

# Exploring Innovation in Educational Services: A Case Study at a State Islamic University in Riau

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Keywords:

educational innovation;  
academic support;  
university services;  
leadership;  
higher education management

### Article history:

Received 2025-03-12

Revised 2025-08-04

Accepted 2025-09-30

## ABSTRACT

Universities play a vital role in providing academic and administrative support services that facilitate student success. However, limitations in infrastructure, human resource capacity, and service delivery quality have hindered optimal educational support in many institutions. This study investigates how innovation in academic and instructional support is implemented at Sultan Syarif Kasim Islamic State University (UIN SUSKA) Riau. A qualitative descriptive approach was employed to explore institutional practices and leadership strategies in advancing educational services. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with key stakeholders, including the Rector, Head of PTIPD, faculty leaders, lecturers, and administrative staff. Additional data were gathered from institutional documents and observations. The findings reveal that effective leadership plays a central role in driving service innovation. Leaders at UIN SUSKA Riau demonstrate strategic vision and the ability to communicate and operationalize innovative ideas to improve academic services. Efforts include the implementation of digital platforms (e.g., e-learning systems, academic portals), routine staff development programs, and the decentralization of support systems across faculties. However, challenges remain in standardizing services, resource allocation, and integrating IT systems across departments. This study underscores the importance of leadership commitment, digital transformation, and human resource development in enhancing educational support services. Strengthening these elements can foster a more responsive and efficient academic environment. Innovative leadership and systemic improvements in instructional and administrative services are essential for enhancing the quality of higher education delivery.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Education is widely recognized as a fundamental pillar of national development, acting as both a public good and a strategic investment in human capital. In Indonesia, education plays a vital role in achieving the objectives outlined in the 1945 Constitution, particularly Article 31, which guarantees every

citizen the right to education and mandates the state to provide it equitably. The state's responsibility in organizing a qualified and inclusive education system is further reinforced by Law No. 20 of 2003 on the National Education System, which defines education as a conscious and deliberate effort to develop the potential of learners, grounded in spiritual-religious values, character, knowledge, competence, and citizenship (Suriyadi, Siregar, Harahap, & Mesiono, 2022). These legal foundations affirm the importance of education not only as a tool for personal development but also as a driving force for national progress.

Within this national framework, universities play a critical role as providers of higher education and as institutions responsible for producing quality human resources. Universities are expected to contribute to the intellectual development of the nation through their dual missions of education and research (Zulaiha, Lian, & Mulyadi, 2020). In this context, the effectiveness of higher education institutions depends not only on their academic curricula but also on the quality and adaptability of their academic support systems. These systems include tutoring, thesis supervision, academic advising, and administrative services—elements essential to the overall learning experience. According to Rayuwati (2020), the performance of universities in providing such services directly affects the quality of graduates and the institution's responsiveness to change.

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted educational systems globally, forcing institutions at all levels to re-evaluate their delivery methods. In Indonesia, this transition was formally initiated by the Ministry of Education and Culture through Circular No. 36962/MPK.A/HK/2020, which required all educational activities to be conducted online as part of a national strategy to reduce virus transmission. This abrupt shift created both opportunities and challenges in the education sector. Digital technologies such as Zoom, Google Meet, Google Classroom, and WhatsApp became essential tools for remote learning and service delivery. However, many institutions struggled to adjust due to disparities in infrastructure, digital literacy, and institutional readiness (Astuti, Berliani, & Nugroho, 2022; Nugraha, Baidi, & Bakri, 2021).

Sultan Syarif Kasim State Islamic University Riau (UIN SUSKA Riau), as one of Indonesia's public Islamic higher education institutions (PTKIN), was among the universities that responded proactively to the COVID-19 crisis. The university issued a series of internal policies and circulars to regulate academic and administrative processes during the pandemic, including guidelines for virtual lectures, thesis supervision, and the postponement of events that could lead to large gatherings (Astuti et al., 2022). In adapting to these new conditions, UIN SUSKA Riau implemented various digital platforms to facilitate academic services. Despite this effort, inconsistencies were observed across faculties regarding the use of platforms, supervision models, and communication practices.

Preliminary observations indicate that some faculties at UIN SUSKA Riau, such as the Faculty of Economics and Social Sciences, continued to conduct thesis proposal defenses and examinations offline, while others transitioned entirely to online modalities. Additionally, different faculties adopted varying digital tools and approaches in delivering academic services. For instance, while some used Google Meet and WhatsApp for communication and tutoring, others relied exclusively on the university's e-learning platform. This lack of standardization highlighted the absence of an integrated system for academic support delivery and exposed underlying issues such as limited internet access in rural areas, insufficient IT infrastructure, and unequal digital competencies among faculty and staff (Mesiono & Haidir, 2021).

