



Santri Adaptation Strategies in Higher Education from a Social Studies Learning Perspective

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Article Info

Article History:

Received May 30, 2026
Revised August 18, 2026
Accepted August 31, 2026

Keywords:

Islamic boarding school;
Santri adaptation;
Higher education;
Social ethics;
Character education.

Abstract

This study examines the adaptation strategies employed by former Islamic boarding school students (santri) in navigating academic and social life within higher education institutions from a social studies learning perspective. The study focuses on how moral values, social ethics, and educational principles acquired in pesantren contribute to students' ability to adapt to university environments and develop social competencies relevant to social studies learning. This research employed a descriptive qualitative method. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted via the WhatsApp application with several second-semester students of the State Islamic Institute of Madura (IAIN Madura) who previously studied in pesantren. Supporting data were also obtained from books, journal articles, and classical Islamic texts commonly studied in pesantren, such as Ta'lim al-Muta'allim and Bidayat al-Hidayah. The findings reveal that former santri experience significant differences between pesantren and university life, particularly in learning systems, academic demands, social interaction patterns, and institutional regulations. Several respondents initially experienced adjustment challenges due to the more flexible nature of university environments. However, the moral and educational values instilled in pesantren helped them adapt effectively. The study also found that careful friendship selection, discipline, responsibility, politeness, and self-control function as important adaptation strategies. Therefore, pesantren-based education contributes not only to religious understanding but also to character formation and the development of competencies that support social studies learning in higher education.

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1. Introduction

Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) are among the oldest Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia and have played a significant role in the development of religious education, social values, and moral formation within Indonesian society. Historically, pesantren have not only functioned as centers for the transmission of Islamic knowledge but also as institutions responsible for shaping students' character, discipline, spirituality, and ethical behavior [1]. In Indonesian Muslim society, pesantren are widely recognized as educational institutions that emphasize the balance between intellectual development, moral cultivation, and religious practice. The existence of pesantren has contributed greatly to the preservation of Islamic traditions and the formation of generations who possess strong religious understanding and social responsibility [2].

Terminologically, pesantren refer to Islamic educational institutions that apply a boarding system in which students (santri) reside within the educational environment under the supervision and guidance of a kyai or Islamic scholar [3]. The kyai serves not only as a teacher but also as a moral and spiritual role model for students. In addition, the mosque functions as the central place for worship, learning, and social interaction within pesantren life. This educational model emphasizes close interaction between teachers and students, allowing moral values and ethical principles to be transmitted directly through both formal learning and daily behavior [4]. Pesantren are educational institutions where santri spend most of their time studying religious sciences and living within a religious community. The duration of study may range from several months to many years depending on the educational goals and level of knowledge pursued by the students [2].

Pesantren possess several distinctive characteristics that differentiate them from other educational institutions [5]. First, pesantren are commonly categorized as traditional Islamic institutions because they preserve and maintain classical Islamic scholarship inherited from earlier Muslim scholars (ulama salaf). Second, pesantren function as institutions of cultural resistance by maintaining Islamic moral values amid social transformation and modernization [6]. Third, pesantren are educational institutions fundamentally oriented toward the formation of individuals who possess *tafaqquh fi al-din*, namely a profound understanding of Islamic teachings accompanied by moral awareness and ethical behavior. Consequently, pesantren education does not solely focus on intellectual achievement but also prioritizes character formation and spiritual discipline [7].

The educational process within pesantren generally involves the study of classical Islamic sciences such as *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), *hadith*, *tafsir* (Qur'anic exegesis), *nahwu-sharaf* (Arabic grammar and morphology), *tajwid* (Qur'anic recitation), and *balaghah* [8]. In addition to religious sciences, pesantren also emphasize the teaching of morality (*akhlaq*) and social ethics through the study of classical Islamic texts. Several widely studied texts include *Ta'lim al-Muta'allim* by Shaykh Az-Zarnuji, *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din* and *Bidayat al-Hidayah* by Imam al-Ghazali, *Nashoihul 'Ibad* by Imam Nawawi al-Bantani, and *Adab al-'Alim wa al-Muta'allim* by K.H. Hasyim Asy'ari. These texts contain teachings related to discipline, manners, educational ethics, friendship selection [9], respect toward teachers, self-control, and appropriate social interaction. Such teachings are intended to guide students not only during their educational journey in pesantren but also in their future social lives [10].

