

Universitas Islam Internasional Indonesia (UIII) and the Search for a New Epistemology in Islamic Studies

Ade Jaya Suryani

UIN Sultan Maulana Hasanuddin Banten
ade.jaya.s@uinbanten.ac.id

Abstract:

Formed through Presidential Regulation No. 57/2016, UIII represents a state initiative to globalise Indonesian Islam and to position it as an intellectual actor in the global academic landscape. This article aims to analyse the epistemological transformation in Indonesian Islamic studies through the establishment of the Universitas Islam Internasional Indonesia (UIII). By using document analysis of government policies, journalistic reports, the university's official website, observation, and scholarly discourse, this study argues that UIII marks a paradigmatic shift in Indonesian Islamic higher education, from a normative-theological model towards a secular-academic epistemology with a global orientation. Nevertheless, this orientation also reveals ambiguities, for UIII simultaneously seeks to undertake a decolonial process, namely challenging Western paradigms on the one hand while embracing the Islamic intellectual tradition on the other. This analysis shows that UIII is situated within an epistemological tension that is not easily synthesised: the institution rejects the dominance of a single centre of knowledge, yet at the same time has not formulated a stable alternative epistemological form. Thus, UIII is more aptly understood as a dynamic space of epistemic negotiation, where various knowledge traditions compete and engage in dialogue to shape the future configuration of Indonesian Islamic scholarship.

Keywords: *UIII, Indonesian Islam, Epistemology, Knowledge diplomacy*

INTRODUCTION

In the field of Islamic education, Indonesia has had state Islamic higher education institutions since the 1960s. After that, dozens of other state Islamic higher education institutions continued to emerge. Indeed, at present some have already transformed into universities. However, the existence of these Islamic studies campuses has still not enabled Indonesia to become one of the world's centres of Islamic studies. So far, people still often point to Mecca, Medina, and Cairo as centres of Islamic studies (Yamaguchi, 2024). As an example, in 2024 it was recorded that around 15,000 Indonesians were studying at Al-Azhar University alone (Prabowo, 2024). Among the general public, there is even an assumption that the majority of Muslims live in Arab countries, whereas around 12 per cent of the world's Muslims live in Indonesia, and this makes Indonesia the country with the largest Muslim population in the world. This condition shows that Indonesia's role in the Islamic world remains marginal (Abdullah, 2017; Laffan, 2011; Latief, 2022; Lukens-Bull, 2013; Meuleman, 2002). Tho Seeth (2023), however, argues that it was not marginal, but understudied.

The statement that Indonesia is a recipient of the globalisation of Islam is made by Meuleman in the book *Islam in the Era of Globalization: Muslim Attitudes towards Modernity and Identity*, published in 2002. Now, more than 20 years after the publication of this book, is Indonesian Islam still a recipient of external ideas, or has Indonesia become capable of producing them? Or a simpler question: what has happened to Indonesian Islam in the last 20 years? Of course, many things have happened, but one important development that deserves attention is the establishment of the Universitas Islam Internasional Indonesia (UIII) in 2016 in Depok. This university was established by the Ministry of Religious Affairs through Presidential Decree No. 57/2016 and began operating in 2021. This campus has marked the latest development in Islamic studies in Indonesia, with an academic orientation that differs from other Islamic campuses under the Ministry of Religious Affairs.

Meuleman's (2002) question about Indonesia's position as a recipient of the globalisation of Islam is closely tied to the historical development of Islamic higher education, where universities have long served as key sites for producing and circulating Islamic knowledge. Accordingly, debates over whether Indonesian Islam merely receives or actively generates Islamic ideas have largely focused on state Islamic higher education institutions. The literature on this topic commonly addresses IAIN's role in safeguarding orthodoxy, the overseas education of its lecturers, and the transformation from IAIN to UIN as an epistemological shift. Tayeb (2018) portrays IAIN as a classical institution mediating pesantren traditions, global intellectual currents, and Muslim society. Its orientation was first shaped by al-Azhar, later enriched by Western social sciences and humanities through overseas study from the 1980s onward.

Lukens-Bull (2013) describes this development as producing a dual academic orientation (classical philology and modern social sciences), while Abbas (2021) interprets it as a fusion aimed at overcoming the dichotomy between religious and modern knowledge (see also Kosim et al., 2023). The subsequent transformation of IAIN into UIN marked a further epistemological shift through the integration of non-religious faculties, generating both concern over the erosion of *ulumuddin* and support for enhancing Muslim competitiveness in modern society (Lukens-Bull, 2013; Tayeb, 2018). Despite this rich literature, the establishment of UIII in 2016 remains largely unexamined, particularly regarding its epistemological framework and its role as a state instrument of knowledge diplomacy.

