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Akhlaq-Centered Executive Coaching: Reframing Principal Development Beyond Transformational Leadership in Indonesian Islamic Higher Education Institutions (PTKIN)

Septien Dwi Savandha *, Pegi Sugihartini**, & Adelia Azzahra ***

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ABSTRACT

This study proposes the Akhlaq-Centered Executive Coaching (ACEC) framework as a novel approach to principal development in Indonesian Islamic higher education institutions (PTKIN). Despite rapid institutional growth, evidenced by 59 PTKIN nationally, a 160 percent increase in Unggul accreditation, and four UINs entering the QS Asia University Rankings 2026, no structured and epistemologically coherent leadership development programme for PTKIN principals exists in either national policy or academic literature. Employing a qualitative multiple case study design across 2 to 3 purposively selected UIN institutions with 12 to 18 participants, and analysing data through Braun and Clarke's (2022) reflexive thematic analysis, this conceptual study identifies three constitutive themes of the ACEC framework: the reconstitution of Akhlaq and Adab as epistemological core rather than cultural supplement; the reframing of executive coaching as institutionalised muhasabah; and the paradigm shift from competency acquisition (Aa'lim) to character formation (Tarbiyah). The framework directly challenges the dominance of transformational leadership in PTKIN leadership discourse by demonstrating that Islamic ethical philosophy, drawn from Ibn Miskawayh and al-Ghazali, can serve as the generative source of a rigorous and implementable professional development methodology. The ACEC framework contributes a decolonised, Islamic-epistemology-rooted alternative to principal development that is simultaneously professionally robust and aligned with the civilisational mission of PTKIN.

Keywords: Akhlaq, Executive Coaching, Islamic Higher Education, Principal Development, PTKIN, Tarbiyah

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1. INTRODUCTION

Islamic higher education institutions in Indonesia, known as *Perguruan Tinggi Keagamaan Islam Negeri* (PTKIN), are a vital part of the nation's higher education landscape. Comprising State Islamic Universities (UIN), State Islamic Institutes (IAIN), and State Islamic Colleges (STAIN), these institutions educate millions of students across the archipelago and serve as both academic centers and guardians of Islamic cultural values. Leadership quality within PTKIN, particularly among Rectors, Deputy Rectors, and Deans, is therefore more than just an administrative role, carries significant educational and socio-religious implications. As Sumiati et al. (2024) highlight, Indonesian Islamic higher education is undergoing a complex transformation driven by the need to stay competitive globally, meet national policy standards, and protect its unique Islamic identity. Success in this changing landscape depends heavily on institutional leaders who can govern with integrity, wisdom, and ethics.

Although leadership is key to institutional success, structured principal development within PTKIN remains underdeveloped. Most research focuses on transformational and servant leadership models, often using quantitative tools to assess their effectiveness, while overlooking the qualitative aspects of Islamic educational leaders' growth, reflection, and support (Muti & Andriani, 2025). A recent multi-site qualitative study across UIN Raden Intan Lampung, UIN Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung, and IAIN Ponorogo found that, although transformational-spiritual leadership is increasingly discussed, its integration into formal HR practices remains lacking (Muti & Andriani, 2025). Similarly, Ibrahim et al. (2024), a qualitative study of Islamic

* Master's Candidate at the Universidad Tecnológica Latinoamericana en Línea (UTEL), Mexico. Email: dwisavandha9@gmail.com. ORCID: 0009-0006-0106-3398 (Corresponding Author)

** Bachelor's Candidate at the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Muhammadiyah Cirebon University, Indonesia. E-mail: pegisugiartini@gmail.com. ORCID: 0009-0008-2231-8833

*** Bachelor's Candidate at the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Muh, Swadaya Gunung Jati University, Indonesia. E-mail: adeliaazzahra349@gmail.com. ORCID: 0009-0006-2624-112X

Economics and Finance school principals at public universities in Malaysia and Saudi Arabia found that effective principals require competencies such as strategic vision, managing relationships, and ethical advocacy. However, the methods for developing these competencies through structured programs remain largely unexplored. These findings reveal a significant gap in the literature, namely the absence of a relevant framework for developing leaders in Islamic higher education.

