized to contextualize the intersection of modern institutional frameworks with classical Islamic scholarly traditions.

Data Analysis

Data were evaluated utilizing a structured qualitative procedure comprising document classification, thematic coding, and interpretive analysis (Agius, 2013; Allan, 2020). The analytical process integrated qualitative policy analysis with a decolonial framework to critically decode the epistemological assumptions embedded within the national accreditation standards. Subsequently, these assumptions were juxtaposed with the core epistemic characteristics of *pesantren* education, namely *turats*-based (classical Islamic texts) scholarship, *sanad*-oriented (chain of transmission) knowledge, and the central authority of the *kyai* (Islamic scholars) within intellectual networks (Aspers & Corte, 2019; Aurini et al., 2021). Through this approach, the study evaluated the extent to which contemporary accreditation regimes are compatible with the foundational epistemology of *pesantren*, thereby highlighting potential tensions in the governance of Islamic higher education in Indonesia.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

Empirical Context of Ma'had Aly in Indonesian Islamic Higher Education

The development of *Ma'had Aly* within the Islamic education system in Indonesia cannot be separated from the growth of *pesantren* as religious educational institutions with a broad social base ("*Ma'had Aly Resmi Menjadi Perguruan Tinggi*", 2016). Data from the Ministry of Religious Affairs show that the number of *pesantren* in Indonesia has increased significantly over the past two decades, accompanied by a substantial rise in the number of students (*santri*) (Masyayikh, 2023). This condition confirms that *pesantren* function not only as traditional religious educational institutions but also as social institutions that play an important role in shaping the intellectual and moral formation of Muslim generations in Indonesia.

In the 2020–2021 academic year, approximately 30,494 *pesantren* were recorded across Indonesia with around 4.37 million students (Kahfi, 2020; Kekasih, 2021). In subsequent developments, the number

increased to 39,167 institutions in 2023, and by the first semester of the 2023–2024 academic year there were approximately 39,551 *pesantren* with about 4.9 million students (Kemenag, 2025).

Table 1. Development of *Pesantren* and Students in Indonesia.

Year	Number of <i>Pesantren</i>	Number of Students
2020–2021	30,494	±4.37 million
2023	39,167	±4.85 million
2023/2024	39,551	±4.9 million

This growth indicates that *pesantren* contribute significantly to the national education system. With millions of students, *pesantren* function not only as centers of religious education but also as institutions that shape the character, morality, and religious identity of Indonesian Muslim communities (Riswadi & Amrullah, 2023).

Within the context of higher education development in *pesantren*, *Ma'had Aly* emerged as an institutional innovation designed to deepen the study of Islamic sciences in a more systematic manner. The idea of establishing *Ma'had Aly* first appeared in 1989 through a consensus among *pesantren kyai*, pioneered by KH. As'ad Syamsul Arifin in Sukorejo, Situbondo. The institution was officially established on 21 February 1990, focusing on the development of *fiqh* as a primary discipline within the *pesantren* intellectual tradition (Juandi & Yasid, 2016; Mas'ud et al., 2019; Niam et al., 2025).

Alongside the development of the national education system, *Ma'had Aly* gradually gained formal recognition through various government regulations that integrated *pesantren* education into the framework of Islamic higher education.

Table 2. Government Regulations Governing *Ma'had Aly*

Regulation	Year	Substance
Government Regulation (PP) No. 55	2007	Religious Education
Law (UU) No. 12	2012	Higher Education System
Minister of Religious Affairs Regulation (PMA) No. 13	2014	Islamic Religious Education
Minister of Religious Affairs Regulation (PMA) No. 71	2015	Implementation of <i>Ma'had Aly</i>

Through these regulations, the government formally recognized *Ma'had Aly* as part of the Islamic higher education system in Indonesia. In the early stage of this policy implementation, 13 *Ma'had Aly* institutions obtained official operational permits, marking the formal integration of *pesantren* into the national higher education system. In subsequent developments, the number of *Ma'had Aly* institutions continued to grow as more *pesantren* became interested in organizing higher education based on classical Islamic scholarly traditions. In recent years, approximately 45 *Ma'had Aly* institutions have obtained official operational permits across various regions in Indonesia (Taufiq, 2024).