This article argues that the Universitas Islam Internasional Indonesia (UIII) represents a third wave in the reform of Islamic higher education in Indonesia, marking a shift from the integration paradigm of IAIN and UIN toward a model of epistemic translation that positions Indonesian Islam as a producer of global knowledge rather than a peripheral recipient. By adopting a secular-academic orientation while remaining grounded in Islamic intellectual ethics, UIII rearticulates Islamic scholarship in forms intelligible to international academia and functions as an instrument of knowledge diplomacy. Situated within postcolonial and decolonial debates, the article demonstrates that UIII embodies Indonesia's attempt to renegotiate the geography of Islamic intellectual authority, moving Indonesian Islam from the margins toward the centre of global Islamic studies.

Furthermore, the purpose of this study is to examine the epistemological orientation and intellectual role of the Universitas Islam Internasional Indonesia (UIII) within the trajectory of Islamic higher education reform in Indonesia, and to analyse how UIII repositions Indonesian Islam in the global circulation of Islamic knowledge. Specifically, this research aims to (1) conceptualise UIII as a third wave in the transformation of Islamic higher

education beyond the IAIN–UIN framework, (2) explore UIII’s secular–academic turn through postcolonial and decolonial perspectives, and (3) assess UIII’s function as an instrument of knowledge diplomacy in Indonesia’s efforts to become an active producer of global Islamic scholarship.

To achieve the aforementioned aims, this research employs a qualitative approach combining document-based policy analysis and interpretive textual analysis. Primary sources include Presidential Regulation No. 57/2016 on the establishment of UIII, *Rencana Strategis Kementerian Agama 2020–2024* (Kementerian Agama, 2020), official institutional reports, and UIII’s public communications, which were analysed through close reading and thematic coding to identify key narratives and epistemological orientations. Secondary data from academic literature on Islamic higher education provided contextual and comparative insights. In addition, informal conversations with UIII lecturers and observations at seminars and conferences were used to triangulate the documentary analysis. Data validity was ensured through source triangulation, while analytical reliability was maintained by applying consistent coding categories—postcoloniality, decoloniality, and knowledge diplomacy—across all data sources.

DISCUSSION

UIII as the Third Wave in the Reform of Islamic Higher Education in Indonesia

Islamic higher education in Indonesia evolved from IAIN, established in 1960 and shaped largely by al-Azhar’s textual tradition, into a more outward-looking system. Although IAIN served as the main institution for mainstream Islamic knowledge, it was criticised for weak mastery of classical texts and remained largely a recipient of global intellectual flows (Abbas, 2021; Fina, 2020; Laffan, 2011; Lukens-Bull, 2013; Meuleman, 2002). We call this period as the first wave of epistemology in Islamic higher education in Indonesia. The second happened when IAIN transformed into UIN from the 2000s. This wave marks an epistemological shift through the incorporation of social sciences and humanities, fostering critical and contextual approaches to Islam.

The third wave started when the Ministry of Religious Affairs established Universitas Islam Internasional Indonesia (UIII) in 2016, which differs from UINs by positioning itself as a global knowledge producer. Rather than integrating religion and science domestically, UIII translates Indonesian Islamic thought into international academic discourse, signalling a new phase in Indonesia’s Islamic higher education landscape. At present UIII has five faculties, namely the Faculty of Islamic Studies, the Faculty of Social Sciences, the Faculty of Economics and Business, the Faculty of Education, and the Faculty of Science and Technology. This university is not merely a new addition to the network of Islamic higher education institutions, but a representation of a shifting intellectual orientation. This campus marks the third wave of epistemological change in Islamic studies in Indonesia.

Unlike IAIN and UIN, UIII marks the most recent development in how Islam is studied, taught, and positioned within the contemporary academic world. Unlike IAIN, which seeks to produce ulama, and UIN, which seeks to integrate religious and general sciences, UIII takes a further step. It presents a form of Islamic higher education that no longer relies on a normative theological approach, but on an academic perspective that is critical, interdisciplinary, and cosmopolitan. On this campus, Islam is treated as a scholarly subject that can be studied through various approaches. To a certain extent, this effort has already been pioneered by several UIN institutions.

This epistemological shift can be seen more clearly in the Faculty of Islamic Studies (FIS). FIS systematically integrates the classical Islamic tradition with modern scholarly

approaches. Its programme is not confined to the boundaries of classical studies, but develops cross-disciplinary perspectives that examine the dynamics of contemporary Muslim societies through historical, social, political, and cultural frameworks. The encounters approach, which emphasises the importance of interaction between classical and modern contexts, becomes its hallmark. The integration of advanced research methods, international orientation, and emphasis on critical understanding of the universal values of Islam renders this faculty distinct from similar programmes elsewhere.