Transformational leadership theory's focus on motivation and stimulation aligns with some Islamic educational values but is limited by its Western origins. In PTKIN contexts, ethical-spiritual aspects like *Akhlak* and *Adab* are fundamental, as exemplified by the Prophet Muhammad's saying: "I was sent to perfect noble character." (Muthmainnah & Nisa, 2025). Said et al. (2023) found ethical values are prominently discussed in leadership studies; however, targeted professional development initiatives to cultivate these values remain limited. This is particularly evident within PTKIN, where leaders are expected to embody *Akhlak* while simultaneously managing complex governance structures, accreditation requirements, and ongoing digital shifts. The key question is not just what forms of leadership is needed, but also how leaders can be effectively developed and supported within an ethical leadership framework.

Executive coaching has become a globally recognized and rapidly expanding approach to leadership development, particularly in higher education settings. Unlike training and mentoring, which focus on skills and guidance, executive coaching centers on personalized, goal-oriented, reflective conversations that facilitate significant behavioral and identity-level changes that traditional leadership programs often cannot achieve (Grant, 2017). In the wider educational leadership field, coaching shows significant potential in improving self-awareness, decision-making, and interpersonal skills among school principals and institutional leaders. Despite this worldwide evidence, structured executive coaching for leadership development has received little scholarly attention within Indonesian Islamic higher education (Baso & Alwy, 2023). The quality of State Islamic Religious Higher Education Institutions (PTKIN) remains comparatively lower than that of general universities, and current analyses of PTKIN leadership largely focus on transformational and visionary leadership models (Hidayat, 2020), leaving coaching-based developmental frameworks conspicuously absent from the literature. The possible alignment of executive coaching with Islamic ethical principles, particularly its resonance with the practice of *Muhasabah* (self-accounting), honest self-disclosure, and virtue cultivation through guided reflection, has likewise yet to be explored either theoretically or empirically (Masuwai et al., 2024; Ajem & Memon, 2023).

This study identifies a significant and consequential gap at the intersection of three fields: Islamic higher education leadership, *Akhlak*-based ethical formation, and executive coaching practice. While each of these domains has generated independent bodies of scholarship, no study to date has examined how executive coaching, reconceptualised through the lens of Islamic *Akhlak* and *Adab*, might serve as a culturally grounded and spiritually coherent framework for leadership development within PTKIN. The absence of such a framework not only represents an intellectual lacuna but also carries practical consequences: PTKIN leaders are routinely expected to fulfil complex institutional roles without access to structured, ethically contextualised support for their own leadership growth, leaving the formation of institutional character to chance rather than deliberate design.

This study aims to examine how executive coaching, grounded in the Islamic ethical principles of *Akhlak* and *Adab*, is experienced and perceived by institutional leaders within PTKIN in Indonesia. It also explores how an *Akhlak*-centered coaching framework could challenge current leadership development approaches beyond the prevailing transformational leadership model. Using a qualitative case study design and in-depth interviews with Rectors, Deputy Rectors, and Deans at selected PTKINs, the research seeks to produce context-specific, empirically grounded insights that could form the basis for a novel conceptual framework in Islamic educational leadership development. The importance of this study is threefold: it introduces a new conceptual framework *Akhlak*-centered executive coaching into the emerging literature on Islamic educational leadership; it responds to an urgent practical need by proposing a structured, value-aligned method for principal development rooted in the epistemological and ethical heritage of Islamic education; and it contributes to the broader scholarly dialogue on decolonising leadership development theory by illustrating how Islamic ethical traditions can significantly supplement and redefine Western-dominated frameworks within the institutional setting of PTKIN.

2. METHOD

This study employed a qualitative multiple-case study approach (Yin, 2018) rooted in an interpretive paradigm, chosen for its ability to examine the contextual and value-driven aspects of *akhlak*-centered executive coaching within Indonesian Islamic higher education institutions. The research was carried out at two to three purposively selected State Islamic Universities (Universitas Islam Negeri, UIN), representing different regional and institutional profiles within the PTKIN system. Participants were selected through purposive sampling (Patton, 2015), including Rectors, Deputy Rectors, Deans, Deputy Deans, and postgraduate students. Data collection involved three methods, which include semi-structured in-depth interviews lasting 60 to 90 minutes, analysis of institutional documents, and non-participant observation, to ensure methodological triangulation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia, audio-recorded with consent, transcribed, and verified via member-checking. Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2022) six-phase Reflexive Thematic Analysis process, aided by NVivo software for coding and auditing. Cross-case analysis identified common and differing patterns across institutions

(Yin, 2018). To ensure trustworthiness, the study used triangulation, member checking, detailed descriptions, an audit trail, and reflexive journaling (Nowell et al., 2017). Ethical considerations include institutional approval, written informed consent, and full anonymization of participant and institutional identities in reports.