Table 3. Development of *Ma'had Aly* Institutions in Indonesia

Periode	Number of <i>Ma'had Aly</i>
1990	1 institution (Situbondo)
2015	13 licensed institutions
2023	±45 institutions

This growth demonstrates that *pesantren* are actively developing higher education grounded in classical Islamic scholarly traditions. The existence of *Ma'had Aly* not only functions as an advanced

educational institution for *santri*, but also as an intellectual space for strengthening *pesantren* scholarly traditions in response to the dynamics of modern education (Supriyanto et al., 2025).

Several studies show that *Ma'had Aly* plays an important role in the intellectualization of *pesantren* education (Gazali & Malik, 2009; Niam et al., 2025). Through advanced academic programs, students do not only study classical religious sciences such as *fiqh*, *tafsir*, and *hadith*, but also engage with other academic disciplines including social sciences, research methodology, and interdisciplinary approaches to Islamic studies (Anam et al., 2024; Huda & Musyarrof, 2023).

Table 4. Academic Contributions of *Ma'had Aly* to the Intellectualization of *Pesantren*

Academic Dimension	Form of Contribution
Islamic scholarship	In-depth study of <i>turats</i> texts and <i>fiqh</i> disciplines
Methodology	Strengthening scientific research methodology
Interdisciplinary approach	Integration of social sciences and humanities
Intellectual capacity	Development of critical thinking among <i>santri</i>

Nevertheless, the integration of *Ma'had Aly* into the formal higher education system has also generated academic debates. On the one hand, the modernization of education through *Ma'had Aly* is considered an opportunity to strengthen the position of *pesantren* within both national and global higher education systems (Rahmadani & Nurhidin, 2025). On the other hand, several studies express concerns that the standardization of education may gradually shift the epistemological character of *pesantren*, which has historically been grounded in the study of *turats*, the transmission of scholarly lineage (*sanad*), and the intellectual authority of the *kyai* (Munifah dkk., 2025).

Thus, the development of *Ma'had Aly* reflects a complex dynamic between two orientations. The first emphasizes the importance of formal recognition and educational standardization so that *pesantren* graduates can participate in modern academic environments. The second emphasizes the need to preserve *pesantren* scholarly traditions rooted in the transmission of classical knowledge and the authority of religious scholars (Djalal et al., 2021). The tension between these two orientations indicates that the integration of *pesantren* into the modern higher education system is not merely an institutional issue but also involves a deeper epistemological transformation within Islamic educational traditions (Faiz & Abdelmalek, 2025). In this context, critical reflection on the accreditation system of *Ma'had Aly* becomes essential to ensure that the process of educational standardization does not marginalize the intellectual traditions of *pesantren* that have developed for centuries.

Discussion

Technocratic Orientation of Accreditation Policy

The accreditation system applied to *Ma'had Aly* places significant emphasis on managerial and technocratic indicators as the primary basis for evaluating institutional quality. Institutional assessment focuses on administrative governance, curriculum documentation, quality assurance mechanisms, and formal reporting systems (Alaldaya et al., 2026). The evaluation instruments include self-evaluation reports, institutional development plans, curriculum structures, and compliance with internal quality assurance systems implemented through the Dewan Masyayikh (Munifah et al., 2025). In addition, the accreditation process requires institutions to demonstrate the completeness of administrative documentation and the proper implementation of institutional management procedures (Nashiruddin et al., 2025).