At the master's level, students study, among others, Wasatiyya Islam in Indonesia, Islamic History and Civilization, Approaches and Methods in Islamic Studies, Studies on Muslim Societies, Islam in Indonesia, and Digital Islam (*M.A. Program*, n.d.). At the doctoral level, students study, among others, Islam in Religious Moderation Framework, Theories and Approaches in Islamic Studies, Islam and Global Issues, Classical Islam: Text, Context, and Discourse, Islamic Digital Humanities, Management of Religious Diversity, Mobility and Mobilization in Muslim Societies, and Global Muslim Politics (*Ph.D. in Islamic Studies*, n.d.). It must be underlined here that Indonesian Islam is taught as a course. At the master's level this course is called Wasatiyya Islam in Indonesia, whereas in the doctoral programme it is called Islam in Religious Moderation Framework.

The presence of lecturers and students from various countries, Muslim and non-Muslim, creates a unique intellectual atmosphere. At UIII, discussions on fiqh, tafsir, or Islamic history run alongside studies on ecology, digital technology, and global geopolitical change. Spaces of dialogue are not limited by affiliation to any particular madhhab or religious identity. Rather than being a da'wa-oriented institution, UIII positions itself as an arena of civilisational conversation. Thus, the Faculty of Islamic Studies becomes not only an academic space, but also a laboratory for imagining new forms of Islamic scholarship that are more inclusive and globally connected.

Furthermore, as has been pursued by other IAIN/UIN institutions, internationalisation becomes an important element of UIII's profile. Through English and Arabic as languages of instruction, research collaborations with universities such as Leiden University, SOAS University of London, and the University of Edinburgh, as well as global scholarship programmes attracting students from more than fifty countries, UIII is projected as a knowledge hub. Unlike what Meuleman and others described two decades ago, Indonesia, through UIII, no longer wishes to be merely a consumer of ideas, but a producer of Islamic discourse recognised at the global level. The 2025 AICIS+ international conference held on the UIII campus serves as concrete evidence of this ambition. The main theme, "Islam, Ecotheology, and Technological Transformation: Multidisciplinary Innovations for an Equitable and Sustainable Future," shows that FSI is at the forefront of dialogues between Islamic values and global challenges. By bringing together scholars from more than thirty countries, UIII demonstrates its capacity to become a space of knowledge production, not merely an organiser of higher education (<https://aicis.uiii.ac.id/>).

UIII and Secular-Academic Turn in Islamic Studies

To understand that UIII takes a further step beyond what has been undertaken by IAIN and UIN, here we compare it with two other major Islamic universities, namely the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) in Malaysia and al-Azhar University in Egypt. These three universities represent three different paradigms: the Islamisation of knowledge (IIUM), the preservation of orthodoxy (al-Azhar), and translation into global academia (UIII). Founded in 1983, IIUM carries the paradigm of the Islamisation of knowledge (al-Faruqi, 1989; Al-Attas, 2009). The idea behind its establishment arose from efforts to integrate divine

revelation with modern disciplines so as to form a tawhidic epistemology that brings together faith and rationality. This model reflects the optimism of postcolonial Muslim reformers to reclaim epistemic sovereignty without hindering scientific advancement. Al-Azhar University presents a different model, namely continuity and preservation. Founded in the tenth century, this institution remains the symbolic centre of Sunni orthodoxy, relying on fiqh, tafsir, and hadith. Although it has undergone several institutional reforms, al-Azhar's engagement with modern disciplines remains limited. Its authority endures through theological legitimacy, not epistemic innovation, and its influence is constrained by linguistic exclusivity and caution in responding to secular academia (Laffan, 2011).

UIII follows a different path from both models. Instead of Islamicising modern disciplines as IIUM does or maintaining orthodoxy as al-Azhar does, UIII develops a paradigm of translation: an attempt to rearticulate the Islamic intellectual tradition in academic forms that are readily intelligible globally without abandoning its moral and cultural foundations. English-medium postgraduate programmes, an interdisciplinary curriculum, and an inclusive campus community demonstrate efforts to build an academic Islam that is plural and dialogical, moving beyond the dichotomy between Western secularism and Islamic traditionalism.

Institutionally, UIII also differs in its origins and governance. Unlike IIUM, which emerged from a pan-Islamic initiative, and al-Azhar, which developed from centuries-old religious authority, UIII was established through a state decision as a national university with an explicit global mandate. Through its collaborations with institutions such as Leiden University, SOAS (University of London), the University of Edinburgh, Deakin University, and Dundee University, UIII functions as both a centre of scholarship and an instrument of diplomacy—what Knight (2022) calls knowledge diplomacy, namely the cultivation of cross-cultural understanding through academic collaboration.