The moral values taught in pesantren become increasingly important within the context of contemporary social transformation. The advancement of modernization, globalization, and technological development [11] has significantly influenced patterns of social interaction, behavior, and lifestyles among young people. Educational environments, including higher education institutions, are not immune from these changes [12]. Various social problems among adolescents and university students have increasingly become public concerns, including violence, bullying, drug abuse [9], promiscuity, academic dishonesty, declining respect toward teachers, and weakening moral values. Several cases involving university students in Indonesia, such as acts of violence, criminal involvement, and unethical behavior, indicate the existence of moral degradation within academic environments. These conditions highlight the importance of strengthening character education and moral guidance among students [13].

In this context, pesantren-based education offers an important contribution because it emphasizes the integration of intellectual development, spirituality, morality, and discipline. Former santri who continue their education in universities bring with them educational experiences and ethical values acquired during their time in pesantren. However, entering higher education institutions often requires significant adaptation because university environments possess characteristics that differ substantially from pesantren life. Universities generally provide greater freedom in social interaction, more flexible academic systems, broader social diversity, and increased personal independence. Consequently, former santri may encounter cultural adjustment challenges when

adapting to university life, particularly regarding academic learning systems, peer relationships, and social interactions.

The differences between pesantren and university environments can create both opportunities and challenges for former santri. On the one hand, university environments provide broader opportunities for intellectual development, social interaction, and academic exploration. On the other hand, the openness and flexibility of university life may expose students to negative social influences and moral challenges. In this situation, the moral teachings and ethical principles learned in pesantren potentially function as adaptive strategies that help students maintain positive behavior and navigate academic life responsibly. Values such as discipline, responsibility, politeness, self-control, and careful friendship selection may contribute significantly to students' ability to adapt successfully within higher education environments.

One of the important teachings emphasized in pesantren concerns the influence of friendship and social relationships on individual character. Classical Islamic texts studied in pesantren strongly encourage students to associate with righteous, knowledgeable, and morally upright individuals while avoiding harmful companionship. These teachings remain highly relevant within university environments, where peer influence plays a substantial role in shaping students' behavior, academic motivation, and lifestyle choices. Peer groups play a significant role in adolescent development, social adjustment, emotional support, friendship quality, and the establishment of interpersonal trust. Positive friendships may support students' emotional well-being, academic achievement, and moral development, whereas unhealthy social relationships may contribute to negative behavior and academic difficulties.

Although numerous studies have examined pesantren education and character formation, studies specifically discussing the adaptation strategies of former santri within higher education institutions remain relatively limited. Most previous studies focus primarily on pesantren educational systems, leadership models, or moral education in general. Therefore, this study seeks to contribute to the existing literature by specifically exploring how former santri adapt to academic and social life in universities and how pesantren educational values continue to influence their behavior and decision-making processes within higher education environments.

Based on these considerations, this study aims to examine the adaptation strategies employed by former santri in navigating academic and social life within higher education institutions. This research specifically investigates the differences between pesantren and university environments, the challenges encountered during the adaptation process, and the role of pesantren educational values in supporting students' successful adjustment to university life. Furthermore, this study seeks to demonstrate that pesantren-based education contributes not only to religious understanding but also to character formation, ethical awareness, and social adaptation within contemporary academic environments.

2. Method

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design to explore the adaptation strategies of former Islamic boarding school students (santri) in navigating academic and social life within higher education institutions. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study aimed to understand participants' experiences, perceptions, and meanings in depth [14], particularly regarding how pesantren values influence their adaptation to university life [15].

The research was conducted at the State Islamic Institute of Madura (Institut Agama Islam Negeri Madura/IAIN Madura). The participants consisted of several second-semester university students from different faculties and study programs who had previously studied in Islamic boarding schools (pesantren). The informants were selected purposively based on specific criteria, namely: (1) being active university students, (2) having a pesantren educational background, and (3) possessing experience in adapting to academic and social life in higher education institutions. Through these criteria, the researcher was able to obtain data that were relevant to the objectives of the study.

