

## Navigating educational excellence: The implementation and impact of strategic management in a rural Islamic boarding school context

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### ABSTRACT

**Purpose** – This study aims to analyze the implementation of strategic management in improving the quality of education at Pondok Pesantren Nurul Fattah Tulang Bawang, including environmental analysis, strategy formulation, strategy implementation, as well as evaluation and control.

**Method** – This study employs a qualitative approach using a field research design. Data were collected through observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation. The research informants consisted of the *pesantren* leader, the head of the madrasah, and the boarding school administrators. Data analysis was conducted using the Miles and Huberman model, which includes data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. To ensure the validity of the data, triangulation techniques were applied, including source triangulation, methodological triangulation, and time triangulation.

**Findings** – The research findings indicate that the implementation of strategic management, from a conceptual standpoint, has encompassed all the key stages. However, its execution has not yet reached an optimal level. Environmental analysis is still conducted in an unsystematic manner, strategy formulation is not entirely data-driven, and the implementation phase is hindered by low levels of discipline and weak coordination. Furthermore, the evaluation process tends to focus more on the execution of activities rather than on the achievement of strategic objectives.

**Keywords:** Strategic Management, Quality of Education, and Islamic Boarding School Institutions.

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## INTRODUCTION

Islamic boarding schools, commonly referred to as *pesantren*, represent a traditional form of Islamic education that has long constituted an integral component of the educational system in Indonesia (Alwi, 2013; Marhamah et al., 2025). The distinctive characteristics of Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) include a learning system centered on classical Islamic texts (*kitab kuning*), a disciplined residential life within dormitory settings, and a leadership structure in which the *kiai* holds a central and authoritative role (Muntoha et al., 2025; Syaifudin et al., 2021). The number of students enrolled in Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) in Indonesia has reached approximately 3.65 million, distributed across more than 25,000 institutions nationwide (Zamroni & Suyanto, 2023).

The figure indicates a high level of public trust in Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) as institutions for character formation and the development of religious knowledge.

In the context of globalization and technological disruption, *pesantren* are required to sustain their relevance by preserving their traditional values while simultaneously adapting to the dynamics of contemporary change (Irmawan, 2016). The primary challenge faced by Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) lies in maintaining educational quality while ensuring its relevance to societal needs, without compromising their Islamic identity. Educational quality should not be assessed solely based on academic outcomes; rather, it encompasses a broader range of dimensions, including the learning process, the professionalism of educators, the curriculum, as well as the adequacy of facilities and infrastructure (Adilah & Suryana, 2021; Tahang, 2023).

However, many Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) still manage their educational processes in a predominantly traditional manner and have not yet implemented strategic management in a systematic and structured way. This condition is often influenced by the strong centrality of kyai leadership and the persistence of conventional managerial practices, which tend to rely more on experience than on formal planning and data-driven decision-making (Muntoha et al., 2025; Rahmatullah & Ilyas, 2024). In the context of increasing educational competition and rapid socio-technological changes, the adoption of strategic management becomes essential to ensure institutional sustainability and quality improvement (Holm et al., 2026; Diana & Faslah, 2025). Strategic management can be understood as a set of decisions and actions designed to achieve organizational goals effectively and efficiently (Zuhriyah & Hasan, 2022; Widiati et al., 2023; Wahyuni et al., 2022). Furthermore, Wheelen and Hunger (2018) define strategic management as encompassing four interrelated stages: environmental analysis, strategy formulation, strategy implementation, as well as evaluation and control. These stages form an integrated and continuous cycle that enables organizations, including *pesantren*, to respond adaptively to internal and external challenges while maintaining their core values and identity (Hidayah et al., 2025; Thoyib, 2022).

According to data from the Ministry of Religious Affairs, Tulang Bawang Regency is home to 68 Islamic boarding schools (Hakim, 2012). Despite this substantial number, research examining the implementation of strategic management in *pesantren* remains limited, particularly studies that employ comprehensive and integrative theoretical frameworks (Halean et al., 2021). Existing studies, such as those by Iqbal and Sesmiarni (2025) and Ristianti (2024), generally emphasize the importance of strategic planning and management in improving educational quality; however, they predominantly focus on formal schools or general educational institutions, thus paying limited attention to *pesantren*, which possess distinct characteristics in terms of leadership, culture, and value systems. Moreover, recent literature highlights the importance of effective strategy implementation and evaluation in achieving organizational performance (Holm et al., 2026; Hidayah et al., 2025), yet it often lacks contextual adaptation to traditional Islamic educational settings, where management practices are strongly influenced by kyai-centered leadership and informal decision-making processes (Muntoha et al., 2025;

Thoyib, 2022). Consequently, there remains a gap in the literature regarding in-depth empirical studies that integrate strategic management theory with the unique socio-cultural context of *pesantren*, particularly in exploring how the stages of environmental analysis, strategy formulation, implementation, and evaluation are applied in practice. This study addresses this gap by providing a comprehensive and context-sensitive analysis of strategic management implementation in a *pesantren* setting.