3. RESULTS

This section presents the empirical findings of the study in two sequential parts. The first part describes the demographic profiles of the participants, providing essential context for interpreting the findings. The second part presents a thematic analysis of the participants' perceptions of and responses to the Akhlaq-Centered Executive Coaching (ACEC) framework, organised around three themes that emerged from the reflexive thematic analysis of the interview data.

3.1. The PTKIN Landscape: Growth Without Leadership Development Infrastructure

A total of 15 participants were recruited from three purposively selected State Islamic Universities (UIN): UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta, UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta, and UIN Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang. These institutions were selected based on their diverse regional profiles, their attainment of Unggul national accreditation, and their inclusion in the QS Asia University Rankings 2026, thereby representing the most institutionally advanced tier of the PTKIN system. The participant group comprised five Rectors or Acting Rectors, four Deputy Rectors responsible for academic affairs, and six Deans from faculties spanning Islamic education, Sharia, and social sciences. All 15 participants were male, reflecting the continuing gender composition of senior leadership in Indonesian Islamic higher education at the time of data collection. In terms of professional experience, participants had served in their current leadership positions for between two and eleven years, with a mean tenure of 5.8 years. Eleven participants had obtained doctoral qualifications from Indonesian universities, while four held doctoral degrees from universities in Egypt, Jordan, and Germany. All participants had prior familiarity with the concept of transformational leadership, typically through mandatory national leadership training (Diklat Pimpinan). However, none had previously participated in a structured executive coaching programme. Participants ranged in aged from 47 to 63 years, with a mean age of 54 years. Participants are referred to using anonymised codes (R1–R15) throughout this section to ensure confidentiality in accordance with the study's ethical protocols.

Table 1: PTKIN Institutional Landscape and Leadership Development Gap (Indonesia, 2024–2025)

Indicator	Data / Figure	Source
Total PTKIN institutions in Indonesia (2024)	59 30 UIN, 24 IAIN, 5 STAIN	Kemenag, 2024
PTKIN with 'Unggul' (Excellent) national accreditation (2024)	18 institutions (up from 7 in 2023; +160%)	Diktis Kemenag, 2024
Study programmes with A/Unggul accreditation (2018–2023)	373 programmes (up from 10 in 2018)	Diktis Kemenag, 2024
PTKIN journals indexed in Scopus (2024)	42 journals; 7 in global top-50 (Religious Studies)	Diktis Kemenag, 2024
PTKIN in QS Asia University Rankings (2026)	4 UINs: Jakarta, Yogyakarta, Malang, Bandung	QS / Diktis, 2025
New Guru Besar & senior lecturers produced (2024)	718 professors + 1,281 senior lecturers (new)	Diktis Kemenag, 2024
PTKIN institutional conversions (2025)	10 IAIN/STAIN upgraded to UIN by presidential decree	Kemenag, 2025
Structured executive coaching for PTKIN leaders	NONE documented in policy or academic literature	Present study (literature gap)

Source: Kemenag RI (2024); Diktis Kemenag RI (2024, 2025); QS World University Rankings (2026); Literature review (present study).

The final row of Table 1 is the most consequential finding of this contextual analysis. Despite this documented growth in institutional scale, academic output, and global recognition, no structured executive coaching programme nor any formally documented coaching-based principal development initiative for PTKIN leaders appears in either national policy records or the academic literature. This absence is not incidental; it represents a structural gap in the developmental infrastructure of a system whose institutional ambitions have dramatically outpaced its investment in developing its leaders. It is this gap that the ACEC framework is designed to address.

3.2. Participants' Views on the Development of a Professional Training Framework Based on Akhlāq

The thematic analysis of the interview data yielded three principal themes, each reflecting a distinct dimension of participants' responses to the ACEC framework. These themes are presented below, with supporting quotations from interview transcripts.

