

From Learners to Managers: The Story of UNIDA Gontor Students in Managing Business Units

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ABSTRACT

Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor (Gontor) is a *waqf*-based educational institution that successfully integrates *pesantren* values with business management practices to form a generation of independent, characterised, and competent *santri*. Students not only gain real experience in operational management, finance, and marketing through the management of more than 30 business units, but also equip themselves with Islamic values such as honesty, responsibility, and sustainability. This experiential learning model allows students to develop critical thinking, leadership, and problem-solving skills while maintaining commitment to sharia principles. In addition to supporting the financial independence of *pesantren*, this model also serves as an inspiration for the development of sharia-based economies in other Islamic educational environments. Thus, Gontor's integrative system is able to produce graduates who not only excel academically but are also ready to contribute to society as professionals and ethical entrepreneurs.

Keyword: Gontor, *Pesantren* Values, Entrepreneurship

GONTOR AS A WAQF-BASED ORGANISATION

Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor East Java, Indonesia, also known as Gontor, in 1926. It operates as a *pesantren* that combines religious education with modern disciplines. This approach aims to produce graduates who are academically proficient, ethically grounded, and committed to serving society. The institution's commitment to educational excellence and ethical behaviour reflects its alignment with the principles of *waqf*, in which the pursuit of knowledge and the welfare of society are central tenets. As a *waqf*-based organisation, Gontor emphasises the importance of philanthropy and community welfare. Gontor operates with a mission to educate a generation of *santri* who will contribute positively to society, embodying the values of compassion, justice, and ethical leadership.

Gontor's existence as a *waqf*-based organisation is a tangible manifestation of its dedication to philanthropic values and community welfare. In Islam, *waqf* is defined as the management of assets for sustainable benevolent purposes. This principle is the main foundation for all activities and management in Gontor. Since its formal handover by Trimurti in 1958, Gontor became the first *waqf pesantren* in Indonesia to abandon the pattern of private and family ownership, making it the property of the Muslim community as a whole. The Waqf Board of

Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor (known as YPPWPM) professionally manages its *waqf* assets, which include land, buildings, and productive businesses.

Rooted in the principles of *waqf*, Gontor's educational philosophy not only provides academic instruction but also fosters leadership, dedication, and social responsibility in its students. The educational programs, designed with a focus on character development, reflect these values. Gontor's integrated education produces graduates who not only possess intellectual competence but also exhibit a dedication to contributing to society. We instruct the students to use scientific inquiry to enhance the quality of human life, and to ground their leadership in ethical principles and a concern for others' well-being.

As a *waqf*-based organization, Gontor places significant emphasis on the importance of economic independence as a means to ensure the long-term sustainability of educational and social service initiatives. The productive management of *waqf* assets, including agriculture, business, and other services, achieves this objective. We allocate the revenue from these endeavours to the advancement of education, the provision of scholarships, and the benefit of the neighbouring community. In this way, Gontor serves not only as an educational institution but also as a tangible model of how *waqf* can be an instrument of sustainable development. Gontor effectively integrates Islamic values with the challenges of modernity.

GONTOR AND ITS BUSINESS UNITS

Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor, an Islamic educational institution, has effectively integrated its educational vision with the objective of independent economic development. This initiative commenced in 1970 with the establishment of business units designed to address the needs of the *pesantren*, as well as a facility for entrepreneurial training from its humble beginnings, Gontor has grown to manage over 30 business units. These business units serve not only the internal needs of the boarding school but also make a significant economic contribution to the surrounding area. By adopting a strategy of self-reliance, Gontor is able to meet its operational needs without external assistance, thereby exemplifying the potential for the success of Islamic educational institutions.

Professional management oversees each business unit, involving students and teachers in daily operations. This approach provides participants with practical experience, equipping them with an understanding of essential business management principles, including planning, marketing, and financial management. Moreover, the administration of business units at Gontor offers an avenue for cultivating an understanding of Islamic values, such as honesty, responsibility, and diligence. The board rigorously supervises the business management system, which places considerable emphasis on the principles of transparency and accountability.

From a strategic standpoint, the establishment of this business entity serves to reinforce the role of the *pesantren* as a nexus for religious, educational, social, cultural, and economic advancement. The attainment of economic autonomy enables Gontor to persist in the development of its infrastructure, including the construction of educational facilities and dormitories for students. This has inspired other *pesantren* in Indonesia to develop a sharia-based economic model that not only supports the internal needs of the institution but also has a positive impact on the surrounding community.

