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Recontextualisation of religious moderation teaching for strengthening the identity of Islam Nusantara: lessons learned from faculty in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

The teaching of religious moderation for strengthening Islam Nusantara has become a central programme in Indonesia. While most research has focused on its implementation, the criteria for recontextualisation have yet to be fully examined. This qualitative study aims to explore how faculty members in Indonesia define and recontextualise the religious moderation programme. We involved eight faculty members from two universities that prioritise the strengthening of Islam Nusantara, using focus groups as the method of data collection. The analysis draws on the five recontextualisation criteria proposed by Pollefeyt & Bouwens. The study reveals that all faculty members have a clear definition of Islam Nusantara and its connection to religious moderation, resulting in positive expectations for the implementation of this learning programme. It highlights the faculty's application of constructive teaching methods, fulfilling the four of the criteria: the reconstructive hermeneutics, didactic approach, pluralistic openness and interactive pragmatism. Furthermore, this recontextualisation of constructivism is applied by emphasising knowledge resources and open discussions among students, fostering a conducive classroom environment. However, the faculty face challenges in meeting the final criterion – transformative orientation – due to contextual factors such as limited time and large class sizes.

KEYWORDS

Constructive learning; strengthening Islam Nusantara; religious moderation education; five recontextualisation criteria

Introduction

In the current context, culture exhibits a highly dynamic process of pluralisation (Berry 2015). This situation necessitates precise interpretation in understanding the interaction between traditions and religion and their influence on student behaviour. An integrative and comprehensive approach is required to illustrate how cultural forms, religious understanding patterns, student changes and technological developments contribute to students' religious interpretations (Ristiniemi 2022). Concurrently, efforts have been made to recontextualise and counter certain Islamic terms, one example being the commodification of religious understanding (Shi and Pande 2022). This has the

potential to promote a narrow and rigid mindset among students when interpreting religious texts (Hanafi et al. 2022), limiting opportunities for re-examining religious concepts in line with the current context.

In such a scenario, students may adhere strictly to their beliefs (de bruin-Wassinkmaat et al. 2019), often focusing on their own communities where rigid (textualist) beliefs, practices and values prevail, alongside efforts to remain separate from broader society (Visser-Vogel et al. 2012, 2015). These strict beliefs and practices may reduce the scope for students to explore and commit to their religious identity independently (Armet 2009; Hemming 2016). In this context, Islamic Religious Education (IRE) needs to address this issue if it aims to play a crucial role in shaping students' religious identity. It is proposed that contextual influences are stronger on students who grow up in strict religious environments. Furthermore, IRE is expected to develop new competencies, such as engaging students in critical reflection and dialogue to promote open-mindedness (Viinikka, Ubani, and Lipiäinen 2022).

IRE can be reinforced by involving lecturers and students in the process of recontextualisation. In this study, 'recontextualisation' refers to the effort to reinterpret whether the pedagogical process of religious moderation in higher education aligns with the contemporary realities of Indonesia. This includes evaluating how lecturers' pedagogical frameworks reflect pluralistic values and support the development of a moderate Islamic identity among students. In this study, the term 'context' also 2022 Recontextualisation is not a blueprint process and cannot automatically foster spiritual autonomy in students. The success of this process depends on the commitment and skills of lecturers in engaging with it. In such an IRE approach, lecturers act as both 'moderators' and 'specialists' (Pollefeyt and Bouwens 2014), facilitating dialogue among students and sharing perspectives from various viewpoints, while also serving as specialists with deep knowledge of religious traditions and understandings. In the literature on contextual influences in religiosity, lecturers are also referred to as 'authority figures' (Zittoun 2013), 'influential adults' (Vaclavik, Velazquez, and Carballo 2020), and 'significant role models' (Marcia and Archer 1993). In this context, lecturers are also termed 'sources' (Visser-Vogel et al. 2015), as they play a role in the development of religious identity. The term 'contextual factors' refers to influences beyond individual control, such as the teaching and learning provided. The research focuses on three areas: practice, disposition and the conditions of IRE teaching and learning, based on five criteria for recontextualisation as proposed by Pollefeyt and Bouwens (2014).