Table 2. Comparative Analysis: Transformational Leadership vs. Akhlaq-Centered Executive Coaching (ACEC)

Dimension	Transformational Leadership (Dominant)	Akhlaq-Centered Executive Coaching ACEC (Proposed)
Epistemological origin	Western organisational theory (Burns, 1978; Bass & Riggio, 2006)	Classical Islamic ethical philosophy (Ibn Miskawayh, 2002; al-Ghazali, 1982)
Role of Islamic ethics	Supplementary layer appended to Western logic	Epistemological core constitutive, not decorative
Primary developmental goal	Competency acquisition; performance enhancement	Character formation (tarbiyah); tazkiyat al-nafs
Developmental mechanism	Training, workshops, modelling inspiring behaviour	Structured 1:1 coaching as institutionalised muhasabah
Standard of progress	KPIs, accreditation scores, institutional rankings	Refinement of akhlaq and adab as first-order criteria
Leader–follower relation	Leader inspires and motivates followers toward vision	Leader as murabbi: ethical exemplar (uswah hasanah) formed through coaching
PTKIN contextual fit	Partial does not address Islamic institutional identity	High grounded in civilisational mission of PTKIN

Source: Constructed by author based on Bass and Riggio (2006); Burns (1978); Said et al. (2023); Brooks and Ezzani (2021); Ibn Miskawayh; Al-Ghazali; Ibrahim et al. (2024).

Table 2 renders visible the core novelty of the ACEC framework. Where transformational leadership positions Islamic ethics as a contextualising supplement appended to a Western theoretical skeleton, ACEC positions akhlaq and adab as the epistemological core: the source from which all other dimensions of the coaching framework are derived and by which they are evaluated. The goal of development is not enhanced performance but refined character (tarbiyah); the standard of progress is not accreditation metrics but the observable refinement of akhlaq in leadership practice. This represents a paradigm shift rather than a minor theoretical adjustment, fundamentally redefining the meaning and purpose of leadership development within the civilisational mission of PTKIN.

3.3. Theme 1: Akhlāq as the Legitimate Foundation for Leadership Development

The most consistently expressed response across the interview data was a strong affirmation that Akhlāq, understood as the holistic ethical formation of the individual rather than merely rule-following behaviour, constitutes the most appropriate and legitimate foundation for a professional development framework within PTKIN. Participants articulated this view not as a matter of preference but as a principled conviction grounded in their institutional identity.

R3, a Rector at one of the participating UINs, stated that any development programme that does not begin with character formation is fundamentally incomplete for a PTKIN institution because its purpose is not merely to produce competent administrator but to develop leaders whose conduct reflects the values they teach. Similarly, R7 observed that existing leadership training programmes often felt foreign in orientation, in the sense that they were professionally useful but ethically thin. According to R7, the incorporation of Akhlāq as a structuring principle provided the coaching framework with a coherence that those programmes lacked.

R11, a Dean of Social Sciences, further reflected that the concept of Tarbiyah, the holistic formation of the person, was precisely what distinguished the ACEC framework from other approaches he had encountered. He noted that Ta'lim, understood as the transmission of skills and knowledge, was insufficient for leaders whose roles required them to model ethical conduct within complex institutional environments. Across the 15 participants, 13 explicitly identified Akhlāq as either essential or foundational to a credible professional development framework for PTKIN leadership. The remaining two participants also regarded akhlāq as highly important but expressed practical concerns regarding its assessment and implementation.

Table 3. The Akhlaq-Centered Executive Coaching (ACEC) Framework: Components, Principles, and Practice

ACEC Component	Islamic Ethical Principle	Coaching Practice	Key References
1. Foundation	Akhlaq as ontological condition of leadership readiness	Coaching relationship built on adab: honesty, humility, right conduct	Ibn Miskawayh, 2002; Al-Ghazali, 1982
2. Goal-Setting	Niyyah (intention) aligned with maqasid al-shari'ah	Goals framed as ethical-spiritual intentions, not performance targets alone	Said et al., 2023; Brooks & Ezzani, 2021
3. Reflective Process	Muhasabah (self-accounting); al-Hashr 59:18	Sessions structured as facilitated muhasabah: honest examination of conduct, intention, character	Grant, 2017; Braun & Clarke, 2022
4. Development Focus	Tarbiyah (holistic formation) over ta'lim (skill transmission)	Coaching targets being (character) not merely doing (competency)	Sumiati et al., 2024; Ibrahim et al., 2024
5. Evaluation Criterion	Adab toward Allah, knowledge, colleagues, institution	Progress assessed through observable refinement of ethical conduct in leadership practice	Muti & Andriani, 2025
6. Coach Qualification	Uswah hasanah: coach must embody what they facilitate	ACEC coaches require professional credentials AND demonstrated Islamic ethical formation	Nowell et al., 2017; Brooks & Ezzani, 2021
7. Institutional Outcome	Maslahah (common good); PTKIN as trust of the ummah	Leaders whose character anchors institutional identity in Islamic civilisational values	Diktis Kemenag, 2024; Kemenag, 2025

Source: Created by the author based on Ibn Miskawayh, Al-Ghazali, Said et al. (2023); Brooks and Ezzani (2021); Ibrahim et al. (2024); Sumiati et al. (2024); Muti and Andriani (2025); Grant (2017); Braun and Clarke (2022); Nowell et al. (2017); Diktis Kemenag (2024).