Such evaluation mechanisms are designed to ensure transparency, accountability, and institutional standardization within the national education system (Asari et al., 2020). However, the reliance on

bureaucratic indicators means that accreditation assessments tend to prioritize administrative compliance rather than the intellectual traditions that historically shape *pesantren*-based education. Consequently, the distinctive epistemological contributions of *Ma'had Aly* particularly the transmission of classical Islamic scholarship (*turats*), the continuity of scholarly lineage through *sanad*, and the discursive engagement of scholars within Islamic intellectual traditions receive limited attention within the accreditation framework (Yaqin et al., 2022). The formation of religious authority in *pesantren* contexts is deeply embedded in processes of scholarly mentorship, textual interpretation, and long-standing intellectual networks that cannot easily be captured through administrative indicators alone.

Table 5. Models of Institutional Legitimacy in the Accreditation of *Ma'had Aly*

Dimension	Western Quality Assurance Model	Colonial Legal Paradigm	<i>Pesantren</i> Scholarly Tradition
Basis of Legitimacy	Institutional performance measured through standardized indicators	Institutional legality verified through documentary evidence	Scholarly authority rooted in intellectual lineage and religious scholarship
Evaluation Mechanism	Accreditation instruments, self-evaluation reports, curriculum documentation, and institutional quality assurance systems	Legal documentation, operational permits, institutional reports, and regulatory compliance	<i>Sanad</i> of knowledge transmission, scholarly networks, reputation of kyai, and recognition within Muslim communities
Epistemological Foundation	Managerial rationality and technocratic governance	Legal-administrative rationality inherited from colonial governance	Discursive traditions of Islamic scholarship and embodied knowledge practices
Institutional Authority	Built through compliance with national and international accreditation standards	Built through formal legality and administrative verification	Built through scholarly reputation, intellectual authority, and continuity of tradition
Source of Public Trust	Institutional certification and accreditation status	Legal recognition and documentary verification	Social recognition of ulama, intellectual networks, and <i>pesantren</i> reputation
Implication for <i>Ma'had Aly</i>	Encourages institutional standardization and global competitiveness	Prioritizes documentary legitimacy in institutional evaluation	Preserves intellectual traditions of <i>pesantren</i> through <i>turats</i> scholarship and scholarly lineage

This technocratic orientation reflects broader developments in contemporary higher education governance, where quality assurance systems increasingly rely on standardized bureaucratic procedures and measurable institutional outputs (Gaston, 2023). In many modern accreditation frameworks, institutional credibility is assessed through compliance with formal management systems, documented evaluation mechanisms, and quantifiable indicators of academic performance. While such systems are intended to

enhance institutional accountability, they also risk reducing the complexity of knowledge production to administrative procedures (Makhoul, 2019).

Another dimension that reinforces the technocratic character of the accreditation system can be traced to the legal paradigms underlying educational governance in Indonesia. The accreditation mechanisms implemented by the Ministry of Religious Affairs implicitly reflect the influence of continental European legal traditions, particularly Dutch civil law (*Burgerlijk Recht*) and French legal paradigms (*Droit Civil*). These legal traditions were institutionalized during the colonial period through the *Indische Staatsregeling*, which functioned as the constitutional basis of the legal system in the Dutch East Indies. Within this legal framework, institutional legitimacy is constructed through documentary verification, formal legality, and compliance with administrative procedures that can be validated through written evidence (Grimes, 2017).

The influence of this documentary legal logic remains visible in contemporary accreditation practices. The credibility of educational institutions is evaluated largely through the completeness of administrative documentation and compliance with formal regulatory requirements (Finkin, 1994). Institutions must demonstrate their legitimacy through legal documents, institutional reports, and structured management systems that meet standardized administrative criteria. This approach reflects a modern legal rationality in which documentation functions as the primary foundation for building public trust in institutional governance (Farrington & Palfreyman, 2012).