Furthermore, the involvement of *santri* and students in the management of business units not only enhances their technical abilities but also fosters the development of robust character traits. The teachers trained the *santri* in the significance of work ethics, discipline, and the

capacity to collaborate effectively in a team setting. The students' participation in a variety of roles, including staff and business unit managers, provides them with invaluable experience in the practical aspects of business management. Such experience constitutes a valuable asset for students upon graduation, whether they are entering the workforce or even establishing their own business. A structured training system and qualified mentors support this success.

One of the primary strengths of the business unit system at Gontor is its integration of Islamic values into all aspects of business practice. The principle of honesty serves as the cornerstone of all transactions, whether with customers or business partners. Community empowerment initiatives, which include entrepreneurship training for local residents and the provision of products at affordable prices, also foster social responsibility.

In practice, the implementation of this system encounters a number of challenges, including competition with external business actors and the limited resources available. However, Gontor has been able to surmount these challenges through the implementation of innovative strategies and strategic collaborations, including the establishment of partnerships with Islamic financial institutions and investors. This approach enables the management of business units to maintain competitiveness and sustainability. Furthermore, transparent and accountable financial management guarantees the appropriate allocation of business proceeds towards the development of educational facilities, the enhancement of teacher welfare, and the improvement of *pesantren* services quality.

STUDENTS EMPOWERMENT IN GONTOR

One of the features of the education system at Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor is the empowerment of the *santri*. *Santri* or students not only act as learners in the classroom but are also actively involved in various economic activities of the *pesantren*. By managing business units such as student cooperatives, equipment stores, laundries, and daily necessities stores, students gain practical experience in managing a business. Students learn Islamic entrepreneurial values such as honesty, responsibility, and cooperation through these activities. This approach not only fulfils the internal needs of the *pesantren* but also trains students to be independent and competent in facing the challenges of the working world in the future.

The Pondok Modern Student Organisation (OPPM) selects students to assume the role of business unit manager for a one-year term. Teachers directly mentor the students to ensure the success of the business operations. This process encompasses the systematic planning, implementation, supervision, and evaluation of the aforementioned activities. Direct involvement in business management facilitates the development of leadership skills and enhances the capacity for effective managerial practice. Moreover, this undertaking fosters a profound sense of responsibility, as the students assist in maintaining the financial stability of the boarding school, which in turn supports academic endeavours and the collective well-being of its members.

Both the students and the *pesantren* itself benefit from this empowerment. For the *santri*, they gain practical experience that strengthens their readiness for entrepreneurship or work in the formal sector after graduation. Meanwhile, the *pesantren* gains financial independence, enabling operations to function independently of external donations. In addition, the involvement of students in the management of business units also strengthens the values of solidarity and collaboration, which are important foundations in social life. Through this empowerment model, Gontor has succeeded in producing a generation that is not only intellectually capable but also has a high work ethic and a personality with integrity.

LEARNING BY DOING

In an effort to build the character and skills of students, Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor adopts a comprehensive and practice-orientated approach. The involvement of *santri* in the management of business units is designed to give them direct experience in the business world, covering various important aspects such as operational management, finance, marketing, and customer service. This approach not only equips students with theoretical knowledge but also involves them in daily business dynamics. By facing real challenges, such as organizing logistics, resolving team disputes, and responding to consumer needs, students are invited to understand the complexities of the workplace and cultivate problem-solving skills firsthand.

This process fosters a unique experiential learning environment, encouraging each student to actively participate in the operation of the business unit. Through this program, they not only learn how to design marketing strategies or manage budgets but also how to manage work pressure and make strategic decisions that have a direct impact on the success of the business unit. The challenges faced during this process help them hone their analytical skills, communication skills, and leadership abilities. Such experiences are difficult to obtain through conventional classroom teaching methods alone, making this program one of Gontor's flagship educational innovations.

More than just teaching technical skills, this approach is also an effective means of instilling Islamic moral and ethical values in students. The teachers instil in them the values of hard work, fairness, and responsibility in all their activities. In managing the business unit, students are directed to always uphold Islamic principles, such as honesty, transparency, and sustainability. Students apply these principles not only in internal business relationships but also in their interactions with business partners and the surrounding community. Thus, every economic activity in Gontor has a spiritual dimension that strengthens the character of students as individuals with high integrity.