Moreover, academic support—both instructional and administrative—was often influenced by the personal initiative and technological capability of individual lecturers. As Lattu (2018) points out, the quality of academic services in virtual learning environments is often dependent on the educator's digital literacy and commitment to student engagement. The uneven implementation of online academic support across faculties suggests a broader institutional challenge in ensuring equitable and effective services for all students.

Educational institutions are expected to remain agile and adaptive in the face of socio-technical transformations. As Mursyanti (2022) argues, universities must continuously innovate to align with changes in technology, student expectations, and educational demands. The ability to maintain academic quality and student satisfaction during a crisis depends heavily on the capacity of the institution to

manage, evaluate, and improve its support systems. According to Brennan et al. (2021), the success of educational service innovation hinges on the integration of effective governance, competent human resources, and digital infrastructure. Similarly, Seabra (in Agus, Juliadharna, & Djamaluddin, 2023) emphasizes the importance of accountability mechanisms in evaluating the effectiveness of academic innovations and institutional responsiveness.

Despite the growing literature on online learning during COVID-19, there remains a lack of empirical studies that investigate how academic support systems were adapted and implemented in specific institutional contexts in Indonesia, particularly within Islamic universities. While much research has examined student satisfaction and learning outcomes, fewer studies have explored the organizational processes behind academic service delivery during the pandemic. This gap is particularly relevant for institutions like UIN SUSKA Riau, which must balance religious values with modern educational standards and technological adoption.

This study seeks to fill that gap by examining how academic support services—specifically tutoring, thesis supervision, and academic administration—were organized and implemented at UIN SUSKA Riau during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research aims to identify institutional adaptations, assess the effectiveness and consistency of support systems across faculties, and explore the challenges faced in transitioning to online academic services. By focusing on the organizational and managerial dimensions of academic support, this study contributes to the broader discourse on educational resilience, digital transformation, and quality assurance in Indonesian higher education.

## 2. METHODS

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to explore how academic support services were implemented at Sultan Syarif Kasim State Islamic University (UIN SUSKA) Riau during the COVID-19 pandemic. This approach was chosen to capture participants' perspectives and contextualize institutional practices in their natural settings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The research focused on academic and instructional services, including tutoring, thesis supervision, and administrative assistance.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on their roles and relevance to the research objectives. Informants included university leaders (rector, deans, and vice deans), lecturers acting as academic advisors, educational staff providing administrative services, and students from various faculties. A total of 15 participants were interviewed using semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted both online and in person, depending on availability and access.

Data collection also involved document analysis of academic regulations, faculty policies, and institutional circulars. Field notes were taken during observations and interviews to complement the narratives.

Data analysis followed the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), involving data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. This included condensing transcripts, coding data thematically, and identifying emerging patterns related to academic service practices.

To ensure data validity, triangulation was used by comparing interview data, documents, and observations. Member checking was also conducted to confirm the accuracy of interpretations with selected participants.

This methodology provided an in-depth understanding of the institutional adaptations and challenges in delivering academic support services during the pandemic.

## 3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1 *Effective Leadership in Driving Service Innovation*

Leadership plays a central role in facilitating innovation and change in public sector organizations, including higher education institutions (León Velarde et al., 2021). At UIN SUSKA Riau, leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic was not only reactive but also strategic in navigating administrative

transformation and technological adaptation. Interview data suggest that leadership at the rectorate and faculty levels generally showed initiative and commitment in sustaining educational and administrative functions, even amid technological and infrastructure constraints.

The rector, vice rectors, deans, and other senior administrators worked to maintain institutional performance and student services by introducing digital platforms such as E-Kinerja, i-Management, Goods Inventory System, and Presensia. These tools aimed to enhance transparency, performance monitoring, and operational efficiency. Faculty-specific systems such as SITASI, SIASY, and the long-established e-Learning platform were also leveraged to ensure continuity in academic delivery. However, despite the apparent enthusiasm for innovation, the implementation lacked institution-wide coordination. As a result, different faculties developed or adopted systems independently. For example, while the Faculty of Science and Technology operated mainly through the e-Learning platform, other faculties relied on combinations of WhatsApp, Zoom, and Google Meet. The university's limited server capacity also restricted the scalability of centralized platforms across all faculties.