However, this documentary model of institutional legitimacy differs fundamentally from the mechanisms of authority that historically developed within *pesantren* traditions (Dhofier, 1992). For centuries, *pesantren* institutions have maintained public legitimacy without relying on complex formal administrative systems. Instead, public trust in *pesantren* has been constructed through the scholarly reputation of *kyai*, the continuity of intellectual traditions transmitted through *sanad*, and the role of *pesantren* as centers of Islamic learning within Muslim communities (Lukens-Bull, t.t.). In this context, institutional legitimacy is not primarily determined by legal documentation but by social recognition of scholarly authority and the intellectual networks sustained by religious scholars.

Interestingly, the pattern of legitimacy embedded in *pesantren* traditions bears resemblance to the logic found in the English common law tradition. In common law systems, institutional credibility often emerges through precedent, social practices, and the reputational authority of individuals and institutions rather than solely through formal legal documentation. Authority is built gradually through historical continuity, public recognition, and demonstrated expertise (Hamdanah et al., 2025; Zainuddin et al., 2026).

A similar pattern can be observed in the context of *pesantren* institutions. The credibility of a *pesantren* or *Ma'had Aly* is frequently associated with the scholarly reputation of the *kyai*, the strength of its intellectual lineage, and the continuity of its tradition of Islamic learning. The *sanad* of knowledge transmission, the recognition of scholarly authority within religious networks, and the long-standing reputation of *pesantren* institutions function as forms of legitimacy widely acknowledged within Muslim communities. In this sense, the authority of *pesantren*-based institutions emerges from the accumulation of intellectual reputation and social trust rather than from administrative certification alone.

Toward a Decolonial Framework of Accreditation

The accreditation framework applied to *Ma'had Aly* is closely connected to quality assurance models that have developed within modern global higher education systems (Schneijderberg & Steinhart, 2019). These evaluation models emphasize indicators such as institutional standardization, administrative governance, self-evaluation reports, and formally documented quality assurance mechanisms. In practice, institutional assessments involve a range of administrative requirements, including operational permits,

institutional development plans, self-evaluation reports, and the completeness of institutional data within national education management systems. Such evaluation mechanisms reflect the dominant approach in contemporary accreditation systems, where institutional quality is primarily measured through managerial indicators and documented administrative compliance (Pahlawati et al., 2025).

This tendency cannot be separated from the influence of quality assurance models originating in Western higher education traditions. Within this framework, educational quality is defined through measurable and standardized indicators, including institutional management, academic reporting systems, administrative accountability, and compliance with national and international standards (Fernandes & Singh, 2021). These models have been widely adopted across higher education systems globally, including in the governance of Islamic higher education in Indonesia (Arif et al., 2025; Tarigan & Zahara, 2024). While such mechanisms aim to strengthen institutional accountability, their application in the context of *pesantren*-based education may generate forms of epistemic dependence, in which the standards of academic legitimacy are shaped by paradigms derived from modern Western higher education rather than from the intellectual traditions of *pesantren* themselves (Abdullah, 2017).

In the context of *Ma'had Aly*, administrative-based evaluation frameworks risk positioning *pesantren* scholarly traditions in a subordinate position relative to external standards that do not fully reflect their epistemological foundations. Historically, *pesantren* intellectual traditions have developed through the transmission of classical Islamic texts (*turats*), the continuity of scholarly lineage (*sanad*), and the authority of ulama as central figures in the production and transmission of knowledge (Niam et al., 2025). These epistemological dimensions are difficult to capture through bureaucratic indicators because the formation of scholarly authority in *pesantren* emerges through long-term intellectual relationships, mentorship, and participation in living scholarly traditions.

This issue becomes even more significant when viewed within the broader landscape of *pesantren* education in Indonesia. Data from the Ministry of Religious Affairs indicate that by the 2023–2024 academic year there were approximately 39,551 *pesantren* with around 4.9 million students across the country. The scale of this educational ecosystem demonstrates that the legitimacy of *pesantren* institutions does not depend solely on administrative evaluation mechanisms but is also rooted in social recognition of their intellectual and religious authority (Kemenag, 2025). In practice, public trust in *pesantren* is built through the scholarly reputation of kyai, the continuity of intellectual traditions transmitted through *sanad*, and the broader role of *pesantren* in shaping religious authority within Muslim communities (Hamdanah et al., 2025; Zainuddin et al., 2026).