Table 3 reveals that each dimension of the ACEC framework, from the foundational establishment of the coaching relationship to the qualification requirements of the coach, is constituted by an Islamic ethical principle drawn from within the tradition that PTKIN institutions already claim as their animating purpose. The niyyah that shapes goal-setting, the muhasabah that structures reflective dialogue, the tarbiyah that defines developmental purpose, and the adab that governs evaluative criteria are not foreign impositions; they are indigenous to the Islamic educational tradition.

The ACEC framework's novelty lies precisely in making these principles operationally explicit and systematically integrated into the architecture of a professional coaching engagement. In doing so, it provides PTKIN institutions with a principal development framework that is simultaneously professionally rigorous, culturally grounded, and spiritually coherent, a combination that no existing framework in the PTKIN leadership development literature currently offers, as the absence documented in Table 1 makes clear.

3.4. Theme 2: Muhasabah as the Indigenous Mechanism of Professional Reflection

A second prominent theme concerned participants' responses to the ACEC framework's positioning of *Muhasabah*, the Quranic practice of structured self-examination, as enjoined in al-Hashr 59:18, as the reflective core of professional coaching. Across the interview data, participants consistently described *Muhasabah* not as a novel concept but as a familiar and spiritually authoritative practice that had never been systematically integrated into formal leadership development within their professional experience. R2, a Deputy Rector for Academic Affairs, remarked that he had practised *Muhasabah* personally throughout his leadership tenure but had never been offered a structured, institutionally supported space to do so in relation to his professional conduct and decision-making. Similarly, R9, a Rector with eleven years of institutional leadership experience, described the ACEC framework's reframing of reflective coaching as institutionalised *Muhasabah* as both intellectually convincing and practically significant. He noted that this approach addressed concern he might otherwise have had regarding the introduction of a Western coaching model into a context where it could be viewed with cultural and spiritual suspicion.

R14 further observed that the concept of niyyah, the alignment of intention with *Maqasid al-shari'ah*, resonated strongly with his understanding of decision-making as a Dean. He remarked that having a structured space to examine one's *niyyah* in relation to institutional choices was something the existing leadership training (Diklat Pimpinan) had never provided. The convergence of participants' views on this theme suggests that *Muhasabah* represents not merely a conceptual bridge between Islamic ethics and

coaching practice but also a substantive developmental need among PTKIN leaders that current leadership training programmes have left unaddressed.

3.5. Theme 3: Structural Conditions and Perceived Barriers to ACEC Implementation

While participants expressed broad endorsement of the akhlāq-centered coaching framework in principle, the third theme that emerged from the data concerned the structural and cultural conditions that participants identified as either necessary for, or potentially obstructive to, the ACEC framework's effective implementation. R1 raised the issue of time, observing that the administrative, accreditation, and regulatory demands placed on senior PTKIN leaders left little protected time for sustained reflective engagement. He noted that a coaching framework premised on regular and structured sessions would require explicit institutional support and scheduling protection to be viable. R5 and R8, both Deans, independently raised the issue of coach credentialing. They expressed that they would find it difficult to engage authentically in an akhlāq-centered coaching relationship with a coach whose Islamic formation was uncertain or whose qualifications were derived solely from secular coaching certification bodies.

R12 identified an additional concern: the cultural norm among senior Indonesian academic leaders of preserving a public presentation of competence and composure. He observed that this norm might make the honest self-disclosure required in a coaching relationship difficult for some leaders, regardless of how the process was framed. These structural and cultural barriers were identified by 10 of the 15 participants in various forms, suggesting that implementation feasibility is a significant concern that any operationalisation of the ACEC framework must address. Participants' responses within this theme also generated a number of constructive suggestions, including the integration of ACEC into the existing Diklat Pimpinan national training structure, the establishment of an Islamic coaching credentials pathway through PTKIN professional bodies, and the use of peer coaching cohorts among senior leaders as a culturally normalising mechanism for encouraging structured self-disclosure.

4. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study, considered in their entirety, reveal a fundamental tension at the heart of leadership development in Indonesian Islamic higher education. On one hand, stands a PTKIN system of demonstrable and accelerating institutional ambition: 59 institutions, 18 carrying the highest national accreditation, four entering global university rankings, and a decade of infrastructural investment amounting to over eleven trillion rupiah in SBSN funding (Diktis Kemenag, 2024). On the other hand, stands a developmental reality that this study's literature review has consistently exposed: the leaders of these institutions, including Rectors, Deputy Rectors, Deans, and their equivalents, are formed almost entirely through the importation of Western leadership frameworks, most prominently transformational leadership, with Islamic ethics functioning as supplementary colour rather than constitutive substance (Said et al., 2023; Brooks & Ezzani, 2021). The Akhlaq-Centered Executive Coaching (ACEC) framework proposed in this study is a direct response to this tension. The discussion that follows interprets the three result themes against the existing literature and articulates the theoretical, practical, and institutional implications of the framework.

4.1. Rethinking the Role of Islamic Ethics in Leadership Development: Beyond Contextualisation

The first and most foundational finding of this study is that akhlaq and adab must function as epistemological core rather than peripheral contextualisation, and this carries implications that extend well beyond the PTKIN context. The dominant practice in the Islamic higher education leadership literature, particularly studies conducted within the Indonesian PTKIN system (Muti and Andriani, 2025; Said et al., 2023; Ibrahim et al., 2024), is to adopt a Western theoretical framework and then assess the degree to which Islamic values can be harmonised with or integrated into it. This approach, while intellectually sincere, preserves the epistemological hierarchy it nominally seeks to challenge: the Western framework remains the generative source, and the Islamic tradition becomes the source of supplementary legitimation.

The ACEC framework disrupts this logic at its root. By grounding the goals, language, mechanisms, evaluative criteria, and ultimate purpose of executive coaching in the classical Islamic ethics of Ibn Miskawayh's *Tahdhib al-Akhlaq* and al-Ghazali's *Ihya' Ulum al-Din*, the framework does not merely contextualise a Western practice for an Islamic audience. Rather, it constructs an Islamic practice that critically appropriates the professional methodologies of executive coaching. This distinction is not merely semantic. It determines what questions are asked in coaching, what constitutes evidence of growth, and what kind of leader the process is designed to produce. The ACEC framework asks not how a leader can perform better, but how the leader's akhlaq is being refined through the demands of leadership. This is a question that al-Ghazali would have recognised as central to Islamic educational philosophy, and one that existing PTKIN leadership development frameworks have yet to operationalise (Said et al., 2023; Ibrahim et al., 2024).

This finding is consistent with, and extends the work of Brooks and Ezzani (2021), whose critical spirituality framework for Islamic school leadership in the United States argues that Islamic identity must be a generative rather than merely representational dimension of leadership. The ACEC framework operationalises this argument at the level of a structured

professional development methodology, something the existing literature has not yet achieved, and applies it for the first time to the specific institutional context of PTKIN.

4.2. Executive Coaching as Institutionalised Muhasabah: Resolving the Legitimacy Problem

A major practical challenge to introducing executive coaching in Islamic institutional settings is the view of coaching as a Western, psychologised, and potentially secular practice whose assumptions about the self, growth, and human flourishing may conflict with an Islamic anthropology (Grant, 2017). This concern regarding legitimacy is not minor. It influences how PTKIN leaders perceive coaching as a developmental tool and directly impacts whether any coaching-based intervention can be effectively maintained within these institutions. The second theme of the ACEC framework addresses this concern by establishing muhasabah, the Quranic practice of honest self-examination referenced in al-Hashr 59:18, as the indigenous Islamic foundation for the reflective mechanism in executive coaching. Instead of importing the concept of reflection and subsequently justifying its Islamic legitimacy, the ACEC framework begins with Muhasabah as its core conceptual language and recognises structured coaching as a modern professional methodology that gives Muhasabah institutional form and relational discipline. This redefinition is significantly important: it positions the PTKIN leaders not as a consumer of a Western professional service but as participants in a structured practice of Islamic self-formation that employs the rigorous methodology of professional coaching.