Epistemologically, UIII represents a third alternative within Islamic higher education. If IIUM aims to Islamicise the university and al-Azhar seeks to safeguard religious authority, UIII aspires to globalise Islamic scholarship. This shift redefines the production of Islamic knowledge as a dialogical and participatory endeavour. The path taken by UIII is not to integrate general sciences into religious sciences, as UIN has done. UIII translates knowledge so that it can function alongside religious identity. In this framework, UIII appears as a cosmopolitan and postcolonial response to the dilemmas of Muslim education, marking Indonesia's emergence as a new intellectual axis in the geography of global Islamic thought.

When explaining the transformation of IAIN into UIN, Lukens-Bull (2013) shows that various faculties within UIN hold different standards regarding the Islamisation of knowledge: some emphasise Islamic ethics and morality (Fina, 2020; Millie, 2025; Millie et al., 2023), while others prioritise neutral scientific methodology. This integration, according to Lukens-Bull, has never been linear. It continues to shift depending on actors, faculties, and the dominant parole of Islam. The result is epistemological diversity rather than a single model of an Islamic university. For example, when explaining the epistemology of knowledge, UIN Malang produces the metaphor of the tree of knowledge, UIN Surabaya the twin towers, and UIN Bandung the wheel of knowledge. Meanwhile UIN Yogyakarta and Jakarta develop religion–science integration without using metaphors.

One of the most fundamental epistemological innovations introduced by UIII is its willingness to adopt what may be called a secular–academic turn in Islamic studies. This step does not mean rejecting faith or revelation, but rather institutionalising academic secularism as a methodological approach, a way of thinking that positions religion as a legitimate object

to be studied critically and interdisciplinarily. Within such a framework, Islam is studied not as a fixed dogma but as a living tradition continually shaped by history, society, and culture. This orientation can be seen in its faculties, curriculum, faculty members, and conferences.

The faculties that exist at UIII, as well as their courses, do not reflect the epistemology of IAIN, which remained dominated by religion, nor that of UIN, which sought to integrate general sciences into religious sciences. The faculties at UIII (Islamic Studies, Social Sciences, Education, Economics, and Science & Technology) mirror faculties in general universities. Courses such as *Islamic History and Civilization*, *Studies on Muslim Societies*, *Contemporary Discourses in Islamic Law*, *Theories and Approaches in Islamic Studies*, *Islam and Global Issues*, and *Global Muslim Politics in the Faculty of Islamic Studies* utilise theories from general/secular disciplines such as anthropology and sociology. This curriculum reflects the interdisciplinary model common in leading global universities, positioning UIII at the intersection between Islamic epistemology and contemporary social sciences. English and Arabic are then used as mediums of instruction to ensure connectivity with global scholarly conversations. The lecturers, for example in the Faculty of Islamic Studies, are internationally trained scholars who actively engage in academic forums, research projects, and public lectures at national and global levels (*Faculty Members*, n.d.)

Such an orientation can also be seen in the AICIS+ 2025 programme when Islam is discussed through interdisciplinary and critical lenses. The major themes highlighted in AICIS+ 2025 show how UIII's academic focus is no longer on the inner components of religion such as theology, fiqh, and tasawuf, for instance. UIII chose ecotheology and environmental sustainability, science and technological transformations, Islamic law, social equality and eco-feminism, sustainable economic systems and social welfare, industrialisation, innovation, and Islamic economic values in the new era, decolonising Islamic studies, peacebuilding and humanitarian crises, and public health in Muslim societies as the themes of AICIS+ 2025 (Kementerian Agama Republik Indonesia, 2025).

Practically, this epistemological shift transforms the function of an Islamic university. Whereas previous generations (IAIN and UIN) focused on producing ulama or bureaucratic elites, UIII seeks to shape scholar-intellectuals, namely researchers capable of engaging in international academic conversations while remaining grounded in Islamic scholarly ethics. This approach aligns with Connell's (2007) call to build a Southern epistemology, in which knowledge from the Global South not only consumes global theory but contributes to its formation.

Through this secular-academic orientation, UIII offers a vision of Islamic studies as a space of intellectual encounter, not an arena for theological assertion. UIII invites scholars from diverse backgrounds to explore Islam not through apologetics, but through critical, comparative, and creative reasoning. Thus, UIII normalises the idea that Islamic knowledge—like other human intellectual traditions—can develop through dialogue, critique, and participation in global scholarly life. This, ultimately, is what distinguishes UIII's epistemological project: it transforms Indonesian Islam from merely an object of study into a subject of knowledge capable of shaping the contours of modern academia.