Data collection was carried out using semi-structured interviews conducted digitally through the WhatsApp application. This interview technique enabled the researcher to obtain detailed and flexible information while allowing participants to explain their experiences freely. The interview questions focused on several aspects, including differences between pesantren and university life, challenges faced during the adaptation process, social interaction patterns, learning systems, and the influence of pesantren values on students' behavior and decision-making in academic environments.

In addition to interview data, this study also utilized documentation and literature review techniques as supporting sources of data. Various academic journals, books, and classical Islamic texts commonly studied in pesantren were examined to strengthen the analysis and interpretation of findings. Among the classical texts used were Ta'lim al-Muta'allim by Shaykh Az-Zarnuji, Bidayat al-Hidayah by Imam al-Ghazali, Taisir al-Khallaq fi 'Ilm al-Akhlaq by Shaykh Hafidz Hasan al-Mas'udi, and Durrat al-Nasihin by Shaykh Utsman bin Hasan al-Khubawi. These texts were analyzed because they contain ethical teachings, principles of social interaction, and educational values relevant to students' adaptation strategies in higher education.

The collected data were analyzed using descriptive qualitative analysis techniques. The analysis process involved several stages, including data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. First, the researcher organized and selected relevant interview data related to the research focus. Second, the data were categorized and presented narratively to identify recurring themes and patterns concerning adaptation strategies among former santri. Finally, conclusions were drawn by interpreting the relationship between pesantren educational values and students' adaptation processes in university environments.

To ensure the validity and credibility of the findings, the researcher compared interview results with supporting literature and classical Islamic references relevant to the topic. This triangulation process was conducted to strengthen the reliability of the data interpretation and to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the adaptation strategies employed by former santri in higher education institutions.

3. Results

3.1 Additional Findings from a Social Studies Learning Perspective

The findings indicate that the adaptation of former santri to higher education involves not only academic adjustment but also social and cultural adaptation. The three respondents experienced differences in learning systems, social interactions, institutional regulations, and personal freedom between pesantren and university environments. Although university life was perceived as more flexible, this flexibility also required greater independence, self-control, responsibility, and time management. The values acquired in pesantren, particularly discipline, politeness, responsibility, moral awareness, and self-control, supported the respondents in navigating the university environment. Friendship selection also emerged as an important strategy, as the respondents attempted to maintain positive social relationships while avoiding negative influences. These findings demonstrate that pesantren experiences function as a social and cultural foundation for adapting to a more diverse university environment.

From a Social Studies learning perspective, the adaptation process reflects several important competencies, including social interaction, social responsibility, cultural awareness, self-regulation, respect for diversity, and social participation. Thus, the transition from pesantren to higher education can be understood as a process of social learning in which previously acquired values are applied and negotiated within a new social environment.

Table 1. Dimensions of Santri Adaptation and Social Studies Learning Competencies

No.	Adaptation Aspect	Main Finding	Social Studies Relevance
1	Social Interaction	Students adapt to more open patterns of interaction	Social interaction
2	Moral Values	Politeness and ethical values are maintained	Social values
3	Responsibility	Students become responsible for academic obligations	Social responsibility
4	Self-Regulation	Students manage greater personal freedom	Self-regulation
5	Cultural Awareness	Students recognize differences between pesantren and university culture	Cultural awareness
6	Friendship Selection	Students selectively choose positive social relationships	Social participation

7	Time Management		Students manage academic and social activities independently	Personal and social responsibility
8	Respect for Diversity		Students interact with peers from different backgrounds	Diversity and social tolerance

Overall, the findings suggest that pesantren education provides a foundation for social adaptation that is highly relevant to Social Studies learning, particularly in developing students' ability to interact, take responsibility, regulate themselves, appreciate differences, and participate constructively in diverse social environments.

3.2 Thematic Distribution of Adaptation Strategies

The interview findings show that the three former santri experienced differences between pesantren and university life, particularly in terms of academic systems, social interaction, regulations, and personal freedom. The first respondent viewed pesantren life as more peaceful but highly regulated, while university life provided greater freedom but involved heavier academic demands. The second respondent reported similar differences and emphasized the need for effective time management because university learning was more flexible and assignment-oriented. Meanwhile, the third respondent focused on the greater freedom of social interaction at university and reported no significant cultural shock during the transition. Despite these differences, the three respondents demonstrated similar adaptation strategies. They maintained the moral values acquired in pesantren, particularly politeness, discipline, responsibility, and self-control. They also emphasized the importance of selecting friends carefully. The first and third respondents explicitly related this principle to the teachings of Ta'lim al-Muta'allim, while the second respondent expressed a similar principle without directly referring to the text. None of the respondents reported negative experiences resulting from poor friendship choices.