Research focusing on 'sources' and 'contextual factors' in the development of students' religious identity remains limited, and there is still minimal academic understanding of 'how beliefs and practices within specific religious contexts contribute to the development of a healthy religious identity' (Roehlkepartain, Benson, and Scales 2011). Therefore, further research is required on the role of lecturers as 'sources' and the contextual role in facilitating students' religious identity development. Specifically, the question arises: how can IRE support lecturers as 'sources' to implement the recontextualisation approach and facilitate religious moderation in students? This study seeks to explore a project aimed at strengthening the Islamic identity of students in higher education and evaluating lecturers' understanding of IRE recontextualisation in Indonesia. Moreover, the research aims to identify the optimal conditions and learning processes for IRE that can lead to professional development for lecturers regarding recontextualisation approaches in IRE. The novelty of this study also includes revising how lecturers perceive their roles in relation to both teaching and students.

This study conceptualises the strengthening of Nusantara Islamic identity through the Eriksonian-Marcian identity theory, applied to religion as an identity domain (Visser-Vogel et al. 2012), and sees religious identity development as 'inherently social' (Loveland 2016). Consequently, this study demonstrates that religious identity development is shaped and influenced by context (Cohen-Malayev, Schachter, and Rich 2014; de bruin-Wassinkmaat et al. 2019; Fisherman 2011; Hemming and Madge 2012; Visser-Vogel et al. 2015). In this study, 'Islamic identity' encompasses the fundamental characteristics inherent in being a Muslim, including the relationship with Allah (divine connection)

and the global Muslim community (interpersonal connections). Essentially, ‘Islamic identity’ encompasses the integrative nature of Islam that permeates all aspects of Muslim life, both personal and social (Gaya and Ahmad 2024). This identity is not static but evolves dynamically, shaped by various factors such as individual religious teachings, local cultural values, social interactions and life experiences. In the Indonesian context, Islamic identity manifests in a unique expression where Islamic principles are universally applied while accommodating local cultural traditions, which is known as ‘Islam Nusantara’.

‘Islam Nusantara’ is also known as the traditionalist Islamic orientation that was subsequently generalised as ‘Islam Indonesia’ by Nahdlatul Ulama (NU). Islam Nusantara was formed through the fusion of Islam with various Javanese customary laws and mystical practices, as well as Buddhism and Hinduism (Weintraub 2011). Subsequently, it was influenced by Arab and Middle Eastern culture through novel ideas of Javanese individuals who performed the hajj and studied Islam abroad (Kruithof 2014). Although NU has commenced promoting Islam Nusantara as ‘moderate Islam’ to counter Islamic ‘radicalism’, the term ‘Islam Nusantara’ has been defined by NU to commend the virtues of Islamisation that are attuned to the culture prevalent in Java and to reject all forms of Arabized Islam (Schmidt 2021).

Method

Research design

This research is a multiple case study (Halkias et al. 2022), conducted at two public universities with a focus on strengthening Islam Nusantara through religious moderation programmes. The multiple case study approach was employed to identify the perceptions of lecturers regarding the programme for strengthening Islam Nusantara. Focus group discussions were held, and a set of guiding questions was developed based on five recontextualisation criteria, as outlined by Pollefeyt and Bouwens (2014). The questions posed during the focus groups aimed to closely examine the success of implementing transformative religious moderation learning in meeting the recontextualisation criteria and how this was perceived by the lecturers. The focus group guide was designed by the principal researcher and reviewed by the other team members. Prior to its implementation, a pilot focus group was conducted to assess the appropriateness of the questions. Examples of key questions asked are presented in Table 1.

Subject selection

The sampling technique employed was purposive sampling. The participants were lecturers involved in the religious moderation programme for strengthening Islam Nusantara, specifically those teaching Islamic Religious Education and Civic Education. The sample size was determined based on the recommendations of Braun and Clarke (2021) and Sim et al. (2018), which suggest careful consideration and pre-determination of sample size prior to the study in order to yield sufficient data to

Table 1. Criteria and questions proposed during FGD.