In addition to the influence of global quality assurance models, the technocratic character of the accreditation system applied to *Ma'had Aly* can also be traced to the legal paradigms underlying administrative governance in Indonesia. Institutional evaluation systems that emphasize documentary verification, administrative reports, and formal regulatory compliance reflect the influence of continental European legal traditions, particularly Dutch civil law (*Burgerlijk Recht*) and French legal traditions (*Droit Civil*). These legal frameworks were institutionalized during the colonial period through the *Indische Staatsregeling*, which served as the constitutional foundation of the legal system in the Dutch East Indies (Grimes, 2017).

Within this legal paradigm, institutional legitimacy is established through formally documented administrative compliance. Public trust in institutions is therefore constructed through legal recognition, documentary evidence, and adherence to formal procedures. This logic continues to shape contemporary institutional evaluation mechanisms, including accreditation systems within Islamic higher education (Ahmad, 2012). However, this documentary model of institutional legitimacy differs fundamentally from the mechanisms of authority that have historically characterized *pesantren* institutions.

For centuries, *pesantren* have gained public legitimacy without relying on complex formal administrative systems. Instead, their authority has been built through the scholarly reputation of kyai, the continuity of intellectual traditions transmitted through *sanad*, and the scholarly networks formed through relationships between teachers and students. In this context, institutional legitimacy is not determined primarily by legal documentation but by social recognition of scholarly authority and the contributions of *pesantren* to religious and intellectual life within Muslim communities (Riswadi & Amrullah, 2023).

Interestingly, this pattern of legitimacy bears resemblance to the logic found in common law traditions, where institutional authority often emerges through precedent, social practices, and the reputation of intellectual authorities rather than through formal documentation alone. In the case of *pesantren*, a similar pattern can be observed in how communities choose educational institutions. Decisions to send students to *pesantren* or *Ma'had Aly* are rarely based on formal accreditation status. Instead, they are largely influenced by the scholarly reputation of the *pesantren*, the authority of the kyai, and the continuity of the institution's intellectual tradition (Arif et al., 2024).

These differences highlight a broader epistemological tension between modern accreditation systems and *pesantren*-based knowledge traditions. While modern accreditation systems construct institutional legitimacy through administrative compliance and documentary verification, *pesantren* traditions build legitimacy through scholarly networks, intellectual lineage, and the authority of religious scholars (Hani' et al., 2025; Lathifah et al., 2022). This tension suggests the need to rethink accreditation frameworks for *Ma'had Aly* within a broader perspective that recognizes epistemological plurality in Islamic higher education.

From a decolonial perspective, this situation opens the possibility of reconstructing accreditation frameworks so that they do not merely replicate global quality assurance models but also recognize the epistemological foundations of *pesantren* scholarship. Decolonizing higher education in this context does not imply rejecting institutional accountability mechanisms; rather, it involves integrating evaluation criteria that reflect discursive traditions, the transmission of embodied Islamic knowledge, and the scholarly authority of kyai (Ubaidila & Sulaeman, 2025). Through such an approach, accreditation can function not only as a bureaucratic instrument of educational governance but also as a mechanism for recognizing the diversity of knowledge traditions within Islamic higher education.

Table 6. Key Findings on the Accreditation Framework of *Ma'had Aly*

No	Key Findings	Empirical Indicators	Implications
1	Accreditation prioritizes technocratic and managerial indicators	Administrative governance, self-evaluation reports, SPMI implementation, EMIS data compliance	Intellectual traditions of <i>pesantren</i> receive limited recognition in accreditation systems
2	Adoption of global quality assurance frameworks creates epistemic dependence	Emphasis on institutional permits, master development plans, legal documentation, and administrative reports	Local Islamic intellectual traditions are positioned under global academic standards
3	Accreditation logic reflects colonial legal paradigms	Documentary verification and administrative compliance as the basis of institutional legitimacy	Historical <i>pesantren</i> legitimacy based on scholarly networks and <i>sanad</i> is marginalized
4	Social legitimacy of <i>pesantren</i> operates outside accreditation systems	Public trust based on the reputation of kyai, intellectual lineage, and <i>pesantren</i> tradition	Accreditation does not fully capture the social authority of <i>pesantren</i> institutions