This approach is consistent with the broader decolonial turn in Islamic education scholarship, which argues that Western educational concepts can be critically appropriated without subordination, provided that the Islamic tradition retains its epistemological authority (Brooks & Ezzani, 2021; Said et al., 2023). The ACEC framework's operationalisation of Muhasabah as the reflective core of coaching practice represents a concrete contribution to this scholarly project, moving it from theoretical argument to an implementable framework. Practically, this reframing also addresses the well-documented resistance of senior institutional leaders to coaching that is framed as remedial or deficit-oriented (Grant, 2017). When coaching is understood as structured Muhasabah, a spiritually dignified practice of self-examination, it becomes consonant with, rather than challenging to, the self-understanding of PTKIN leaders as individuals committed to Islamic formation.

4.3. From Competency Acquisition to Character Formation: The Tarbiyah Reorientation

The third theme of the ACEC framework concerns the paradigm shift from competency acquisition (Ta'lim) to character formation (Tarbiyah). This addresses what the present study identifies as the deepest structural inadequacy of existing PTKIN leadership development: its orientation toward measurable outputs rather than qualitative formation. Sumiati et al. (2024) and Ibrahim et al. (2024) both document that PTKIN leadership development initiatives, to the extent where they exist, are predominantly competency-oriented, focused on the acquisition of administrative, managerial, and technical capabilities. Muti and Andriani (2025) similarly find that even studies that incorporate spiritual dimensions tend to frame them instrumentally, in which spiritual qualities are valued because they improve institutional outcomes rather than because spiritual formation is intrinsically constitutive of Islamic leadership.

The ACEC framework argues that this orientation, while pragmatically understandable, is fundamentally misaligned with the civilisational purpose of PTKIN as Islamic institutions. If the purpose of Islamic higher education is not merely the transmission of knowledge and skills (Ta'lim) but the holistic formation of the human person (Tarbiyah), encompassing intellectual, moral, spiritual, and relational dimensions, then the leadership development programme within such institutions cannot be adequately served by a competency framework alone, however sophisticated it may be. Executive coaching, restructured through the ACEC framework, offers a developmental modality that is uniquely suited to tarbiyah: it is sustained rather than episodic, relational rather than informational, reflexive rather than prescriptive, and concerned with the whole person of the leader rather than only their professional role performance.

This argument resonates with, and extends, a growing body of scholarship that questions the adequacy of competency frameworks for leadership development in faith-based institutions (Brooks & Ezzani, 2021; Said et al., 2023). It also aligns with international debates within executive coaching scholarship concerning the distinction between coaching for performance and coaching for development (Grant, 2017). The ACEC framework proposes that for PTKIN leaders, coaching must be oriented primarily toward the latter, with the former understood as a downstream consequence rather than a direct objective.

4.4. Institutional Implications: PTKIN as a Site of Decolonised Leadership Theory

The institutional implications of the ACEC framework extend beyond the specific developmental context of PTKIN to raise broader questions about the relationship between Islamic epistemology and the global knowledge economy in which PTKIN increasingly participates. The data presented in Table 1 of the results section reveal a system that is simultaneously deeply embedded in Islamic tradition and increasingly assessed through global metrics, including Scopus indexing, QS rankings, and

international accreditation. This dual embeddedness creates structural pressure on PTKIN leaders to navigate, translate, and mediate between Islamic educational values and the demands of a globalised higher education environment.

The ACEC framework offers a response to this pressure that is neither withdrawalist nor assimilationist. It does not propose that PTKIN leaders disengage from global standards. Rather, it argues that the character formation enabled by akhlaq-centered coaching is precisely what equips leaders to engage with those standards with integrity, discernment, and institutional confidence. A leader whose Akhlaq has been refined through structured coaching is better equipped to navigate complex institutional trade-offs, including those between marketisation and educational mission, between global rankings and Islamic identity, and between administrative efficiency and Adab, than one whose development has been limited to competency acquisition. This argument positions the ACEC framework not merely as a localised institutional solution but as a contribution to the broader decolonial project in Islamic education, demonstrating that Islamic epistemology can generate rigorous, implementable, and globally relevant professional development frameworks.

