

A Preliminary Study on Institutional Readiness in Preparing Indonesian Students for Al-Azhar University

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ABSTRAK

Meningkatnya minat mahasiswa Indonesia untuk melanjutkan studi ke Universitas Al-Azhar Kairo menuntut kesiapan lembaga-lembaga persiapan yang mampu menjembatani perbedaan sistem akademik, bahasa, dan budaya. Namun, variasi pengelolaan lembaga persiapan menunjukkan belum adanya gambaran yang jelas mengenai tingkat kesiapan kelembagaan dalam konteks pendidikan pra-universitas internasional. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi kesiapan institusional lembaga persiapan calon mahasiswa Indonesia menuju Universitas Al-Azhar Kairo melalui analisis studi pendahuluan. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain studi pendahuluan multisitus. Data dikumpulkan melalui observasi grand tour, wawancara awal semi-terstruktur, dan analisis dokumen kelembagaan. Analisis data dilakukan secara kualitatif melalui proses reduksi data, pengelompokan awal, dan identifikasi pola kesiapan institusional. Hasil studi pendahuluan menunjukkan bahwa kesiapan institusional telah terbentuk, namun bersifat beragam dan belum merata antar dimensi. Kesiapan organisasi tercermin melalui kohesi budaya dan struktur administratif formal; kesiapan akademik berfokus pada penguasaan bahasa Arab dan studi dasar keislaman; sementara kesiapan mahasiswa masih didominasi oleh aspek linguistik dengan perhatian terbatas pada kemandirian belajar dan adaptasi budaya. Studi ini menyimpulkan bahwa kesiapan institusional merupakan konstruksi multidimensi yang dipengaruhi oleh konteks dan orientasi manajemen lembaga. Temuan ini memberikan landasan empiris awal bagi penelitian lanjutan yang lebih mendalam terkait efektivitas dan pengembangan model kelembagaan.

Kata kunci: Studi Pendahuluan, Kesiapan Institusional, Pendidikan Pra-Universitas, Mahasiswa Indonesia, Universitas Al-Azhar

ABSTRACT

The growing interest of Indonesian students in pursuing higher education at Al-Azhar University in Cairo highlights the importance of institutional readiness among pre-university preparation institutions. These institutions play a critical role in bridging differences in academic systems, language, and cultural contexts. However, variations in institutional practices indicate that institutional readiness remains insufficiently understood, particularly within the context of international Islamic pre-university education. This study aims to explore institutional readiness in preparing Indonesian students for Al-Azhar University through a preliminary study analysis. Employing a qualitative approach with a multisite preliminary design, data were collected through grand tour observations, initial semi-structured interviews, and institutional document analysis. Data analysis was conducted using preliminary qualitative procedures involving data reduction, initial categorization, and pattern identification. The preliminary findings reveal that institutional readiness is present but uneven across dimensions. Organizational readiness is reflected through cultural cohesion and formal administrative structures; academic readiness emphasizes Arabic language instruction and foundational Islamic studies; while student readiness remains largely centered on linguistic competence, with limited attention to learning autonomy and cross-cultural adaptation. This study concludes that institutional readiness is a multidimensional and context-dependent construct shaped by organizational orientation and management practices. As a preliminary investigation, the findings provide initial empirical insights and serve as a foundation for further in-depth research on institutional effectiveness and model development.

Keywords: Preliminary Study, Institutional Readiness, Pre-University Education, Indonesian Students, Al-Azhar University

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the last two decades, international mobility of Muslim students has increased significantly, particularly toward renowned centers of Islamic higher education in the Middle East. One of the most prominent destinations is Al-Azhar University in Cairo, Egypt, which has long been recognized as a global reference for Islamic scholarship and moderate religious thought. Indonesian students constitute one of the largest foreign student groups at Al-Azhar, reflecting strong historical, intellectual, and religious ties between Indonesia and Egypt.

Despite the growing interest, many Indonesian applicants face substantial challenges in gaining admission and adapting to academic life at Al-Azhar. Previous reports and institutional records indicate that a considerable number of candidates fail entrance examinations or experience academic and socio-cultural difficulties during their early years of study. These challenges are commonly linked to insufficient Arabic language proficiency, limited exposure to classical Islamic texts (turath), weak academic orientation, and inadequate psychological readiness.

To address these issues, various non-formal and semi-formal institutions in Indonesia have emerged as pre-university preparation centers for prospective Al-Azhar students. These institutions offer intensive Arabic language programs, classical text studies, character development, and administrative guidance for overseas study. However, the rapid growth of such institutions has not always been accompanied by standardized management practices, clear academic frameworks, or systematic evaluation mechanisms. As a result, the level of institutional readiness varies considerably across organizations.