Evaluating *Ma'had Aly* solely through accreditation frameworks based on administrative indicators risks overlooking the social and epistemological foundations that characterize *pesantren* as institutions of Islamic learning. Accreditation systems typically emphasize bureaucratic governance, formal documentation, and compliance with standardized managerial procedures. While these mechanisms aim to ensure institutional accountability, they tend to measure academic quality primarily through technocratic indicators. In the context of *pesantren* education, however, such an approach may reduce the complexity of Islamic scholarly traditions to administrative compliance, while neglecting the discursive traditions, scholarly lineage (*sanad*), and the authority of ulama that historically shape the transmission of knowledge.

Previous studies illustrate that the intellectual dynamics of *Ma'had Aly* are deeply rooted in these epistemological traditions. Research by Juandi & Yasid (2016) highlights the shift in Islamic jurisprudence discourse from *taqlidy* to *manhajy* approaches, reflecting methodological transformation within *pesantren* scholarship. Similarly, Anam et al., (2024). show that hadith studies in Islamic boarding schools involve an epistemological negotiation between *bayani* textual traditions and *burhani* methodological reasoning. Studies by Niam et al., (2025) further emphasize the role of *Ma'had Aly* in strengthening the intellectualization of *pesantren* through the integration of *turats* scholarship and academic inquiry, while Arif et al., (2024) demonstrate that *pesantren* research largely focuses on modernization and curriculum integration. Compared with these findings, accreditation systems that rely heavily on administrative indicators appear limited in capturing the epistemological and sociological dynamics that underpin the legitimacy of *pesantren*-based higher education.

Table 7. Epistemological Gap in the Evaluation of *Ma'had Aly*

Aspect	Modern Accreditation Logic	<i>Pesantren</i> Knowledge Logic
Knowledge validation	Documented institutional performance	<i>Sanad</i> and scholarly authority
Educational legitimacy	Accreditation status	Recognition of ulama and scholarly tradition
Learning evaluation	Standardized curriculum and reports	Mastery of <i>turats</i> and intellectual mentorship
Academic authority	Institutional certification	Kyai-centered intellectual networks

The comparison above illustrates a fundamental epistemological gap between the evaluation logic embedded in modern accreditation systems and the knowledge traditions that historically shape *pesantren* education. Modern accreditation frameworks tend to validate knowledge through measurable institutional performance and documented compliance with administrative standards. Institutional credibility is therefore constructed through formal reports, curriculum structures, and quality assurance documentation that demonstrate adherence to standardized evaluation criteria. In contrast, the epistemological logic of *pesantren* scholarship is grounded in the transmission of knowledge through *sanad*, where scholarly authority is built upon intellectual lineage, recognition by respected scholars, and long-standing participation in Islamic scholarly networks.



Figure 1. Epistemological gap in higher education evaluation

The contrast between modern accreditation systems and *pesantren* traditions in constructing educational legitimacy can be understood through several key scholarly perspectives. Dhofier (1992) emphasizes that the authority of *pesantren* institutions is rooted in the figure of the kyai and the transmission of classical Islamic scholarship through teacher–student lineages. In this tradition, institutional credibility is derived not from bureaucratic certification but from scholarly reputation and the continuity of intellectual traditions. Similarly, Azra (2004) highlights the importance of transnational networks of ulama in shaping Islamic intellectual authority in the Malay-Indonesian world, where legitimacy emerges through scholarly connections, intellectual genealogy, and participation in wider Islamic scholarly communities.