From a Social Studies learning perspective, these findings indicate that santri adaptation involves more than academic adjustment. The respondents developed the ability to interact within a more open social environment, understand cultural differences, manage personal freedom, fulfill academic responsibilities, and maintain positive social relationships. These experiences reflect important Social Studies dimensions, particularly social interaction, social responsibility, cultural awareness, self-regulation, values formation, and respect for diversity.

Overall, the findings suggest that pesantren education provides a social and cultural foundation that helps former santri navigate higher education. Rather than abandoning pesantren values, the respondents transferred and adapted these values to the university environment. This process demonstrates that the transition from pesantren to higher education can be understood as a form of social learning, in which students continuously interpret, negotiate, and apply previously acquired values within a new and more diverse social setting.

3.3 Relationship between Pesantren Experience and Social Studies Learning

From a Social Studies learning perspective, the adaptation process experienced by former santri represents a form of social learning, in which students learn not only to understand academic systems but also to negotiate social norms, values, interpersonal relationships, responsibilities, and differences within a new social environment. The transition from pesantren to higher education requires students to develop the ability to understand and respond to changes in their social environment. The respondents' experiences illustrate four major dimensions of Social Studies learning. First, social interaction is reflected in their ability to adjust to more open patterns of communication and friendship in university life. Second, social responsibility is demonstrated through their awareness of academic obligations, task completion, and personal responsibility. Third, cultural awareness emerges from their recognition of differences between pesantren culture and university culture. Fourth, values and character formation are reflected in their efforts to maintain politeness, discipline, self-control, and ethical behavior despite experiencing greater freedom.

The findings further suggest that pesantren education provides students with social and cultural resources that can facilitate their adaptation to higher education. Values acquired through daily life in pesantren are transferred into university contexts through practical behaviors, particularly in selecting friends, establishing social relationships, controlling personal behavior, respecting differences, and fulfilling academic responsibilities.

Table 2. Pesantren-Based Values and Their Contribution to Santri Adaptation in Higher Education

Pesantren Experience	Adaptation Strategy in Higher Education	Social Studies Competency
Discipline and adherence to rules	Regulating behavior within a more flexible environment	Self-regulation
Moral and character education	Maintaining respectful behavior in social interactions	Social values
Restrictions on social interaction	Selectively choosing friends and social environments	Social interaction
Structured daily routines	Managing academic tasks and personal activities	Social responsibility
Communal life in pesantren	Interacting with students from diverse backgrounds	Cultural awareness
Religious and moral learning	Using internalized values in decision-making	Values formation
Collective life and social cooperation	Building relationships within the university community	Social participation

Overall, the findings demonstrate that the adaptation of former santri in higher education is not merely an individual process of adjusting to academic demands. It is also a social and cultural learning process. The values and experiences gained in pesantren provide a foundation for students to negotiate new social environments while maintaining their ethical principles. Therefore, from a Social Studies learning perspective, pesantren education can be viewed as an important formative context for developing social interaction, responsibility, cultural awareness, self-regulation, values formation, and social participation, all of which are essential competencies for students living and learning within diverse higher education environments.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that the transition from pesantren to higher education involves substantial academic, social, and cultural adjustment. The three respondents identified differences in learning systems, academic demands, social interaction, and institutional regulations. The first respondent perceived university life as more flexible but academically demanding, while the second respondent emphasized differences in the learning system and the need for effective time management. The third respondent focused more strongly on differences in social interaction and freedom of association. These findings indicate that adaptation is shaped not only by academic demands but also by students' ability to understand and respond to a new social environment. This is consistent with recent research on former pesantren students, which shows that differences in learning ecology, social interaction, and culture between pesantren and universities can create adjustment challenges during the transition to higher education[16]. The learning systems implemented in pesantren and universities are fundamentally different. Islamic boarding schools generally implement traditional learning systems such as sorogan, musyafahah, and bandongan or weton. The sorogan method refers to an instructional approach that provides students with opportunities to study independently according to their individual abilities. This method is highly individualized, as the kyai or teacher teaches students directly through face-to-face interaction[17]. The musyafahah method refers to a learning process involving direct meetings between teacher and student. Meanwhile, the bandongan or weton method involves students collectively listening to the kyai's reading and explanation of classical texts while simultaneously taking notes within their own books (Syukron, 2020).