The research gap identified in the literature includes several key aspects. First, there is a lack of systematic analysis of both internal and external environments in *pesantren*, as environmental scanning is often conducted informally without structured frameworks (Tahang, 2023; Rahmatullah & Ilyas, 2024). Second, strategy formulation is frequently not based on comprehensive empirical data, but rather on normative considerations, limiting its effectiveness in guiding institutional development (Adilah & Suryana, 2021; Thoyib, 2022). Third, strategy implementation tends to encounter challenges such as weak coordination and limited stakeholder involvement, which hinder optimal execution (Jannah & Arifin, 2025; Holm et al., 2026). Fourth, evaluation processes are mostly administrative and lack measurable performance indicators, making it difficult to assess their impact on educational quality (Fikroturrohmah, 2024; Diana & Faslah, 2025). Addressing these gaps, this study offers novelty by integrating a comprehensive strategic management framework with the unique socio-cultural context of *pesantren*, particularly emphasizing kyai-centered leadership and traditional values. Unlike previous studies that focus on general educational institutions or only partially examine strategic management stages, this research provides a holistic and empirically grounded analysis of environmental analysis, strategy formulation, implementation, and evaluation in a *pesantren* setting. Therefore, this study not only describes the implementation of strategic management at Pondok Pesantren Nurul Fattah Tulang Bawang but also contributes to developing a more adaptive and context-relevant strategic management model for Islamic boarding schools.

The objectives of this study are: (1) to analyze environmental assessment and strategy formulation in improving the quality of education, and (2) to examine the implementation and evaluation of strategies at Pondok Pesantren Nurul Fattah Tulang Bawang. This study is expected to contribute theoretically to the advancement of Islamic educational management and practically to assist *pesantren* administrators in developing more systematic and sustainable strategies for quality improvement.

## METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach with a field research design. A qualitative method is selected as it enables the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of strategic management implementation within the natural context of the *pesantren*, without any external intervention (Sugiyono, 2020). The study was conducted at Nurul Fattah Islamic Boarding School, located in Penawar Jaya Village, Banjar Margo District, Tulang Bawang Regency, Lampung. This site was purposively selected due to its relevance to the research objectives, as it represents a *pesantren* that has begun to adopt elements of strategic management while still maintaining strong traditional characteristics,

particularly in terms of kyai-centered leadership and religious-based educational practices. Such conditions make it a suitable case for examining the extent to which strategic management is implemented within a *pesantren* context and for identifying the challenges and gaps between theoretical frameworks and practical application. The research was carried out over a period of four months, from February to May 2026, allowing sufficient time to gain an in-depth understanding of institutional processes and practices.

The research data consist of both primary and secondary sources. Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews with key informants, including the head of the *pesantren* (ZM), the head of the madrasah (TM), and three boarding school administrators. The interviews were conducted face-to-face, with each session lasting approximately 45–60 minutes. Secondary data were obtained from institutional documents, including the school profile, organizational structure, annual work plans, activity reports, and program archives.

The data collection techniques employed in this study consisted of participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Participant observation was conducted by directly engaging in and examining the daily activities of the Islamic boarding school, including teaching and learning processes, coordination meetings, and interactions among the caregivers, administrators, and students. In-depth interviews were carried out using a semi-structured interview guide developed based on the four dimensions of strategic management proposed by Wheelen and Hunger (2018). This approach allowed for a more comprehensive exploration of participants' perspectives while maintaining alignment with the research framework. Documentation was also utilized to complement the data, encompassing photographs of activities, meeting minutes, and institutional planning documents. These materials served to support and validate the findings obtained through observation and interviews.