Moreover, budgetary constraints and fragmented procurement policies—where some systems were developed internally and others outsourced—created barriers to standardization. Although leaders demonstrated political will and strategic intent, the absence of a unified IT roadmap and insufficient resource allocation undermined efforts to scale innovations institution-wide. This indicates that vision alone is insufficient; it must be supported by a cohesive digital strategy and structural integration.

*“We support innovation, but sometimes the systems are redundant or incompatible because each unit does its own thing. There’s no central governance,”* (Informant: Faculty IT coordinator, Interview, 2023)

This reflects a broader challenge in educational leadership: how to balance decentralized innovation with centralized coordination for sustainable transformation.

### **3.2 Human Resource Development: Progress and Uneven Impact**

Human resource development (HRD) has been essential in adapting to digital service delivery. Coaching and training programs were provided to both academic and administrative staff to familiarize them with new platforms and performance expectations. Initiatives included Google Scholar coaching, i-Management system training, and public relations workshops, particularly targeting staff at university service units and faculty operators.

Informants acknowledged that HR development initiatives did improve digital competence, especially for younger or tech-savvy staff. However, several respondents noted that participation in coaching programs was unequal and inconsistent.

*“Not all staff receive training. Some units are more active, others are left behind. It depends on the leadership in that unit,”* (Informant: Administrative Officer, Interview, 2023)

Furthermore, the rotation system and unclear job descriptions created confusion and redundancy in task execution. In some cases, training was seen as superficial or untimely, particularly when conducted after new systems had already been implemented. Additionally, there was limited follow-up or evaluation to measure the impact of HR programs. Informal learning—such as peer-to-peer support and self-training—was more effective in many cases than formal training sessions. This suggests that while UIN SUSKA Riau recognizes the need for HR development, implementation remains fragmented and reactive.

There is an opportunity for the university to create a more structured HRD framework that aligns training content with institutional digital goals, includes assessment metrics, and ensures equitable access for all staff categories.

### 3.3 Organizational Culture: Supportive, Yet Structurally Inhibited

A university's culture deeply influences how change and innovation are embraced. At UIN SUSKA Riau, the findings indicate that while individual motivation and informal collaboration were present, the organizational culture has not yet matured into a supportive environment for sustainable innovation.

Several staff members reported that innovation was not consistently encouraged across faculties, and that bureaucratic rigidity often slowed down service adaptation.

*"Sometimes we want to try new ideas, but procedures are too rigid. We must wait for approvals that take weeks,"* (Informant: Lecturer, Interview, 2023)

Additionally, task overlaps, unclear authority lines, **and a** non-integrated HR rotation system were identified as contributors to work overload and inefficiency. Despite some leaders demonstrating openness and flexibility, the underlying system lacked the agility required for rapid adaptation. The university's vision of becoming a world-class institution remains aspirational unless supported by a strong and adaptive organizational culture. Innovation needs to be normalized through policies that empower mid-level managers, flexible SOPs, and a feedback-oriented performance system.

### 3.4 Teamwork: Functioning Well but Facing Resource Gaps

Teamwork was consistently cited by informants as a positive organizational trait at UIN SUSKA Riau. Faculties have established collaborative routines, including joint planning for academic seminars, curriculum discussions, and cross-unit coordination for student services. In times of crisis, such as the pandemic, informal collaboration between academic and administrative staff enabled continuity of essential functions.

However, the effectiveness of teamwork is uneven due to staff shortages, particularly in roles such as public relations, communication center personnel, and IT support. Additionally, the absence of a centralized digital database hampers communication and information sharing among units.

*"Our team works well, but we lack tools. We need better IT integration to collaborate efficiently,"* (Informant: Vice Dean of Academic Affairs, Interview, 2023)

Teamwork thrives under trust and clear roles. However, uncertainties around job scopes and digital literacy disparities sometimes create miscommunication or delays in service. To enhance teamwork, the university must invest not only in technical infrastructure but also in team management training and cross-functional collaboration platforms.

### 3.5 Networking and Partnerships: Underutilized Potential

Despite some notable partnerships—such as with Lintasarta for internet infrastructure and Cyber Garuda for platform development—UIN SUSKA Riau's external collaboration strategy remains underdeveloped. Informants expressed that most partnerships are reactive and based on short-term needs rather than strategic alliances.

For instance, the development of the I-Raise platform received external support but lacked sustained knowledge transfer or internal capacity building. Partnerships often focus on product delivery, not institutional learning or joint innovation.