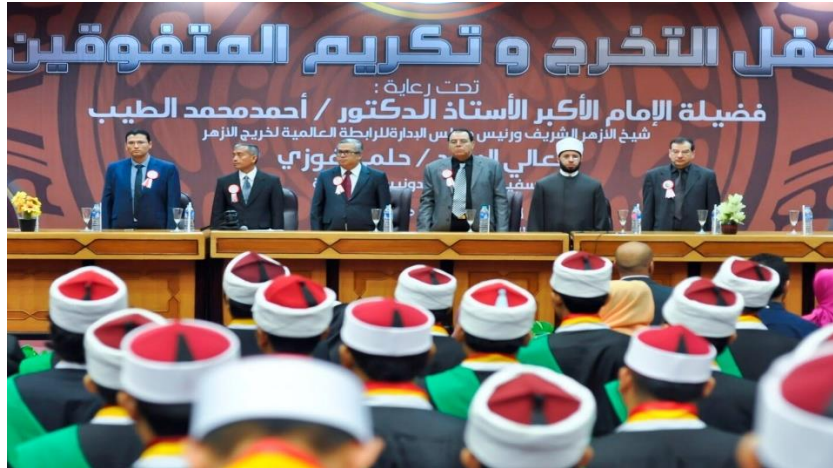


Figure 1. Acceptance of Daarul Arifin Indonesia students at Al-Azhar University in Cairo, Egypt

Understanding institutional readiness is crucial, particularly at the preliminary stage, to identify whether these preparation institutions possess adequate organizational structures, academic management systems, and support mechanisms to prepare students effectively for international Islamic higher education. This study therefore conducts an exploratory examination of institutional readiness as an initial step toward deeper evaluation and model development. This study draws on organizational effectiveness and educational management theories, particularly the concept of institutional readiness. Institutional readiness refers to an organization's capacity to mobilize resources, manage processes, and align internal systems to achieve intended goals within a specific context (Robbins & Judge, 2018).

From an educational management perspective, readiness is closely associated with the alignment between input, process, and output (Ivancevich et al., 2011). In pre-university preparation institutions, this alignment involves student selection mechanisms, curriculum design, instructional processes, character development, and administrative support for overseas study. Furthermore, Campbell's multidimensional framework emphasizes that organizational effectiveness and by extension readiness cannot be assessed through a single indicator. Instead, it includes dimensions such as goal achievement, internal integration, adaptability, and stakeholder satisfaction (Rulandari et al., 2022). For institutions preparing students for Al-Azhar, readiness also entails responsiveness to external academic systems, cultural contexts, and international regulations.

In this preliminary study, institutional readiness is conceptualized as a combination of organizational structure, academic management, student preparation programs, and institutional

support mechanisms, without making claims about final effectiveness or outcomes. Although preparation institutions play a strategic role in bridging Indonesian students to Al-Azhar University, several unresolved issues remain evident:

- a. There is no standardized framework to assess the readiness of institutions preparing students for international Islamic higher education.
- b. Institutional practices vary widely in terms of curriculum design, academic supervision, and student support systems.
- c. Documentation and monitoring of preparation processes and post-departure outcomes are often limited or informal.
- d. Existing studies tend to focus on language learning or student adaptation, while institutional readiness at the organizational level remains underexplored, particularly in the Indonesian context.
- e. These issues indicate a significant research gap concerning how ready these institutions are organizationally and academically to fulfill their preparatory role.

As a preliminary response to the identified problems, this study adopts an exploratory qualitative approach using a multisite perspective. The research focuses on:

- a. Conducting a grand tour of selected preparation institutions;
- b. Gathering initial data through interviews with institutional leaders, educators, and administrators;
- c. Analyzing institutional documents related to curriculum, academic management, and student preparation programs.

Rather than measuring effectiveness or impact, the study aims to map existing practices, identify readiness indicators, and highlight potential gaps in institutional preparation. The findings are expected to serve as an empirical foundation for subsequent in-depth studies and future model development.

Table 1. Dimensions of Institutional Readiness (Preliminary Framework)

Dimension	Indicators (Preliminary)
Organizational Structure	Vision, mission, leadership roles, decision-making mechanisms
Academic Management	Curriculum orientation, teaching methods, assessment practices
Student Preparation	Arabic proficiency training, classical text exposure, character development
Administrative Support	Documentation, overseas study guidance, coordination mechanisms
Adaptability	Responsiveness to policy changes and international academic systems

Based on the background and identified problems, this preliminary study aims to:

- a. Explore the organizational and academic readiness of institutions preparing Indonesian students for Al-Azhar University.
- b. Identify key dimensions and indicators of institutional readiness in the context of pre-university Islamic education.
- c. Provide initial empirical insights that may inform further research and institutional development strategies.