Data analysis was conducted using of Miles et al. (2019) in this study consists of three main stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Data reduction is carried out by selecting, focusing, and simplifying raw data obtained from the field. The data are then presented in the form of narrative descriptions and tables to facilitate interpretation. Conclusion drawing is conducted continuously throughout the research process, allowing the researcher to refine findings as new data emerge. To ensure the validity of the data, this study employs triangulation techniques, including source triangulation (comparing information from different informants), technique triangulation (using multiple methods such as interviews, observations, and documentation), and time triangulation (repeating observations at different times).

To ensure the validity and reliability (trustworthiness) of the data, this study employed several strategies based on qualitative research standards. Credibility was established through prolonged engagement in the field over a four-month period and the use of triangulation techniques, including source triangulation (comparing data from different informants such as the *pesantren* leader, madrasah head, and administrators), method triangulation (integrating observation, interviews, and documentation), and time triangulation (collecting data at different times to ensure consistency). In addition, member

checking was conducted by confirming key findings with participants to ensure the accuracy of interpretations. Transferability was supported by providing a thick description of the research context, enabling readers to assess the applicability of the findings to similar settings. Dependability was ensured through a clear and systematic documentation of the research process, including data collection and analysis procedures, while confirmability was maintained by preserving an audit trail and minimizing researcher bias through reflective practices.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **Environmental Analysis and Strategy Formulation**

The findings of the study indicate that Pondok Pesantren Nurul Fattah has undertaken efforts to identify various strategic factors originating from both internal and external environments, although these efforts have not yet been conducted in a systematic and well-structured manner. This condition reflects an initial awareness among the *pesantren* management of the importance of environmental analysis in supporting the formulation of appropriate strategies. However, the approach employed remains relatively simple and has not fully aligned with established strategic management frameworks.

From an external perspective, several opportunities have been identified, including the increasing public interest in integrated religious education that combines Islamic values with formal academic instruction. In addition, support from the local village government constitutes a significant enabling factor in the development of the *pesantren*. Such support may take the form of infrastructural assistance, policy facilitation, and active participation in religious and social activities organized by the institution.

On the other hand, the *pesantren* also faces a number of external challenges. These include the growing competition from modern educational institutions that offer more advanced facilities and technology-based learning systems. Furthermore, limited access to information technology poses a constraint in improving both the quality of educational services and the efficiency of administrative management. These challenges necessitate innovation and adaptive strategies to ensure that the *pesantren* remains competitive in the face of ongoing societal and technological changes.

Meanwhile, from an internal perspective, Pondok Pesantren Nurul Fattah possesses several key strengths that serve as strategic capital for its development. One of its primary advantages lies in the presence of a charismatic *kiai* whose leadership exerts significant influence on both the students and the surrounding community. In addition, the existence of a Qur'anic memorization (*tahfidz al-Qur'an*) program as a flagship initiative constitutes a distinctive appeal, enhancing public trust and attracting greater community interest in the institution.

However, the *pesantren* also faces a number of internal challenges that require immediate attention. Among these are the relatively low levels of discipline and responsibility among some administrative members, as well as a limited understanding of strategic management principles. These conditions have led to the suboptimal

implementation of planned programs. Such weaknesses highlight the urgent need to strengthen human resource capacity, particularly in the areas of managerial competence and organizational leadership.

Based on an interview with the *pesantren* leader, it was revealed that the process of environmental analysis conducted thus far remains largely incidental and lacks formal documentation. As stated, *"We usually discuss challenges and opportunities during deliberative meetings, but we do not yet have a standardized SWOT analysis document"* (interview, February 25, 2026). This statement indicates that the environmental scanning stage has not been carried out systematically, resulting in analytical outcomes that have not yet been fully utilized as a robust foundation for strategic decision-making.

In terms of strategic formulation, Pondok Pesantren Nurul Fattah has established a clear institutional direction through the articulation of its vision, mission, and organizational goals. The vision reflects an aspiration to cultivate students who are not only spiritually grounded but also intellectually capable and open-minded. Furthermore, the mission is formulated in a comprehensive manner, encompassing the development of individuals who are pious, possess Islamic moral character, demonstrate social and economic independence, and actively contribute to supporting governmental programs.

The strategic objectives are primarily focused on strengthening Qur'anic memorization (*tahfidz*) programs and enhancing proficiency in Arabic and English. To achieve these objectives, the *pesantren* has designed several flagship programs, including *tahfidz* and *tahsin* initiatives, the study of classical Islamic texts (*kitab kuning*) through the Amsilati method, the provision of formal education (SMP IT and SMK NUFAT), extracurricular activities centered on language and Islamic arts, as well as the development of *pesantren*-based business units. However, the process of strategic formulation has not yet been fully grounded in systematic data and in-depth analysis. Coordination meetings are conducted only approximately six times per year and do not involve all relevant stakeholders. As a result, the potential for broader input and more comprehensive perspectives has not been optimally utilized.

