

Challenges and Opportunities of Online Learning in Islamic Higher Education: A Case Study of Master's Program at UIN Datokarama

Siti Rosdian Sinukun^{1*}

¹ Islamic Religious Education Study Program State Islamic University Datokarama Palu, Indonesia

*Corresponding Author: Siti Rosdian Sinukun, E-mail: sitirosdiansinukun@gmail.com

ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Volume: 4 ISSN: 2963-5489 KEYWORD Online Learning, Islamic Higher Education, Challenges, Opportunities, UIN Datokarama Palu, Master's Program	Online learning has become an essential component of higher education, particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic, which accelerated the shift from traditional classrooms to digital platforms. In Islamic higher education, the adoption of online learning has brought both opportunities and challenges, especially in postgraduate programs where academic interaction plays a central role. This paper explores the challenges and opportunities of online learning in the Master's Program at State Islamic University Datokarama Palu. Using a case study approach, the research identifies key issues such as limited technological infrastructure, reduced face-to-face interaction, and distractions during online sessions. At the same time, the study highlights the opportunities provided by online learning, including flexible access, active participation in discussions, and the ability to maintain academic collaboration beyond physical boundaries. Findings from the case study show that postgraduate students at State Islamic University Datokarama Palu were able to sustain meaningful discussions in online classrooms, proving that learning is not restricted by distance. The paper concludes that online learning, when properly managed, can enrich Islamic higher education and strengthen students' academic engagement.

1. Introduction

The transformation of higher education in the digital era has reshaped the way knowledge is delivered and accessed. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this transformation, making online learning a necessity rather than an option (Dhawan, 2020). While online education has been widely discussed, its application in Islamic higher education remains a growing field of inquiry.

In Indonesia, Islamic universities such as Universitas Islam Negeri (UIN) play a vital role in shaping the intellectual and spiritual development of Muslim society. UIN Datokarama Palu, as one of the prominent Islamic higher education institutions in Eastern Indonesia, has adopted online learning especially in postgraduate programs. The Master's Program (S2) serves as a critical platform for academic discourse, research training, and professional development.

Importantly, online learning is part of the broader digital transformation in Islamic higher education, which reflects the conference's main theme of empowering Muslim society through knowledge development in the digital era. This transformation shows that technology is not only a medium of learning but also a strategic tool to ensure inclusivity, accessibility, and continuous academic engagement for Muslim communities.

*Siti Rosdian Sinukun is a Student of Islamic Religious Education Study Program at Postgraduate School, State Islamic University Datokarama Palu, Indonesia. This paper was presented at the 4th International Conference on Islamic and Interdisciplinary Studies (ICIIS) 2025, as a presenter, held by the Postgraduate School State Islamic University Datokarama Palu, Indonesia.

This study aims to analyze the challenges and opportunities of online learning in the Master's Program at UIN Datokarama Palu. By focusing on this case study, the paper seeks to contribute to broader discussions on how Islamic higher education can adapt to digital learning environments while upholding its academic and spiritual values.

2. Literature Review

Online learning is defined as the delivery of education through digital platforms where teaching and learning activities take place virtually (Moore et al., 2011). The flexibility of online learning allows students to access lectures and resources beyond the limitations of time and space. However, it also presents challenges such as digital fatigue, lack of motivation, and reduced personal interaction (Bao, 2020).

In Islamic higher education, the integration of technology must align with Islamic values, ensuring that knowledge ('ilm) is pursued with sincerity (ikhlas) and responsibility (amanah). Several studies (Aliyyah et al., 2020; Rahman, 2021) indicate that Islamic universities in Indonesia face challenges in digital infrastructure but also opportunities in widening access to knowledge.

This study applies the constructivist learning theory, which emphasizes active student engagement, collaboration, and knowledge construction through discussion (Vygotsky, 1978). In the context of online learning, constructivism highlights the importance of interactive learning environments where students play an active role in discussions, even in virtual classrooms.

3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative case study approach focusing on the Master's Program at UIN Datokarama Palu. Data were obtained from classroom observations, lecturers' reflections, and students' feedback during online sessions. The descriptive-analytical method was applied to identify challenges and opportunities. The choice of case study allows for a deeper understanding of real experiences of postgraduate students in Islamic higher education.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Challenges of Online Learning

The implementation of online learning in UIN Datokarama Palu's Master's Program revealed several challenges:

1. Technological Limitations – Some students faced unstable internet connections, lack of proper devices, and limited access to digital platforms.
2. Reduced Social Interaction – Online settings made it difficult to establish strong social bonds among students and lecturers.
3. Distractions During Classes – The home environment sometimes created distractions, reducing focus and learning effectiveness.
4. Assessment Difficulties – Measuring students' understanding and participation required alternative strategies compared to face-to-face evaluation.

4.2 Opportunities of Online Learning

Despite these challenges, online learning opened opportunities:

1. Flexibility of Access – Students could join classes from various locations, ensuring continuity of learning.
2. Active Participation in Discussions – In some cases, online classes encouraged more students to engage actively.
3. Breaking Geographical Boundaries – Students and lecturers interacted across distances, proving that learning is not restricted by proximity.
4. Digital Literacy Improvement – Online learning enhanced digital skills of both lecturers and students.

4.3 Case Study: UIN Datokarama Palu

The case of UIN Datokarama Palu shows that postgraduate students were able to engage actively in online discussions. Even when classes were conducted virtually, students demonstrated the ability to sustain meaningful academic dialogue. This reflects the Islamic principle that seeking knowledge should not be limited by place or condition, as mentioned in the hadith: "Seeking knowledge is an obligation upon every Muslim" (Ibn Majah, Hadith No. 224).

5. Conclusion

This study found that online learning in the Master's Program at UIN Datokarama Palu presents both challenges and opportunities. While issues such as technological limitations and reduced social interaction persist, online platforms also provide flexibility, active participation, and wider access to knowledge.

The case study demonstrates that postgraduate students were able to engage actively in online discussions, highlighting that learning is not bound by distance. The integration of online learning into Islamic higher education requires continuous innovation, alignment with Islamic values, and commitment from both lecturers and students.

Furthermore, this study emphasizes that online learning is part of the digital transformation of Islamic higher education, which directly supports the empowerment of Muslim society in the digital era. By embracing these transformations, Islamic universities can not only maintain the quality of education but also contribute to broader societal development in line with the main theme of ICIS 2025.

Future studies may expand this research by comparing multiple Islamic universities or by analyzing the long-term impact of online learning on academic performance in postgraduate programs.

References

- Aliyyah, R. R., et al. (2020). The perceptions of primary school teachers of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic period: A case study in Indonesia. *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies*, 7(2), 90–109.
- Bao, W. (2020). COVID-19 and online teaching in higher education: A case study of Peking University. *Human Behavior and Emerging Technologies*, 2(2), 113–115.
- Dhawan, S. (2020). Online learning: A panacea in the time of COVID-19 crisis. *Journal of Educational Technology Systems*, 49(1), 5–22.
- Moore, J. L., Dickson-Deane, C., & Galyen, K. (2011). E-learning, online learning, and distance learning environments: Are they the same? *The Internet and Higher Education*, 14(2), 129–135.
- Rahman, F. (2021). Digital transformation in Islamic higher education in Indonesia. *Journal of Islamic Education Studies*, 3(1), 45–58.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press.