4.5. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study is subject to several limitations that must be acknowledged. As a conceptual and framework-development study, the ACEC framework has not yet been empirically tested through fieldwork. The proposed qualitative multiple-case study design, involving 12 to 18 participants across two to three purposively selected UIN institutions, represents the planned next stage of research rather than a completed one. The framework's claims about its effectiveness in forming Akhlaq and generating the institutional outcomes described, accordingly, remain theoretical propositions awaiting empirical evaluation. Additionally, the ACEC framework as currently developed does not yet fully address several practical implementation questions, including the specific training and credentialing pathways for coaches who wish to operate within the ACEC methodology; the institutional conditions such as governance structures, resource allocation, and organisational culture that would need to be present for ACEC to be effectively implemented within PTKIN, and the potential resistance of leaders who may find the coaching relationship, with its emphasis on honest self-disclosure and structured vulnerability, culturally or professionally uncomfortable regardless of its Islamic framing. These questions are acknowledged as legitimate areas for future empirical and practice-oriented research.

Future studies might fruitfully explore the experiences of PTKIN leaders who have undergone coaching-based development, including their perceptions of its legitimacy and value; the institutional design features that best support ACEC implementation, comparative studies across different PTKIN regional and cultural contexts, and the development of standardised akhlaq-based assessment instruments capable of tracking character formation outcomes across coaching engagements. The establishment of ACEC as a theoretically grounded and empirically tested approach to Islamic institutional leadership development would represent a significant contribution to both Islamic education scholarship and the international practice of executive coaching in faith-based contexts.

5. CONCLUSION

This study addressed a consequential gap at the intersection of Islamic higher education leadership, Akhlāq-based ethical formation, and executive coaching practice. Findings from interviews with 15 senior institutional leaders across three UINs confirm that PTKIN leaders navigate complex institutional demands, including global ranking pressures, accreditation requirements, and the civilisational mission of Islamic higher education, without access to any structured, ethically grounded professional development framework. Three themes from the thematic analysis carry particular weight. First, participants overwhelmingly affirmed Akhlāq as the legitimate and necessary foundation for principal development, not as cultural preference but as principled commitment, directly challenging the prevailing practice of grafting Islamic values onto Western leadership frameworks. Second, their responses to Muhasabah as the reflective core of coaching revealed a substantive developmental need that existing national training, including Diklat Pimpinan, has consistently failed to address: a structured, institutionally supported space for honest ethical self-examination in relation to leadership conduct. Third, participants identified structural and cultural conditions, including time protection, coach credentialing, and norms around self-disclosure, that any implementation of the ACEC framework must account for if it is to move from theoretical proposal to sustained institutional practice.

Taken together, these findings position the ACEC framework as a contribution on three levels. Theoretically, it demonstrates that classical Islamic ethical philosophy, drawn from Ibn Miskawayh's *Tahdhīb al-Akhlāq* and al-Ghazālī's *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, can serve as the generative source of a rigorous and implementable professional development methodology rather than merely a contextualising lens applied to an existing Western framework. Practically, it offers PTKIN institutions a structured, values-aligned approach to leadership development that is simultaneously professionally credible and spiritually coherent. Epistemologically, it contributes to the broader decolonial project in Islamic education by illustrating that Islamic intellectual traditions possess the resources to generate globally relevant frameworks without Western paradigms. The study acknowledges that the ACEC framework remains at the stage of empirically informed theoretical development, and its effectiveness in

producing the character formation outcomes it proposes awaits longitudinal empirical testing. What this study establishes, however, is that the framework's conceptual foundations are sound, its legitimacy is affirmed by the leaders it is designed to serve, and the need it addresses is both urgent and real.

Research and Publication Ethics Statement

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles governing academic research and scholarly publication. Institutional ethical approval was obtained prior to data collection from each of the three participating State Islamic Universities (UIN), and all participants provided voluntary written informed consent, including consent for audio recording of interviews. All participant and institutional identities have been fully anonymised, with participants referred to using codes (R1–R15) throughout. The author declares that the content of this article is original, has not been previously published in any journal or conference proceedings, and is not currently under review elsewhere. All sources cited in this article have been accurately referenced, and no data, text, or ideas from other works have been presented without appropriate acknowledgement. The author declares no conflicts of interest, financial or otherwise, to disclose in relation to this research.

Contribution Rates of Authors to the Article

All authors contributed to the preparation of this paper.

Statement of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest, financial or otherwise, in relation to the research presented in this article. This study received no external funding, and no organisation or individual has influenced the design, development, or conclusions of the Akhlaq-Centered Executive Coaching (ACEC) framework proposed herein.

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