The Epistemological Tension Between Islamic and Non-Western Frameworks

Although it has been explained above that UIII has taken a secular-academic turn, the secularity referred to here is not the same as the secularity practised in Western campuses. In other words, UIII appears to stand within a pull between Islamic epistemology on one side, adopting secular-rational values on another, while also not wishing to become entirely Western on yet another. This condition can be seen from the international decolonial

conference held by the Faculty of Islamic Studies on 29–30 April 2025. With the theme “*Decolonizing Social Sciences and Humanities: Islamic and Non-Western Perspectives*”, this conference gathered leading scholars to discuss the reconstruction of knowledge beyond Western frameworks. The themes raised included decolonial epistemology, political economy, ecology, education, and Indonesian social sciences. The speakers, including Syed Farid Alatas, Lena Salaymeh, Joseph Lombard, Vedi Hadiz, Farish Noor, Salman Sayyid, Anna Gade, Recep Şentürk, and Komaruddin Hidayat, presented critiques of coloniality and offered alternative models grounded in the Islamic tradition, local wisdom, and non-Western ethical frameworks as foundations for renewing the global social sciences and humanities (Administrator, 2025).

Islamic, local, and non-Western epistemologies can be seen, for example, in the view of Dr İpek Coşkun Armağan, one of the speakers in the conference. She stated that Islamic universities require authentic academic methods that reflect values and faith. She criticised the overly Eurocentric academic condition that does not suit Muslim societies. She further encouraged the growth of epistemologies aligned with values and belief, free from European dominance. This view is in line with Lombard (2025) who states that European dominance has marginalised Islamic epistemology. Ehsan Shahwahid, one of the participants of the conference, even argued that Islamic studies discourse should avoid becoming trapped not only by Western dominance but also by Middle Eastern dominance.

From this we see that UIII is situated within an epistemological tension. On one side it wishes to continue positioning Islam as an epistemology, and at the same time to free itself from European (and Middle Eastern) dominance, while also opening itself to other epistemologies. This openness to diverse epistemologies, and the rejection of the dominance of any single epistemology—particularly Western epistemology—is what underlies the idea of decolonialism. Ashcroft et al. (2025: 265-270) state that decolonialism is an attempt to liberate knowledge, namely to understand where a form of knowledge originates, its geopolitical location, and how other forms of knowledge (non-Western) have been marginalised or rendered invalid. In other words, decolonialism seeks to ensure that diverse epistemologies may grow and that no one epistemology becomes overly dominant and displaces others. As a projection, of course UIII does not yet have a definite form of what constitutes knowledge that differs from Western, or even Middle Eastern, frameworks. The Dean of the Faculty of Islamic Studies, Yanwar Priyadi, states, “Our vision is to move beyond both classical and Western models—toward something distinct, challenging, and innovative”.

However, from the themes of the conference above, as well as from the comments of its speakers, what is meant by epistemological decolonialism is Islam and the non-West. This view aligns with the view of Nash et al. (2014) that Islamic epistemology and Western epistemology are incompatible. In reality, this view in fact brings new problems. First, with the use of the term non-West, the decolonisation project promoted by UIII becomes a new epistemological colonisation, namely removing and considering the West invalid. Second, this view imagines that each epistemology has a clearly defined boundary. In reality, the knowledge developed by early generations of Muslim scholars originated from outside Islam, including India, Persia, and Greece. Then the Western world took and developed modern knowledge from what Muslim scholars had already developed. At present, Muslim scholars depend heavily on Western thinkers (Al-Khalili, 2011). The reality at UIII shows that most, if not all, of its lecturers studied in the West. In short, defining decolonialism as Islam and non-West contradicts the spirit of decolonialism, namely to seek multiple epistemological

possibilities. This condition is termed by Mignolo & Walsh (2018) as pluriversality, a world consisting of many epistemic centres living in productive dialogue.

Connell (2007) concept of Southern theory also provides a useful framework for interpreting this. She argues that the production of knowledge has long been dominated by Eurocentric paradigms that position the Global South as a passive recipient. The emergence of UIII as a globally oriented research university represents an act of epistemic decolonisation, namely an effort to reclaim the right of the South to define universal questions through local experience. By placing Islamic thought within the context of Indonesian pluralism, UIII contributes to what Mignolo and Walsh (2018) call epistemic delinking: a process of detaching from colonial hierarchies of knowledge while simultaneously building alternative, dialogical frameworks.