2. METHOD

This research employs a preliminary study analysis using a qualitative approach. The preliminary study is designed to obtain an initial understanding of institutional readiness in preparing Indonesian students for Al-Azhar University prior to conducting a full-scale, in-depth investigation. In educational research, a preliminary study functions as an early analytical phase aimed at mapping research contexts, identifying key variables and dimensions, refining research focus, and assessing the feasibility of subsequent comprehensive studies (Creswell & Guetterman, 2018). Accordingly, this study does not aim to evaluate institutional effectiveness or test hypotheses, but rather to analyze early evidence related to organizational and academic readiness.

The preliminary study analysis in this research focuses on four interrelated analytical objectives:

- a. Mapping institutional structures and organizational characteristics;
- b. Identifying existing academic management and student preparation practices;
- c. Exploring perceived readiness and challenges from key institutional actors;
- d. Detecting potential gaps between institutional practices and the demands of international Islamic higher education.

This analytical orientation allows the researcher to construct an initial conceptual framework of institutional readiness grounded in empirical observations. The preliminary analysis was conducted at two Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia that actively manage pre-university preparation programs for Al-Azhar University. These institutions were selected through purposive sampling based on their relevance, accessibility, and contrasting organizational characteristics. A multisite preliminary analysis was applied to enable comparative insight into different institutional readiness patterns without making evaluative or causal claims.

The primary units of analysis in this preliminary study were institutional practices and organizational processes related to student preparation for overseas study. Data sources included:

- a. Institutional leaders and administrators,
- b. Academic coordinators and instructors,
- c. Supporting staff involved in academic and administrative preparation,
- d. Institutional documents such as curricula outlines, program guidelines, and preparation schedules.

Data collection followed procedures commonly employed in preliminary study analysis:

- a. Grand Tour Observation
Initial field visits were conducted to observe institutional environments, organizational routines, and academic activities. This stage enabled broad contextual mapping and identification of focal issues.
- b. Initial Semi-Structured Interviews
Early-stage interviews were conducted to explore institutional perceptions of readiness, organizational strengths, and perceived constraints. Interviews were intentionally limited in scope to capture dominant themes rather than exhaustive narratives.
- c. Preliminary Document Review
Institutional documents were reviewed to identify formal structures, declared objectives, and operational procedures relevant to student preparation programs.

Data analysis in this study followed a preliminary analytical process (Yin, 2016), involving:

- a. Initial coding to identify recurring concepts related to institutional readiness;
- b. Categorization of data into emerging readiness dimensions (e.g., organizational structure, academic management, student preparation);
- c. Pattern identification to detect consistencies and variations across sites.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

This section presents the preliminary findings derived from grand tour observations, initial interviews, and document analysis. The findings are organized according to the institutional readiness dimensions identified during the preliminary analysis. These results represent early-stage empirical insights, not evaluative judgments.

Table 2. Summary of Institutional Readiness

Readiness Dimension	Key Preliminary Findings
Organizational	Readiness present; varies between cultural cohesion and formal administration
Academic Management	Strong focus on Arabic and Islamic studies; differing curriculum structures
Student Preparation	Emphasis on language readiness; limited adaptive skill preparation
Administrative Support	Personalized vs. standardized systems with distinct limitations
Overall Readiness	Functional but uneven across readiness dimensions

a. Organizational Readiness

Preliminary observations indicate that both institutions demonstrate basic organizational readiness, although with distinct management orientations. The first institution exhibits a centralized organizational structure, where leadership authority is concentrated among senior religious figures. Decision-making processes are largely informal but operationally effective due to strong internal cohesion and clear role expectations. Vision and mission statements emphasize moral discipline, religious commitment, and academic seriousness; however, these statements are not always translated into formal operational guidelines.

In contrast, the second institution applies a more formalized organizational structure, supported by documented roles, academic coordination units, and standardized administrative procedures. Organizational readiness in this institution is reflected through clearer task distribution and written regulations, although decision-making tends to be less flexible due to bureaucratic layers. Organizational readiness is present in both sites, but it manifests differently one relying on cultural cohesion and leadership authority, the other on formal administrative systems.

b. Academic Management Readiness

From an academic perspective, both institutions demonstrate readiness in managing core preparatory activities, particularly in Arabic language instruction and foundational Islamic studies. The pesantren oriented institution emphasizes intensive daily learning schedules, immersive language environments, and close supervision by instructors. Academic readiness is strengthened through repetitive practice, discipline-based routines, and continuous informal assessment. However, curriculum structures are largely implicit, relying on instructor experience rather than documented learning outcomes.