The differences in learning systems identified by the respondents also illustrate an important process of academic adaptation. Pesantren learning commonly involves structured interaction between students and teachers through methods such as sorogan, musyafahah, and bandongan, whereas university learning requires greater student independence in managing academic tasks, assignments, and learning activities. In the present study, this difference was particularly evident in the second respondent's experience, who described university learning as more flexible and assignment-oriented. The first respondent similarly emphasized the heavier academic workload

encountered at university. These experiences suggest that former santri need to transform the discipline developed through structured pesantren life into independent academic responsibility. This interpretation is supported by studies showing that changes in curriculum, learning methods, and academic expectations are important challenges during students' transition into higher education[19].

In contrast, higher education institutions employ educational systems and learning methods that differ substantially from those used in pesantren. Universities apply a credit-based academic system known as Semester Credit Units (SKS), which determines the academic workload students must complete within a semester. In terms of instructional methods, universities implement various approaches, including face-to-face learning, independent learning, online learning, and project-based as well as group-based learning methods. Another significant difference lies in the academic workload. Pesantren education primarily emphasizes students' comprehension and fluency in studying classical Islamic texts (*kitab kuning*) through direct practice and repetition. Universities, however, place greater emphasis on academic assignments, both written and project-based.

Shaykh Az-Zarnuji's perspective regarding the criteria for choosing good friends is further reinforced by Imam al-Ghazali in his work *Bidayat al-Hidayah*. Similar to *Ta'lim al-Muta'allim*, the text outlines several criteria for ideal companionship, namely: (1) a person of intellect and wisdom, (2) a person with good morals, (3) a righteous individual, (4) a person who is not excessively attached to worldly matters, and (5) a truthful person[20]. The second major finding concerns the continuing role of pesantren values in students' adaptation. The respondents did not simply abandon the norms learned in pesantren after entering university. Instead, discipline, politeness, responsibility, self-control, and moral awareness were transferred into the university context. The third respondent, for example, reported no significant cultural shock and was able to adapt to the academic and social environment relatively well. This suggests that previous educational experiences can function as an internal resource when students encounter a new social environment. From a Social Studies learning perspective, this process can be understood as the application of social values and cultural knowledge in a changing environment. Students learn to negotiate between previously internalized values and new social expectations while maintaining responsible social behavior.

The third major finding relates to friendship selection and peer interaction. All three respondents emphasized the importance of choosing friends carefully, while the first and third respondents explicitly connected this principle with *Ta'lim al-Muta'allim*. This finding is particularly relevant to Social Studies because peer relationships provide a social context in which students learn norms, values, cooperation, communication, and responsible behavior. The first respondent's experience of seeking help from friends when experiencing difficulties in understanding academic material demonstrates that peer relationships can function as both social and academic support. This finding is consistent with research showing that peer relationships and students' sense of belonging are strongly associated with successful university adjustment. Maunder's study, for example, found that stronger attachment to university peers was associated with better adjustment to university life [21].

One passage from *Taisir al-Khallaq fi 'Ilm al-Akhlaq* states: "The ethics of social interaction include maintaining a cheerful expression, being gentle, listening attentively to friends, behaving politely, avoiding arrogance, remaining calm during joking interactions, forgiving mistakes, being broad-minded, avoiding pride in wealth and status, and safeguarding secrets, for a person who cannot keep secrets has no value in the eyes of others." [22]

This statement is reinforced by Imam al-Ghazali in his treatise *Al-Adab fi al-Din* within *Majmu'ah Rasa'il al-Imam al-Ghazali*, in which he states that proper friendship etiquette includes expressing happiness upon meeting friends, greeting first, demonstrating friendliness and openness while sitting together, accompanying friends when they leave, paying attention while they speak, avoiding unnecessary arguments, speaking kindly, refraining from interrupting conversations, and calling friends by names they appreciate. Drawing upon the teachings of hadith, Imam Al-Ghazali in *Bidayat al-Hidayah* emphasizes that individuals should select their companions based on five key qualities: intelligence, good moral conduct, piety, detachment from worldly desires (*zuhd*), and honesty [23].