Without eliminating any epistemology, UIII can carry out three forms of decolonisation at once: rejecting the monopoly of Islamic legitimacy by Middle Eastern institutions, rejecting the reduction of Islamic studies into orientalist frameworks within Western academia, and at the same time giving space to other epistemologies, including Indonesian local epistemologies, to grow. Thus, UIII returns agency to Muslim scholars in the Global South to define Islam based on their own intellectual frameworks. In this role, UIII not only strengthens Indonesia's religious diplomacy but also contributes to the rebalancing of global knowledge flows, a process in which peripheral regions of the Islamic world become new centres of intellectual gravity.

With regard to Indonesian local epistemology, UIII, like the government and various UINs, offers an Indonesian version of Islam. For this purpose UIII offers courses such as *Wasatiyya Islam in Indonesia* and *Islam in Religious Moderation Framework*. The Rector of UIII, Jamhari Makruf, emphasises that Indonesian Islam can be offered to the world. Indonesian Islam, according to him, presents a tradition that is peaceful, balanced, open to local culture, and supportive of democracy. This internal diversity is seen as an epistemic strength, not a weakness. UIII is then positioned as an academic space that demonstrates how Islam can grow within a plural and modern society, while also serving as a model for students from various regions. Through the synthesis of pesantren and university, the local and the global, Indonesian Islam, he says, is projected as a civilisation-building religion that contributes through knowledge (Permana, 2025).

From Peripheral Identity to the Centre: Epistemic Soft Power and Knowledge Diplomacy

Historically, as noted by Laffan (2011) and Zubaida (2003), intellectual authority in Islam has been centred in the Arab world, with institutions such as al-Azhar serving as references for global Islamic orthodoxy. Such a geography of authority has long marginalised intellectual traditions from peripheral regions, including Southeast Asia. Meuleman (2002) and Laffan (2011) show that Islamic scholarship in Southeast Asia has often been perceived as derivative, merely an extension of Arab intellectual traditions. The contributions of this region have been more readily acknowledged in the realms of mysticism and cultural adaptation than in the production of formal theories within Islam. Within such a global hierarchy, Indonesia occupies a liminal position: its society is religious, yet geographically and epistemically it is considered distant from the classical centres of Islam.

Through the conference *Decolonizing Social Sciences and Humanities*, UIII challenges this imbalance by asserting Indonesia as a legitimate site of Islamic intellectual authority (see also: Sari et al., 2022). The establishment of UIII may be read as a reversal of this pattern: an effort to make Indonesia a centre for the authoritative production of Islamic knowledge, offering

an alternative to established Islamic universities. Its founding does not merely mark an expansion of Indonesia's educational infrastructure, but reflects a deeper epistemological transformation: the shift of Indonesian Islam from a peripheral identity within the repertoire of global Islamic thought towards the centre, through processes of knowledge formation and engagement in global discourse. This transformation includes a redefinition of what counts as Islamic knowledge, who produces it, and from where it originates. This shift from the periphery to the centre is not only geopolitical but also methodological. UIII embodies a form of critical Muslim reason (Sardar, 2018), a mode of Muslim reasoning that acknowledges revelation and tradition yet situates them within rational and comparative inquiry. Thus, Islamic studies becomes a space of negotiation rather than mere affirmation; a field in which multiple epistemologies interact rather than negate one another.

In short, the rise of UIII reflects a broader epistemological shift in the Islamic world: from studying Islam as defined by others towards teaching Islam to the world. This marks a conscious transition from identity politics towards intellectual participation, from theological preservation towards the global production of knowledge. If sustained, this transformation may redefine Indonesia's position in the global intellectual landscape, not only as the country with the largest Muslim population in the world, but as a leading voice in articulating a plural, dialogical, and decolonial Islamic modernity. In other words, this is the initial condition in which Indonesia becomes an actor emerging from the position of a recipient of Islamic discourse as described by Meuleman (2002) two decades ago.

UIII is not simply another Islamic university in Indonesia, but an intellectual and diplomatic project with clear epistemological ambitions. Designed as a global centre of Islamic studies grounded in inclusivity, pluralism, and critical reasoning, it seeks to position Islamic higher education as a constructive force in global intellectual and social transformation. Through its mission to promote Indonesian Islamic culture as part of world civilisation, UIII aims to convert Indonesia's religious and cultural capital into universal knowledge and civilisational dialogue (*Visi Dan Misi Universitas Islam Internasional Indonesia*, 2024).