No	Criteria	Items
1	Reconstructive Hermeneutics	What is your understanding of Islam Nusantara?
2	Interactive Pragmatism	How do you ensure that the teachings of religious moderation can be applied in real-life situations and daily student interactions?
3	Pluralistic Openness	Are there activities or discussions designed to encourage students to be more open-minded towards differences?
4	Didactic Approach	Is there a specific curriculum or sequence of materials used to achieve these goals?
5	Transformative Orientation	How does religious moderation education in higher education inspire positive changes in student behaviour and values regarding the identity of Islam Nusantara?

answer the research questions. At the two targeted universities, the total number of lecturers involved in strengthening Islam Nusantara through the teaching of religious moderation was counted. This included two coordinators and 14 teaching staff, bringing the total sample size to 16 participants for the focus groups.

All lecturers, both coordinators and teaching staff, received an information sheet via email to seek their consent to participate. In the email, the lecturers were invited to contact the principal researcher directly if they were willing to take part in the study. Of the 16 lecturers, eight agreed to participate, while the remaining eight declined due to heavy workloads. Thus, the participants comprised two coordinators (one male and one female), both professors, along with two senior lecturers, two lecturers and two assistant lecturers. Their teaching experience ranged from 5 to 20 years. The focus groups were conducted across two universities, comprising a total of four faculty members in each group, as part of a unified integrated dataset. Each focus group session lasted approximately 60 minutes and was conducted in September 2024.

Setting

This research was conducted in accordance with the qualitative research standards outlined by the American Psychological Association (Levitt et al. 2018). The study was undertaken following ethical approval from the research committee of Universitas Negeri Malang (Contract Number: 4.4.761/UN32.14.1/LT/2024). All participants were provided with a list of questions at least 1-day prior to the focus group sessions to ensure they were aware of the topics to be discussed. The principal researcher also ensured that all participants present at the focus group had provided written informed consent, in addition to verbal consent given before the sessions commenced. At the beginning of each focus group, we explained the purpose of the research, the format of the focus group discussions, and confidentiality measures. Only the principal researcher, one research team member, and the participants were present during the focus group sessions, which were conducted in a comfortable staff office setting.

Researcher positionality

This study adopts an emic and etic perspective in its analysis of how the concept of Islam Nusantara is recontextualised in IRE in higher education. The first author, a professor of Islamic Studies and a long-standing participant in the discourse of religious moderation, particularly in higher education and Islamic boarding school settings, approached this study with an emic orientation. The researcher's view of Islam Nusantara as a legitimate theological and pedagogical framework rooted in pluralistic and moderate values was shaped by the author's lived experience as an NU-affiliated educator. However, the research team engaged in ongoing reflexive dialogue throughout the analysis process to counteract potential normative bias. This included the integration of ethical insights and critical perspectives that ensured the coding process remained open to multiple interpretations of Islam Nusantara and religious moderation, rather than being tied to a single insider understanding. This methodological positioning allowed the study to honour both the internal significance of Islam Nusantara for its adherents and its broader pedagogical implications in the context of Indonesian higher education.

Data collection and analysis

Data collection employed a qualitative approach in the form of focus groups. During these focus group discussions, lecturers reflected on the five criteria of recontextualisation. They shared their experiences in applying active teaching strategies in the religious moderation classes, based on these five criteria, and discussed what they observed in student learning. In other words, this study adopts an experiential epistemological stance (Byrne 2022). All reflections provided by the lecturers

were video recorded. Meanwhile, a researcher assisted by transcribing the discussions verbatim in Microsoft Word. One of the research team members kept field notes, and both the field notes and transcripts were stored on the principal researcher's laptop, with access restricted to the research team.

Data analysis was conducted using content analysis techniques (Bengtsson 2016). In this study, we adopted a constructivist epistemology, as the meaningfulness of themes was considered more important than the emergence of new themes (Byrne 2022). The research team collaboratively analysed the lecturers' reflections through the lens of recontextualisation as conceptualised by Pollefeyt and Bouwens (2014). The content analysis was performed at a semantic level, focusing on manifest content, while a five priori codes were deductively created and classified according to the five criteria of recontextualisation, as outlined by Pollefeyt and Bouwens (2014), which are reconstructive hermeneutics, interactive pragmatism, pluralistic openness, didactic approach and transformative orientation. Thus, the theoretical approach employed was deductive, with data coded into a pre-existing coding framework. The recontextualisation framework served as a guide for coding, allowing for the inclusion of new criteria and aspects of recontextualisation in the construction of the coding scheme. These criteria were introduced as a theoretical perspective during professional dialogue sessions in the coding process.