### **The Implementation and Evaluation of Strategies**

The findings indicate that Pondok Pesantren Nurul Fattah has made initial efforts to identify strategic factors from both internal and external environments; however, these efforts remain unsystematic and not yet aligned with formal strategic management frameworks. This theme emerged from field data coded as *"informal environmental scanning"* and *"limited documentation"*. Based on observations, environmental discussions were typically conducted during routine coordination meetings without the use of structured analytical tools such as SWOT matrices. This was confirmed by the *pesantren* leader, who stated, *"We usually discuss challenges and opportunities during deliberative meetings, but we do not yet have a standardized SWOT analysis document"* (Interview with *Pesantren* Leader, February 25, 2026).

From an external perspective, the theme of *"emerging opportunities"* was identified. Several informants highlighted the increasing public interest in integrated Islamic

education. One administrator noted, *"Recently, more parents are looking for schools that combine religious values with formal education, so this becomes an opportunity for us"* (Interview with Administrator A, March 3, 2026). In addition, observational data showed active involvement of the local village government in supporting *pesantren* activities, including participation in religious events and limited infrastructural assistance. Field notes (Observation, March 10, 2026) indicate that village officials attended monthly religious gatherings organized by the *pesantren*, reflecting institutional support.

However, the theme of *"external constraints"* also emerged strongly. Informants consistently mentioned increasing competition from modern schools and limited access to technology. As expressed by the head of the madrasah, *"We are aware that other schools already use digital systems, while here we are still very limited, especially because students are not allowed to use gadgets"* (Interview, February 27, 2026). Observational findings further confirmed that most administrative processes, including student records and scheduling, were still managed manually using handwritten documents.

From an internal perspective, the theme of *"institutional strengths"* includes charismatic leadership and flagship programs. Observations revealed strong emotional and social bonds between the *kiai* and students, particularly during religious activities such as daily prayers and Qur'an recitation sessions. One student stated, *"We really respect the kiai because he directly guides us, not only in religious matters but also in daily behavior"* (Interview with Student, March 12, 2026). In addition, the *tahfidz* program was identified as a key institutional strength, as reflected in both interviews and documentation of student achievement records.

Nevertheless, internal challenges were categorized under the theme of *"human resource limitations"*. Several informants acknowledged issues related to discipline and managerial competence. An administrator explained, *"Sometimes programs are already planned, but their implementation is not optimal because some administrators are not consistent in carrying out their responsibilities"* (Interview with Administrator B, March 5, 2026). This finding is supported by observational data indicating irregular attendance of some staff during scheduled activities (Field Notes, March 8, 2026).

In terms of strategy formulation, the *pesantren* has articulated its vision, mission, and strategic goals, categorized under the theme of *"normative strategic direction"*. Documentation analysis shows that the vision emphasizes the development of spiritually grounded and intellectually capable students. However, the theme of *"limited data-driven planning"* also emerged, as strategy formulation was not based on comprehensive empirical analysis. As noted by the madrasah head, *"We already have vision and programs, but we have not yet used data analysis to determine priorities"* (Interview, February 27, 2026). Furthermore, coordination meetings are conducted only periodically and involve limited stakeholders, which restricts broader participation in decision-making processes. Overall, the findings demonstrate that while elements of environmental analysis and strategy formulation are present, their implementation remains largely informal, experience-based, and insufficiently supported by systematic data and structured management tools.

## DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that the implementation of strategic management at Pondok Pesantren Nurul Fattah has conceptually encompassed the four stages proposed by Wheelen & Hunger (2018), however, its execution has not yet reached an optimal level. This result is consistent with the study conducted by Holm et al. (2026), which emphasizes that the success of strategic management is largely determined by the quality of implementation across each stage, rather than merely the formulation of strategies.

At the environmental analysis stage, the *pesantren* has not yet conducted a systematic and well-documented identification of internal and external factors. This condition is consistent with the findings of Tahang (2023), who argues that traditional *pesantren* tend to overlook strategic environmental analysis due to their reliance on kyai-centered management practices. Furthermore, Rahmatullah & Ilyas (2024) emphasize that effective strategic planning should begin with a comprehensive organizational understanding and the active involvement of all institutional stakeholders.