This historical continuity of Islamic scholarly networks is further elaborated by Bruinessen (1995b), who shows that *pesantren* function as nodes within broader intellectual networks linking Indonesian scholars with other centers of Islamic learning. In this context, the authority of *pesantren* institutions is embedded within long-standing traditions of textual study and scholarly recognition. However, Hefner (2008) notes that the integration of Islamic educational institutions into modern state governance has introduced new forms of bureaucratic accountability and standardized evaluation. While such frameworks aim to strengthen institutional management, they also shift the basis of legitimacy from scholarly authority toward administrative certification.

From a theoretical perspective, Talal Asad’s (Anjum, 2007) concept of discursive tradition helps explain why *pesantren* knowledge cannot be fully captured by standardized accreditation indicators. Islamic learning develops through interpretive engagement with authoritative texts within scholarly communities, where mentorship and intellectual practice play a central role. This perspective is reinforced by Ronald Lukens-Bull, who shows that *pesantren* education involves not only intellectual training but also the formation of moral authority and social leadership under the guidance of the kyai. Together, these perspectives illustrate that *pesantren* legitimacy is built upon scholarly lineage, intellectual networks, and embodied learning traditions dimensions that are often difficult to accommodate within modern bureaucratic accreditation systems.

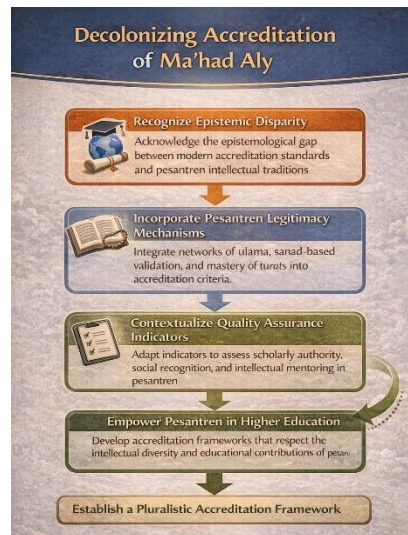


Figure 2. Decolonizing Ma'had Aly accreditation process

These findings indicate that the integration of *pesantren* into the modern higher education system requires an evaluative framework that is more sensitive to epistemological plurality. Rather than merely adopting global quality assurance models based on administrative indicators, the accreditation system for *Ma'had Aly* needs to incorporate mechanisms of legitimacy that have historically developed within *pesantren* traditions. Such mechanisms include recognition of scholarly networks, the transmission of knowledge through *sanad*, and the intellectual authority of ulama who have long served as the foundation of Islamic education in Indonesia. By integrating these epistemological dimensions into institutional evaluation, accreditation can move beyond purely technocratic assessment and contribute to a more inclusive framework for recognizing diverse knowledge traditions within Islamic higher education.

CONCLUSION

This article argues that the accreditation framework applied to *Ma'had Aly* reflects a technocratic model of higher education governance that prioritizes administrative compliance, managerial indicators, and documentary verification as the primary basis of institutional legitimacy. While such mechanisms aim to ensure accountability within the national education system, they only partially capture the epistemological foundations of *pesantren*-based scholarship. The intellectual authority of *pesantren* has historically been constructed through the transmission of *turats*, scholarly lineage (*sanad*), and the authority of kyai within broader networks of Islamic scholarship. These dimensions represent forms of discursive tradition and embodied Islamic knowledge that cannot easily be measured through bureaucratic accreditation indicators. From a decolonial perspective, this study suggests the need to reconstruct accreditation frameworks for *Ma'had Aly* by integrating recognition of *pesantren* scholarly traditions, intellectual networks, and embodied learning practices. Such an approach would allow accreditation to function not only as a mechanism of institutional governance but also as a framework that acknowledges epistemological plurality in Islamic higher education. Reconstructing accreditation systems in this manner would not only strengthen the institutional legitimacy of *Ma'had Aly* but also contribute to the broader project of decolonizing Islamic higher education in Indonesia.

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