*"The vendor built the system, but after that, we struggled to maintain it ourselves,"* (Informant: IT Unit Staff, Interview, 2023)

The concept of inter-organizational partnership networks requires clarity in purpose, shared goals, and reciprocal benefit (Ferlie & Ongaro, 2022). UIN SUSKA Riau needs to adopt a long-term partnership strategy, involving Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) that include capacity-building components, and prioritize collaborations aligned with its digital transformation roadmap.

### 3.6 Governance Innovation in Higher Education

Governance innovation is the application of novel administrative, technological, and managerial approaches to improve service quality and institutional performance. At UIN SUSKA Riau, governance innovation has primarily taken shape through digital service delivery systems, performance tracking platforms, and paperless administration.

However, based on field data, most innovations are incremental and descriptive, rather than systemic. There is no overarching innovation strategy, and the innovations that exist are often siloed within individual faculties or units. This limits institutional learning and scalability.

*“Everyone is innovating, but in their own way. There’s no integration,”* (Informant: Rectorate official, Interview, 2023)

Critical barriers to innovation include:

1. Lack of digital governance framework
2. Budgetary constraints
3. Redundant system development
4. Weak cross-unit integration

Thus, while UIN SUSKA Riau demonstrates responsiveness and willingness to innovate, the absence of systemic innovation governance dilutes impact. The university must move beyond project-based changes and invest in a holistic digital transformation strategy backed by leadership, funding, HR capacity, and policy reform.

### 3.7 Educational Service Management: Challenges and Fragmentation

In terms of educational services, UIN SUSKA Riau made significant adjustments during the pandemic. The shift to online learning and remote administration was executed through various platforms, but again, with minimal standardization. Faculty-level autonomy meant that service quality varied greatly.

Some faculties, such as the Faculty of Economics and Social Sciences, continued thesis exams in person, while others held them virtually. The absence of centralized academic service standards resulted in disparities in student experience.

Furthermore, student feedback mechanisms were weak or nonexistent. Informants noted that students often relied on informal channels (WhatsApp groups or personal contacts) to get information or resolve issues.

*“Sometimes we don’t know the correct procedure. We rely on our classmates or senior students,”* (Informant: Undergraduate student, Interview, 2023)

This indicates a need for clear academic service protocols, student-centered digital platforms, and enhanced communication strategies. UIN SUSKA Riau must institutionalize service quality standards, supported by regular evaluations and feedback loops, to ensure consistent delivery.

This study offers value by exposing the structural and systemic gaps that undermine innovation diffusion in Indonesian Islamic universities. While tools like e-learning or digital presence systems are widespread, this study shows how fragmented governance, uncoordinated leadership, and uneven HR development compromise their effectiveness. Rather than viewing digital transition as merely a technological shift, this research highlights its institutional and organizational dimensions—a perspective underexplored in existing literature.

Theoretically, this study contributes to understanding how partial decentralization and digital fragmentation shape innovation outcomes in the context of higher education in developing countries.

Practically, it provides actionable insights for leaders to rethink governance, HR, and coordination frameworks for digital transformation.

UIN SUSKA Riau has made significant strides in adapting its academic and administrative services in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Leadership has initiated various innovations, and staff have shown a general willingness to adapt. However, challenges remain in the form of fragmented systems, uneven HR development, a rigid organizational culture, and underutilized partnerships.

To move forward, the university must:

1. Develop a centralized digital transformation roadmap.
2. Improve inter-unit coordination and avoid redundant system development.
3. Institutionalize HR training with clear metrics and equitable access.
4. Foster a culture of innovation by aligning policy, incentives, and leadership behavior.
5. Establish strategic partnerships that emphasize long-term learning and capacity building.

This study underscores the importance of integrated, systemic approaches to educational service innovation, especially within public Islamic universities facing unique structural and cultural contexts.

### **Discussion**

The findings of this study provide critical insights into how UIN SUSKA Riau, a public Islamic university in Indonesia, responded to the challenges of academic service delivery during the COVID-19 pandemic through institutional innovation and digital transformation. This discussion contextualizes those findings within existing theoretical frameworks and empirical studies to highlight key implications for leadership, human resource development, organizational culture, and governance in higher education.

#### **Leadership as a Catalyst for Innovation**

The study confirms that effective leadership plays a central role in initiating and sustaining innovation in higher education institutions (León Velarde et al., 2021). At UIN SUSKA Riau, senior administrators demonstrated strategic intent by launching various digital initiatives—such as e-Kinerja and i-Management systems—to ensure the continuity of educational and administrative services. This aligns with the argument by Jibril et al. (2018) that leadership must not only articulate a vision but also operationalize innovation through technology and institutional change.