Results and discussion

This discussion begins with an exploration of how effectively the faculty define and understand the concept of Islam Nusantara. This perception encompasses various aspects, including opinions and the anticipated benefits of strengthening the identity of Islam Nusantara. We consider this section essential, as it relates to how faculty members, particularly those teaching character development, are both willing and able to implement the religious moderation programme as part of curriculum reform (Biesta, Priestley, and Robinson 2015). Furthermore, research conducted by Iwakuni (2017) indicates that educators' initial perceptions are a prerequisite for the effective implementation of learning programmes.

The recontextualisation of the recontextualisation of the classroom through the religious moderation programme in universities has produced unique outcomes. Contrary to the criteria of hermeneutic reconstruction, where the faculty demonstrated a strong ability to define and hold positive perceptions of Islam Nusantara, the implementation of religious moderation met three of the subsequent criteria but fell short in the final one. Within the universities, the faculty's primary focus was on preparing and delivering teaching (meeting the criteria of didactic approach, pluralistic openness and interactive pragmatism). However, many faculty members acknowledged the challenges posed by this focus, particularly regarding the transformative orientation, which remains difficult to achieve due to various obstacles. In other words, the faculty successfully demonstrated four out of the five recontextualisation criteria.

Given these findings, it seems reasonable to assert that the implementation of religious moderation in universities is of high quality. However, this conclusion requires further reflection, as it may not always hold true. Despite the faculty's clear definitions and relevant teaching practices, the overall quality of instruction could be significantly hindered if the criterion related to measuring success is inadequate. For instance, one coordinator defined Islam Nusantara primarily in terms of fiqh (hermeneutic reconstruction), while teaching focused on active learning (didactic approach) and encouraged discussions among students from diverse backgrounds (pluralistic openness and interactive pragmatism). Yet, the challenge of measuring success, particularly in terms of demonstrating change (transformative orientation), impairs the programme's quality. In relation to the didactic approach, the faculty also recognised that the content lacked relevance and practical translation into real-life community contexts. Consequently, the content was revised to better align with local

contexts. The following section will delve deeper into how the faculty recontextualise Islam Nusantara within the teaching of religious moderation.

Reconstructive hermeneutics: teachers' definitions and perceptions of Islam Nusantara

The faculty define Islam Nusantara as a term that describes the Indonesian context without altering core tenets of faith ('aqidah) and religious practices ('ibadah). Their definitions are summarised as follows:

'Islam Nusantara is merely a term. Understanding it as an identity is akin to Fiqh Nusantara, which is adapted to the Indonesian context. There is a difference between Indonesia and the fiqh in several other countries, particularly Saudi Arabia (the birthplace of Islam). Nusantara is simply a label. It does not change the tenets of faith or religious practices; only conduct (akhlak) is adjusted to the context. What is altered is merely complementary. We are obliged to obey the Prophet as well as the leaders (ulil amri). One characteristic of Islam Nusantara is religious nationalism'. — Coordinator 1.

The faculty also define Islam Nusantara as a teaching closely linked with religious moderation. For example, as stated by one senior lecturer: 'Islam Nusantara refers to the form of Islam that has developed in the Nusantara region, integrating local culture and a moderate approach'. This is supported by another senior lecturer: 'This concept seeks to harmonise Islamic teachings with local values, promoting tolerance and diversity, ultimately leading to moderate attitudes and behaviours'. They believe that Islam Nusantara represents progressive Islam and that a 'good' Islam is one characterised by the culture of its respective region.