Meanwhile, the second institution applies documented curricula and level-based instruction, including placement mechanisms to categorize students according to language proficiency. Academic readiness is reflected in structured lesson plans, formal assessments, and alignment with Al-Azhar academic standards. Nevertheless, instructors noted challenges in balancing standardized curricula with individual student learning needs. Academic readiness exists in both institutions, but differs in form experiential and discipline-driven versus standardized and system-driven.

c. Student Preparation Readiness

Regarding student preparation, preliminary findings reveal that readiness is primarily focused on academic and linguistic preparation, while other aspects receive less systematic attention. Both institutions prioritize Arabic language mastery as the main indicator of student readiness. Classical text exposure (turath) is introduced early, though depth and consistency vary. Character formation is embedded through daily routines and institutional culture, particularly in the pesantren-based institution.

However, readiness related to academic independence, learning autonomy, and cross-cultural adaptation is less explicitly addressed. Participants acknowledged that students often rely heavily on institutional guidance during preparation, which may limit early independence once they enter Al-Azhar's relatively autonomous academic environment. Student readiness is strongly academic-linguistic but only partially addresses adaptive and independent learning capacities.

d. Administrative and Support Readiness

Administrative readiness shows noticeable variation between institutions. The pesantren oriented institution manages administrative preparation such as documentation and departure coordination through personalized assistance and informal communication. While this approach enhances responsiveness, documentation is often fragmented and not systematically archived.

The second institution demonstrates stronger administrative readiness through formal documentation systems, standardized procedures, and periodic reporting. Nevertheless,

administrators reported difficulties responding quickly to sudden regulatory changes from external authorities due to procedural rigidity. Administrative readiness is shaped by trade-offs between flexibility and formalization.

e. Emerging Readiness Gap

Across both institutions, several preliminary readiness gaps were identified:

- 1) Limited formal monitoring of student readiness beyond language proficiency;
- 2) Insufficient documentation of preparatory outcomes and post-departure feedback;
- 3) Partial integration of cultural and academic adaptation training;
- 4) Dependence on institutional guidance with limited emphasis on student autonomy.

Discussion

a. Institutional Readiness as Organizational Alignment

The preliminary findings indicate that institutional readiness is manifested through the alignment between organizational structure, leadership practices, and operational routines. This aligns with organizational behavior theory, which emphasizes that readiness and effectiveness are closely associated with the organization's ability to mobilize internal resources toward its goals (Robbins & Judge, 2019).

The contrast between culturally cohesive leadership-based management and formally structured administrative systems reflects Ivancevich et al.'s (2022) assertion that organizations may achieve readiness through different internal mechanisms. In the pesantren oriented institution, readiness emerges from strong leadership authority and shared cultural norms, whereas in the more formalized institution, readiness is supported by documented roles and procedures (Aminuddin, 2019; Sherif et al., 2020).

These findings reinforce Campbell's multidimensional perspective that organizational readiness cannot be reduced to a single structural form. Instead, readiness is shaped by how institutions balance stability, coordination, and adaptability within their specific contexts.

b. Academic Management Readiness and the Input-Process Perspective

From an educational management standpoint, the findings support the input-process-output framework commonly used to assess institutional performance. Preliminary evidence suggests that both institutions prioritize academic input quality, particularly through student selection mechanisms and intensive Arabic language instruction.

However, differences in curriculum formalization reveal two contrasting readiness pathways. One institution relies on experiential, discipline-based learning rooted in instructor expertise, while the other emphasizes standardized curricula and level-based instruction. According to educational management theory, both approaches may support readiness, but they differ in sustainability and scalability (Hoy & Miskel, 2012).

The absence of clearly articulated learning outcomes in the experiential model indicates a potential readiness limitation, particularly for institutions seeking consistency across cohorts. Conversely, excessive standardization may reduce flexibility, limiting responsiveness to individual learner needs an issue highlighted in competing values frameworks of organizational effectiveness (Mishra & Kasim, 2021).

c. Student Readiness Beyond Linguistic Competence

The findings show that student readiness is predominantly conceptualized in terms of linguistic and academic competence, especially Arabic proficiency and familiarity with classical Islamic texts. This emphasis aligns with previous studies identifying language mastery as a critical determinant of success in Al-Azhar entrance examinations.