AICIS+ 2025, along with the decolonial conference, presents Indonesia not as a passive periphery but as a new centre of Islamic intellectual innovation capable of bringing together scholars from around the world to discuss urgent civilisational issues. Through the themes mentioned above, AICIS+ 2025 positions UIII as a space in which Islamic values contribute to the production of universal knowledge. This shows that postcolonial Indonesian Muslim scholarship can serve as an alternative epistemic model that synthesises tradition with critical modernity. In this sense, AICIS+ 2025 does not merely showcase Indonesia's academic potential but also marks its emergence on the global intellectual stage as a producer of knowledge, affirming UIII's role in redefining Islamic higher education in the twenty-first century (Kementerian Agama Republik Indonesia, 2025). Jamhari Makruf the Rector of UIII convey that UIII assumes role in positioning Indonesian Islamic education as an instrument of soft power. With students from fifty-five countries, the cross-cultural interactions that take place daily in UIII's classrooms are not simply academic; they constitute an exchange of civilisations (Permana, 2025).

CONCLUSION

The establishment of UIII marks an important transformation in the intellectual history of Islam in Indonesia. More than simply a new educational institution, UIII is an epistemological as well as diplomatic project that positions Indonesia as an active producer of global Islamic knowledge. Its presence reflects a shift from the theology-based model of

teaching towards a secular–academic framework that redefines how Islam is studied and communicated at the international level. Nevertheless, UIII remains situated within epistemological tension. The university seeks to assert its scholarly identity amid the pull of three sources of knowledge: the epistemological tradition of Islam, modern secular–rational values, and various non-Western epistemologies. This tension arises because UIII aims to free itself from the dominance of any single centre of knowledge (whether Western or Middle Eastern), yet at the same time does not yet possess a finalised form of the alternative epistemological model it seeks to construct.

This article offers three contributions. First, it frames UIII as a third wave in Indonesia’s Islamic higher education reform, departing from the IAIN–UIN model through a paradigm of translation rather than integration. Second, by employing postcolonial, decolonial, and knowledge diplomacy perspectives, it moves beyond existing studies that focus mainly on institutional and curricular change, highlighting instead issues of epistemic power and global knowledge circulation. Third, it addresses an empirical gap by offering one of the earliest systematic analyses of UIII’s epistemological orientation and its effort to reposition Indonesian Islam from a peripheral consumer to an emerging producer of global Islamic knowledge. More broadly, the article argues that UIII represents a novel postcolonial model of Islamic higher education.

In addition, this article focuses primarily on the Faculty of Islamic Studies, which constitutes a limitation of the study. Future research on UIII would benefit from examining other faculties in order to capture a more comprehensive picture of the university’s epistemological orientation and institutional dynamics. Such broader coverage may lead to wider, or potentially different, conclusions regarding UIII’s role in the transformation of Islamic higher education and its function in global knowledge production.

The author would like to thank Yanwar Pribadi, Dean of the Faculty of Islamic Studies at the Universitas Islam Internasional Indonesia, for reading the first draft of this article and offering valuable critical insights. I also thank two anonymous reviewers for their suggestion for the betterment of this article.

REFERENCES

- Abbas, M. B. (2021). *Whose Islam? The Western University and Modern Islamic Thought in Indonesia*. Stanford University Press.
- Abdullah, M. A. (2017). Islamic Studies in Higher Education in Indonesia: Challenges, Impact and Prospects for the World Community. *Al-Jami’ab: Journal of Islamic Studies*, 55(2), 391–426. <https://doi.org/10.14421/ajis.2017.552.391-426>
- Administrator. (2025). *Rethinking knowledge: Faculty of Islamic Studies’ international conference on decolonizing social sciences and humanities*. Universitas Islam Internasional Indonesia. Retrieved from <https://fis.uiii.ac.id/news/uiii-decolonizing-social-sciences-conference-2025-3059/>
- Al-Attas, S. M. N. (2009). *The de-westernization of knowledge*. Citizens International.
- Al-Faruqi, I. R. (1989). *Islamization of knowledge: General principles and work plan* (2nd ed.). International Institute of Islamic Thought.
- Al-Khalili, J. (2011). *The house of wisdom: How Arabic science saved ancient knowledge and gave us the Renaissance*. Penguin Press.

- Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G., & Tiffin, H. (2025). *Postcolonial studies: The key concepts* (4th ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003497561>
- Connell, R. (2007). *Southern theory: The global dynamics of knowledge in social science*. Routledge.
- Faculty of Islamic Studies, Universitas Islam Internasional Indonesia. (n.d.). *Faculty members*. Retrieved from <https://fis.uiii.ac.id/about-us/faculty-members/>
- Faculty of Islamic Studies, Universitas Islam Internasional Indonesia. (n.d.). *M.A. program*. Retrieved from <https://fis.uiii.ac.id/academic/m-a-program/>
- Fina, L. I. N. (2020). *Studying the Qur'an in the context of Indonesian Islamic higher education. Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*, 33(2), 139–161. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15700682-12341508>
- Kementerian Agama Republik Indonesia. (2020). *Rencana strategis Kementerian Agama tahun 2020–2024*. Sekretariat Jenderal Kementerian Agama Republik Indonesia.
- Kementerian Agama Republik Indonesia. (2025). *Official AICIS+ 2025 guidebook: Islam, ecotheology, and technological transformation—Multidisciplinary innovations for an equitable and sustainable future*. Direktorat Jenderal Pendidikan Islam.
- Knight, J. (2022). *Knowledge diplomacy in international relations and higher education*. Springer International Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-14977-1>
- Kosim, M., Muqoddam, F., Mubarak, F., & Laila, N. Q. (2023). *The dynamics of Islamic education policies in Indonesia*. *Cogent Education*, 10(1), 2172930. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2023.2172930>
- Laffan, M. (2011). *The makings of Indonesian Islam: Orientalism and the narration of a Sufi past*. Princeton University Press.
- Latief, H. (2022). *The Masyumi networks and the proliferation of Islamic higher education in Indonesia (1945–1965)*. *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde / Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences of Southeast Asia*, 178(4), 477–502. <https://doi.org/10.1163/22134379-bja10043>
- Lukens-Bull, R. A. (2013). *Islamic higher education in Indonesia*. Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137313416>
- Lumbard, J. E. B. (2025). *Islam, coloniality, and the pedagogy of cognitive liberation in higher education*. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 30(6), 1409–1419. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2025.2468974>
- Meuleman, J. H. (2002). *Islam in the era of globalization: Muslim attitudes towards modernity and identity*. Routledge.
- Mignolo, W. D., & Walsh, C. E. (2018). *On decoloniality: Concepts, analytics, praxis*. Duke University Press.
- Millie, J. (2025). *Limits of bureaucratisation in Islamic education*. *Religion, State and Society*, 53(3), 188–201. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09637494.2025.2560226>
- Millie, J., Syarif, D., & Fakhruroji, M. (2023). *The discipline of dakwah in Indonesia's state education system*. *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde / Journal of the Humanities and Social*

- Sciences of Southeast Asia*, 179(1), 38–60. <https://doi.org/10.1163/22134379-bja10047>
- Nash, G., Kerr-Koch, K., & Hackett, S. E. (2014). *Postcolonialism and Islam: Theory, literature, culture, society and film*. Routledge.
- Permana, R. (2025). *Merebut panggung internasional: UIII, intelektual Muslim Indonesia dan masa depan pendidikan Islam*. Disway.id. <https://disway.id/read/910902/merebut-panggung-internasional-uiii-intelektual-muslim-indonesia-dan-masa-depan-pendidikan-islam/30>
- Faculty of Islamic Studies, Universitas Islam Internasional Indonesia. (n.d.). *Ph.D. in Islamic studies*. Retrieved from <https://fis.uiii.ac.id/academic/ph-d-program/ph-d-in-islamic-studies/>
- Prabowo, K. W. (2024). *Presiden El-Sisi siap dukung peningkatan jumlah pelajar Indonesia di Mesir*. Metrotvnews.com. <https://www.metrotvnews.com/read/K5nCLdaG-presiden-el-sisi-siap-dukung-peningkatan-jumlah-pelajar-indonesia-di-mesir>
- Sardar, Z. (2018). *Critical Muslim*. ZiauddinSardar.com. <https://ziauddinsardar.com/articles/critical-muslim>
- Sari, B. R., Maunati, Y., Wuryandari, G., & Lamijo. (2022). *The widening global network of Indonesian diaspora scholars in Malaysia*. *Diaspora Studies*, 15(2), 184–208. <https://doi.org/10.1163/09763457-20221004>
- Tayeb, A. (2018). *Islamic education in Indonesia and Malaysia*. Routledge.
- Tho Seeth, A. (2023). *The Indonesian “cosmopolitan Islamic intellectual” revisited: A focus on the continued prevalence of “cosmopatriotism” and the “West”*. *International Journal of Islam in Asia*, 2(2), 114–143. <https://doi.org/10.1163/25899996-20223005>
- Universitas Islam Internasional Indonesia. (2024). *Visi dan misi Universitas Islam Internasional Indonesia*. <https://uiii.ac.id/about/vision-mission>
- Yamaguchi, M. (2024). *Reconciling Islam with Indonesian nationalism: Acceptance of the Arab Middle Eastern influence during the Dutch colonial period*. *Die Welt des Islams*, 64(4), 452–481. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15700607-20240004>
- Zubaida, S. (2003). *Law and power in the Islamic world*. I.B. Tauris.