All faculty members expressed a positive attitude towards strengthening Islam Nusantara for several reasons. Firstly, they believe it enables students to learn to live harmoniously with others, whether of different or the same faith, benefiting society as a whole. As one lecturer noted: 'Linking the teachings of Islam Nusantara with the principles of religious moderation brings many advantages, primarily that students gain an accurate perspective on diversity and tolerance'. Secondly, the faculty hopes that students will not only gain knowledge but also be well-prepared for real-life societal challenges. One lecturer remarked: "The strengthening of Islam Nusantara is closely connected to an interactive and contextual approach, linking the material to students' local experiences and real-world situations". Thirdly, the faculty observed that Islam Nusantara and religious moderation foster a better atmosphere among students from different backgrounds. As Coordinator 2 commented: 'When students get to know each other, they create a harmonious environment, which certainly boosts enthusiasm and motivation, ultimately enhancing behavioural learning outcomes'. These explanations align with the views expressed by (Schmidt 2021), who argued that the values embedded within the framework of Islam Nusantara, such as tolerance and open-mindedness, can help cultivate individuals who are 'good' and 'moderate', thereby counteracting 'bad' or 'radical' behaviours that claim to be in the name of religion.

Constructivism: didactic approach and pluralistic openness

The core concept of constructivism introduced by the faculty in the teaching of religious moderation is that knowledge and learning emerge from social interaction. This idea is deeply embedded in the criteria of a didactic approach and pluralistic openness. Knowledge is understood as a collection of insights stemming from students' cultural communities and living environments, which can serve as an essential starting point for further learning. The students already possess considerable knowledge, so the faculty's role is mainly to guide and act as facilitators.

Regarding the concept of learning as a social activity, this often takes the form of group work. At all universities, religious moderation is rarely taught without the formation of student groups. Faculty even equate religious moderation with heterogeneous group work. To make the learning process more contextual and to build on the students' prior knowledge, the faculty aim to fulfil the criterion of interactive pragmatism by introducing community projects and fieldwork. As Senior

Lecturer 2 explained, 'Students are quite knowledgeable about religious moderation, so we need to ensure that their knowledge is applied through field projects that encourage the practical application of teachings in real-life contexts'.

Another social learning approach is discussion, where questions raised by students allow them to acquire new knowledge and relate it to their existing understanding. Assistant Lecturer 1 commented, 'Panel discussions, debates, case discussions and group activities exploring various perspectives'. This approach is common and found in almost all forms of higher education learning. More specifically, the interactions in classroom discussions and field projects are not only conducive and promising but also demonstrate that these tasks target high cognitive levels (evaluation and creation), further reinforcing the students' prior knowledge. As Coordinator 1 noted, 'I don't just ask them to form groups and answer questions. I usually assign field projects where students engage directly with the community, and I require a full report of their findings'. Senior Lecturer 1 further elaborated, 'We use local case studies, historical examples, and social contexts relevant to the students' identities'.

Classroom dynamics: interactive pragmatism

Classroom relationships in the strengthening of Islam Nusantara through the teaching of religious moderation align with the faculty's definition of classroom dynamics. Social activities that emphasise intensive interaction with individuals from both the same and different religious backgrounds create an open and respectful atmosphere. In this socially-oriented learning, peer feedback is often key to fostering positive classroom relationships. Students frequently ask questions, respond, and provide feedback to one another and even to their lecturers. Senior Lecturer 2 explained, 'I often let them discuss and provide feedback to each other first. If something is missing or incorrect, I then offer the appropriate response or explanation'. Assistant Lecturer 1 added, 'I try to position myself as their learning partner. I give them plenty of time to discuss, and I always ask if they have any responses to the explanations I provide'.

Lortie (2002) noted that students tend to mimic the behaviour of faculty, particularly what they experience directly from their lecturers. In other words, such practices provide students with a direct example of openness to opinions.

Despite students having a solid knowledge base, the faculty also recognises their responsibility to deliver enriching content. However, it is important to note that the available content often lacks relevance to the strengthening of Islam Nusantara's identity. Senior Lecturer 2 explained, 'Content with low relevance is concerning; it can become a threat because group learning loses its effectiveness'. This aligns with Kirschner, Paas, and Kirschner (2011), who argue that low-complexity content undermines the benefits of group learning. To address this, the faculty have worked to create a more relevant curriculum, with one lecturer stating, 'We continuously strive to ensure that the syllabus we use emphasises the integration of religious teachings with local cultural contexts. This is important because students tend to be more engaged and motivated when the material is relevant to their context and is applied in a contextual manner'.