However, while leadership exhibited political will and a commitment to innovation, the absence of centralized coordination mechanisms weakened the impact of these initiatives. This reflects Brannan et al.'s (2020) notion that without coherent governance structures, innovation tends to remain fragmented and confined to specific units, leading to inefficiencies and duplication. Thus, visionary leadership must be complemented by institution-wide integration strategies.

#### **Uneven Human Resource Development**

The study also underscores the unevenness in human resource development (HRD), where some faculty and administrative units received adequate training while others were left behind. Handoko's framework (as cited in Mulyapradana et al., 2021) differentiates between coaching, which builds technical skills, and development, which enhances broader competencies and leadership potential. Both dimensions are critical for sustainable digital transformation.

At UIN SUSKA Riau, coaching programs such as training on Google Scholar ID and i-Management usage helped some staff adapt to new systems. However, the lack of systematic evaluation, unequal access, and unclear job descriptions limited the overall effectiveness of these programs. This finding supports Jeaheng et al. (2020), who emphasized that HRD initiatives must be inclusive, needs-based, and aligned with institutional goals to be impactful.

## Organizational Culture and Innovation Readiness

Organizational culture emerged as both a facilitator and a barrier to innovation. While informal collaboration and staff commitment were evident, the rigid bureaucratic structure and lack of a shared innovation mindset impeded agility. Sutrisno (2010) defines organizational culture as a set of shared values that shape behavior and performance. However, as noted by Stamolampros et al. (2019), when innovation is not embedded into the cultural fabric of an institution, change becomes superficial and unsustainable.

The findings reveal that although some leaders encouraged openness and creativity, a top-down, approval-heavy environment remained dominant, limiting initiative-taking at lower levels. Moreover, the disconnect between job roles and actual work created overlapping responsibilities and inefficiencies. This echoes Maulidiyah's (2020) argument that a strong innovation culture requires clarity of roles, empowerment, and continuous communication.

## Teamwork and Operational Collaboration

The research also highlights the importance of teamwork in sustaining academic operations during crisis. According to West (2014), effective teams are characterized by trust, shared goals, and interdependence. At UIN SUSKA Riau, teamwork enabled faculties to jointly manage seminars, coordinate exam schedules, and resolve technical challenges.

However, informants reported gaps in staffing and technological infrastructure, which limited the potential of collaboration. The findings indicate that while interpersonal trust and cooperation existed, structural support—such as centralized databases and collaborative digital tools—was lacking. This reinforces the view of Maxwell (as cited in Li et al., 2021) that trust must be supported by systems and resources to translate into tangible performance improvements.

## Governance Innovation and Service Delivery

From a governance perspective, UIN SUSKA Riau has made strides in service innovation—shifting to online systems and integrating digital tools in academic processes. Yet, the innovations remain largely incremental and uncoordinated, mirroring Wallezky et al.'s (2022) concern that public sector innovation often lacks systemic integration and strategic foresight.

Theoretical contributions from Alberti and Bartucci (as cited in Basuki et al., 2022) suggest that effective public sector innovation depends on four pillars: leadership, HRD, organizational culture, and collaboration. The present study supports this model but shows that the interdependence of these factors is what ultimately determines success. Fragmentation in any one area—be it leadership alignment, HR skills, cultural support, or governance structure—can compromise the entire innovation effort.

Furthermore, the lack of centralized standards for educational service delivery—such as thesis supervision, assessment methods, or learning platforms—led to variability in student experience across faculties. This finding resonates with Tilaar's (as cited in Soltani et al., 2018) assertion that national education governance must be vision-driven, strategy-based, and supported by adaptive institutions.

## 4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that while UIN SUSKA Riau has demonstrated significant efforts to innovate academic and administrative services during the COVID-19 pandemic—particularly through digital platforms and decentralized initiatives—its progress remains constrained by fragmented leadership coordination, uneven human resource development, limited technological infrastructure, and the absence of a unified institutional strategy. Leadership commitment was evident, but without integrated systems and cross-unit collaboration, innovations were largely siloed and inconsistently implemented across faculties. Although teamwork and informal collaboration were strengths,

structural gaps in staffing and data integration hindered service efficiency. The university's organizational culture, while supportive in parts, lacked the systemic readiness to embed continuous innovation. These findings contribute to the discourse on digital transformation in higher education, especially in Islamic public universities within developing contexts. However, the study is limited by its focus on a single institution and reliance on qualitative data from selected informants, which may not fully capture the broader institutional dynamics or experiences of all stakeholders. Future research should involve comparative case studies and mixed-method approaches to better generalize findings and assess long-term impacts of innovation policies.

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