Nevertheless, theoretical perspectives on student readiness and adaptation emphasize that academic success in international higher education also depends on learning autonomy, self-regulation, and cultural adaptability (Altbach, 2016; Tannous et al., 2024). The limited institutional focus on these dimensions suggests that readiness is currently understood in a relatively narrow sense.

From a readiness theory perspective, this gap does not necessarily indicate institutional weakness but highlights the early developmental stage of readiness conceptualization. As readiness frameworks

mature, institutions may need to expand their preparatory focus beyond academic skills to include adaptive and self-directed learning capacities.

d. Administrative Readiness and Institutional Responsiveness

Administrative readiness findings further illustrate the tension between flexibility and formalization discussed in organizational theory. Personalized administrative practices enhance responsiveness and stakeholder trust, supporting internal cohesion. However, limited documentation reduces institutional memory and hinders systematic monitoring an issue widely discussed in organizational accountability literature.

Conversely, formal administrative systems improve transparency and procedural clarity but may reduce institutional agility when facing sudden external policy changes. This reflects the competing values framework, where organizations must continuously negotiate between control and flexibility to maintain readiness (Mishra & Kasim, 2021). Thus, administrative readiness should be understood not as a fixed condition but as a dynamic balance shaped by contextual demands.

e. Preliminary Readiness Gaps as Analytical Entry Points

The readiness gaps identified in this study such as limited outcome monitoring, partial integration of adaptive preparation, and reliance on institutional guidance should be interpreted as analytical entry points rather than deficiencies. In preliminary study analysis, identifying such gaps serves to refine research focus and inform subsequent investigation phases (Creswell & Guetterman, 2018). These gaps suggest that institutional readiness is functional but uneven across dimensions. This unevenness supports the argument that readiness is a multidimensional construct requiring integrative analysis, rather than isolated assessment of individual components.

f. Implications for Further Research

Theoretically, these preliminary findings support the relevance of organizational readiness frameworks in the context of pre-university Islamic education institutions. Empirically, they highlight the need for deeper investigation into how different readiness dimensions interact and evolve over time. As a preliminary study, this research provides a conceptual and empirical foundation for future phases aimed at developing comprehensive readiness models or evaluating institutional effectiveness in a more systematic manner.

4. CONCLUSION

This preliminary study explored institutional readiness in preparing Indonesian students for Al-Azhar University through an analysis of early empirical evidence obtained from observations, initial interviews, and document reviews. The findings indicate that institutional readiness is present across the examined sites, but it manifests in diverse and uneven forms depending on organizational orientation, academic management practices, and administrative systems. At the organizational level, readiness is shaped either by strong cultural cohesion and leadership authority or by formalized administrative structures. Academically, institutions demonstrate readiness through intensive Arabic language instruction and foundational Islamic studies, although differences emerge in curriculum formalization and assessment practices. In terms of student preparation, readiness is largely concentrated on linguistic competence, while adaptive skills, learning autonomy, and cross-cultural preparation receive comparatively limited attention. Administrative readiness further reflects a trade-off between flexibility and procedural consistency.

From a theoretical perspective, these preliminary findings support the view that institutional readiness is a multidimensional and context-dependent construct, aligning with organizational and educational management theories that emphasize alignment, adaptability, and internal coherence. The study reinforces the relevance of readiness frameworks in understanding early-stage institutional capacity without equating readiness with proven effectiveness. Practically, the findings offer initial implications for institutions involved in pre-university preparation for international Islamic higher education. Rather than prescribing solutions, the study highlights areas that warrant further reflection,

such as the balance between formalization and flexibility, the expansion of student readiness beyond language proficiency, and the importance of systematic documentation and monitoring.

As a preliminary investigation, this study is inherently limited in scope and depth. Its primary contribution lies in mapping key readiness dimensions and identifying analytical entry points for subsequent research phases. Future studies are expected to build upon these initial insights through in-depth data collection, refined analytical frameworks, and comprehensive evaluation of institutional practices. In conclusion, this preliminary study provides a foundational understanding of institutional readiness in the context of Indonesian pre-university preparation for Al-Azhar University. While not offering definitive conclusions, it establishes an empirical and conceptual basis for continued scholarly inquiry and institutional development.

5. ACKNOWLEDGE

The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to the institutions and individuals who supported this preliminary study. Appreciation is extended to the participating educational institutions for granting access and providing valuable information during the initial data collection process. The authors also thank the academic colleagues who offered constructive feedback during the early stages of this research. This study was conducted as part of an ongoing doctoral research project, and any remaining limitations are solely the responsibility of the authors.

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