At the stage of strategy formulation, the Islamic boarding school has established its vision, mission, and flagship programs. The integration of *tahfidz* (Qur'anic memorization) and foreign language mastery represents a well-defined differentiation strategy. This finding is in line with Hidayah et al. (2025), who argue that high-quality Islamic educational institutions should be able to integrate spiritual, intellectual, and practical skill dimensions. However, the absence of formally documented strategic plans makes it difficult to measure organizational performance and evaluate the achievement of institutional goals, as highlighted by (Adilah & Suryana, 2021; Thoyib, 2022).

At the implementation stage, low levels of discipline and weak coordination among administrators emerge as the primary challenges. This finding is consistent with the study by Jannah & Arifin (2025), which reveals that strategy implementation in Islamic boarding schools is often dominated by certain groups, while the participation of other stakeholders remains limited. In addition, the limited utilization of information technology constitutes a significant constraint. In this regard, (Diana & Faslah, 2025) emphasize that digital transformation in education requires a well-developed management information system.

At the evaluation stage, the processes implemented remain relatively simple and primarily focus on the execution of activities aimed at achieving strategic objectives. This finding is consistent with Fikroturrohmah (2024), who argues that without a measurable evaluation system, educational organizations will face difficulties in carrying out continuous improvement. Similarly, Majid (2023) found that Islamic boarding schools with well-structured management systems are more capable of producing optimal educational outcomes through effective management of inputs, processes, and outputs.

The theoretical implication of this study reinforces the strategic management model proposed by Wheelen and Hunger (2018) within the context of Islamic boarding schools, with the important consideration that organizational culture and the leadership of the *kiai* play a significant role in determining the success of its implementation. Practically, this study suggests that Islamic boarding schools should develop formal strategic planning documents, enhance the capacity of their human resources, establish performance

indicator-based evaluation systems, and gradually integrate information technology into their management practices.

This study is limited by its focus on a single Islamic boarding school, which restricts the generalizability of the findings. In addition, the qualitative approach employed is inherently dependent on the subjectivity of both the informants and the researcher. Therefore, future research is recommended to adopt a mixed-methods approach, involve a broader range of Islamic boarding schools, and develop strategic management implementation models that are tailored to the unique characteristics of such institutions.

## CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the implementation of strategic management at Pondok Pesantren Nurul Fattah Tulang Bawang has, at a conceptual level, encompassed key stages, including environmental analysis, strategy formulation, strategy implementation, as well as evaluation and control. However, the degree of optimization in its execution remains limited. Environmental analysis has not been conducted in a systematic or well-documented manner, while strategy formulation has yet to be fully grounded in robust data. Furthermore, the implementation phase faces challenges related to insufficient discipline and weak coordination among administrators. In addition, evaluation practices tend to focus more on the execution of activities rather than on the achievement of strategic objectives. Therefore, the effectiveness of strategic management in enhancing educational quality is highly dependent on the quality and consistency of implementation at each stage.

Recommendations for Islamic boarding school leadership include strengthening environmental analysis through the systematic development of SWOT documentation, establishing measurable Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), and implementing data-driven evaluation systems. For madrasah principals, it is essential to align institutional work plans with the strategic vision of the *pesantren* while continuously enhancing academic supervision practices. Meanwhile, *pesantren* administrators are encouraged to improve managerial professionalism, ensure comprehensive program documentation, and adopt performance-based reporting mechanisms. Future researchers are advised to employ mixed-method approaches, expand the scope of study to include a broader range of *pesantren* contexts, and develop strategic management implementation models that are grounded in the unique characteristics of Islamic boarding schools.

## DECLARATIONS

### Author Contribution

**Fajar, A.**, was responsible for the conceptualization of the study, data collection, data analysis, drafting of the original manuscript, and subsequent editing; **Hayati, R.M.**, **Wawan**, and **Subandi, S.**, contributed through supervision, validation of the research findings, and critical review of the manuscript;

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This study was conducted without any external financial support from any organization or institution.

### **Conflict of Interest**

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest associated with this study.

### **Declaration of AI Use**

The preparation of this manuscript did not involve the use of any generative artificial intelligence tools.

### **Additional Information**

This study has been formally authorized by the leadership of Pondok Pesantren Nurul Fattah, Tulang Bawang (Surat No. 025/PONPESNURULFATTAH/III/2026).

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