Peer relationships play a crucial role in supporting students' social adaptation, as interactions with peers provide opportunities for learning, emotional support, and the development of positive behavioral patterns [24]. Positive social relationships with peers contribute significantly to successful adaptation within university life. For example, the first respondent stated that whenever they encountered difficulties in understanding academic material, they would seek assistance from friends. This finding aligns with previous studies indicating that high-quality friendships are characterized by strong mutual assistance, closeness, positive behavior, and low levels of conflict and unhealthy competition.

The importance of peer support is also evident among Indonesian university students. Shanti, Janssens, and Setiadi found that friendship support can help first-year students deal with academic difficulties and emotional challenges, while friendship quality was associated with motivation, emotional adjustment, and academic performance[25]. Similarly, research involving Indonesian university students found a positive relationship between social support and college adjustment, indicating that social networks are particularly important during the transition to higher education[26]. These findings strengthen the present study's observation that selecting supportive friends is not merely a matter of personal preference but can become an important adaptive strategy in university life.

The three findings are closely connected to the Social Studies learning perspective. Social Studies emphasizes the development of students' ability to understand social relationships, values, cultural differences, responsibilities, and participation within society. In the present study, former santri demonstrate these competencies through their ability to adapt to different academic cultures, maintain ethical behavior, regulate themselves in a more flexible environment, select positive social relationships, and interact with peers from diverse backgrounds. Thus, adaptation from pesantren to university can be understood as a form of social learning, in which students apply previously acquired social and moral knowledge while simultaneously learning new patterns of interaction within higher education.

Overall, the findings suggest that pesantren education provides former santri with an important foundation for navigating higher education. The structured learning environment of pesantren develops discipline and responsibility, while its moral and social education provides principles for managing relationships and personal behavior. When students enter the more flexible university environment, these values become adaptive resources that help them negotiate academic demands, social interaction, personal freedom, and cultural differences. Therefore, the adaptation of former santri is not simply a process of adjusting to university requirements but also a process of transferring, negotiating, and applying social values, which makes it highly relevant to Social Studies learning.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the educational values cultivated in Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) play an important role in supporting former santri in adapting to academic and social life within higher education institutions. The transition from pesantren life to university environments presents various challenges, including differences in learning systems, academic demands, social interaction patterns, and institutional culture. While several respondents initially experienced difficulties and cultural adjustment challenges, the moral and educational foundations acquired in pesantren helped them navigate university life more effectively and responsibly.

The findings reveal that pesantren and universities possess fundamentally different educational and social characteristics. Pesantren are generally characterized by stricter discipline, regulated social interaction, and religiously oriented learning systems, whereas universities provide greater flexibility and openness in both academic and social activities. These differences often require former santri to adapt to more independent learning methods, assignment-based academic systems, and broader patterns of interaction with peers. Despite these challenges, the respondents gradually succeeded in adjusting to university environments through the application of values and behavioral principles learned during their pesantren education.

One of the most significant adaptation strategies identified in this study is the careful selection of friendships and social relationships. The respondents emphasized that classical Islamic texts studied in pesantren, such as Ta'lim al-Muta'allim, Bidayat al-Hidayah, and Taisir al-Khallaq fi 'Ilm al-Akhlaq, continue to influence their attitudes toward friendship, ethics, and social behavior. These teachings encourage students to associate with individuals who possess good morals, positive character, and constructive academic attitudes. In addition, pesantren education also contributes to the formation of personal qualities such as discipline, responsibility, politeness, emotional control, and respect for others, all of which support students' adaptation within university environments.

In conclusion, the adaptation strategies employed by former santri in higher education institutions are closely connected to the moral teachings, ethical values, and educational principles instilled in pesantren. The values acquired through pesantren education continue to function as practical guidance for managing academic responsibilities, building healthy social relationships, and maintaining ethical conduct in university life. Therefore, pesantren-based education not only

strengthens religious understanding but also provides an important foundation for students' personal development and successful adaptation within contemporary higher education environments.

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