Another issue that threatens the effectiveness of group work is group size. Character development courses often have large class sizes, resulting in groups with many students. Assistant Lecturer 2 observed, 'We often face the challenge of large class sizes and large groups with limited resources. This makes it difficult for students to participate effectively'.

Challenges: transformative orientation

Faculty members teaching character development also face challenges in the implementation of the Islam Nusantara programme. They are not only expected to emphasise openness and mutual respect but also to evaluate the students' progress in achieving these goals. Consequently, it is unsurprising that faculty encounter difficulties in designing comprehensive and effective evaluations. Coordinator

1 commented, 'We struggle with the transformative orientation aspect. It is difficult to measure exactly what changes we observe in the students; we can only observe active participation in social activities and a more open attitude towards differences'.

Another challenge is that many students already possess moderate views and have rarely been exposed to radicalism. Students at these universities tend to have rich experiences living in multi-cultural environments. Senior Lecturer 1 noted, 'Our students are already quite moderate, so if I'm supposed to evaluate the shift from being non-moderate to moderate, that is a difficult task'.

Some faculty members also admitted to lacking expertise in developing evaluation instruments, which, along with the difficulty students have in self-reporting their progress, negatively impacts the learning process. For example, as Senior Lecturer 2 explained, 'Some of my faculty colleagues, including myself, only take note of students who seem to display less tolerant attitudes, but it's not easy for me to provide a detailed evaluation'.

When explicitly asked about other challenges, several lecturers mentioned large class sizes and limited time. 'The students taking this course are an entire cohort, sometimes numbering in the thousands. It's difficult for us to evaluate so many students in a short period of time', said Senior Lecturer 1. Nearly all faculty members acknowledged that implementing the strengthening of Islam Nusantara in a way that meets all five recontextualisation criteria is time-consuming, with transformative orientation being the most significant challenge.

Conclusion, implication, and limitation

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that lecturers interpret the identity of Nusantara Islam in accordance with Indonesia's pluralistic social structure. Through a reconstructive hermeneutic process, they critically engage with Islamic traditions and narratives, aligning them with the values of tolerance, nationalism, and religious coexistence – thereby strengthening the religious moderation program. Additionally, lecturers recognise the significance of students' socio-cultural knowledge and backgrounds as valuable learning resources. Lecturers select and position themselves as facilitators who foster shared understanding with students through open dialogue, contextual reflection, and experiential exploration. This approach is based on interactive pragmatism. Furthermore, the faculty focus predominantly on didactic approach and pluralistic openness by promoting a socially interactive and student-centred learning environment that encompasses diverse backgrounds. This fosters a dialogic, respectful, and engaging classroom climate.

Despite the faculty's limitations in meeting all recontextualisation criteria, this study provides a framework for faculty to act hierarchically in implementing inclusive education for students from different religious backgrounds. As this research highlights, it is crucial for faculty to have a clear and positive definition and expectations of the learning process from the outset, ensuring a proper teaching vision. Moreover, achieving perfect learning that fulfils all criteria is highly unlikely, even in well-resourced universities. Internal evaluation of daily teaching practices, along with collaboration with students, tends to be overlooked and underappreciated (Hult and Edström 2016). The faculty acknowledge that fulfilling all five recontextualisation criteria is quite challenging, particularly the transformative orientation, which has not been fully realised due to limited capacity, minimal student response, time constraints and large student numbers. Therefore, it is vital for universities to provide training on evaluation techniques and establish effective and efficient evaluation systems to assist faculty in assessing changes in student knowledge, attitudes and behaviours.

We note that sample size considerations and selection techniques have hindered efforts to generalise the findings of this study. As such, it is important to reflect on certain limitations and future research directions. First, this study is similar to that conducted by van de Kuilen et al. (2022), but it refers to the five recontextualisation criteria proposed by Pollefeyt and Bouwens (2014) to understand how faculty members in Indonesia implement religious moderation learning to strengthen Islam Nusantara. While this understanding is relevant for stakeholders in shaping future policy, further research is needed to explore how faculty

dynamics fulfil all criteria and how different parties interpret this programme. Secondly, this study focuses on revealing faculty perspectives, particularly regarding knowledge construction based on social activities. These findings provide an additional dimension to the debate on evaluation, and it is worth exploring further how the fulfilment of this fifth criterion can be achieved.

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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