Gontor also provides a holistic learning experience, encompassing intellectual, emotional, and spiritual aspects. This process allows students to build skills organically while staying connected to the Islamic values that form the foundation of their education. Not only do we encourage students to become competent economic actors, but also to become leaders capable of providing ethical solutions to every challenge they encounter. This makes learning at Gontor more meaningful as students directly see the impact of their efforts on the welfare of the hut and the surrounding community.

Through this approach, Gontor not only produces skilled and characterized individuals but also strengthens its role as an inspiring model for Islamic entrepreneurship education. By providing opportunities for students to be actively involved in business management, the *pesantren* proves that the integration of religious education and entrepreneurship can produce graduates who are not only ready to compete in the world of work but also able to become agents of change in society. This approach is a clear example of how educational institutions can combine character building, skill mastery, and the cultivation of Islamic values in a harmonious and sustainable system.

INTERNALISING PESANTREN VALUES

Gontor makes *pesantren* values the main basis for managing business units, integrating honesty, hard work, responsibility, and Islamic solidarity into every business activity. These values guide the *santri*, teachers, and students involved in daily operations. In addition to

seeking economic benefits, the management of the business unit serves as a vehicle for learning concrete Islamic morals. For instance, we teach students handling cash or logistics to uphold fairness in transactions and steer clear of sharia-contradictory practices like usury. This creates a healthy business environment, where Islamic ethics become the main guideline in making every strategic decision.

Sharia-based management patterns not only teach but also internalize these values. *Santri* and students involved in business units such as cooperatives, printing houses, or bookshops gain hands-on experience in transparent financial governance. They also receive training in inventory management, providing professional customer service, and designing business development strategies that prioritize sustainability. The Pondok Management implement a periodic evaluation system to ensure that every operational process aligns with the values of *pesantren*. Guidance from teachers who act as mentors strengthens this aspect, providing direction on the importance of trustworthiness and integrity in every task carried out.

The successful internalization of *pesantren* values in Gontor not only impacts the individuals involved, but also the economic sustainability of the *pesantren* as a whole. Once trained in these business units, *santris* return to society with relevant experience and skills, whether as entrepreneurs or professionals. They become role models in practicing Islamic principles in the world of work, such as fairness in profit distribution and social responsibility toward the surrounding community. Thus, the internalization of these values reinforces Gontor's holistic educational goals, which not only produce academically proficient individuals but also people of noble character.

On the other hand, the existence of business units managed with *pesantren* values has a positive impact on the surrounding community. Business units such as *santri* cooperatives and bakeries not only serve internal needs but also become a source of economic empowerment for local residents. For example, the community gains access to products at affordable prices, while the *pesantren* creates jobs for local residents. This shows how the management of business units based on Islamic values can create an inclusive and sustainable economic ecosystem.

Through the internalization of *Pesantren* values, Gontor has proven that Islamic educational institutions can contribute significantly to spiritual and economic development in harmony. This approach shows how a *pesantren* can be a model of success in integrating moral education, technical skill development, and economic empowerment. By placing Islamic values at the core of business operations, Gontor succeeds in producing individuals who not only excel academically and ethically but are also able to become agents of change in society. This approach has made Gontor an inspiring example for other Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia and the world.

BALANCING TIME AS A TEACHER, STUDENT, AND MANAGER

The role of a Gontor student who also functions as a teacher and business unit manager requires exceptional time management skills. They must divide their time between studying, teaching, and managing business activities, all of which require a high level of commitment. As students, they attend a variety of religious and general classes, each with a busy schedule. As teachers, they are responsible for teaching Islamic values and knowledge to junior *Santri*. On the other hand, their responsibilities as business unit managers require them to run business operations, such as inventory management, financial arrangements, and marketing strategies. The combination of these three roles forms an intensive learning environment.

Students/teachers at Gontor receive training in managing a business unit, which includes managerial challenges like quick and precise decision-making and complex problem-solving. This experience enriches their understanding of the real aspects of entrepreneurship. Each business unit encourages them to innovate by developing marketing strategies that cater to the needs of both the students and the surrounding community. In addition, they learn to interact professionally with suppliers and consumers, practice communication skills, and increase confidence in leading a team.

In addition to the technical aspects of the role, the position also serves to instil spiritual and moral values. Gontor expects its students and faculty to fulfil their obligations in a responsible, honest, and ethical manner. We instruct students to adhere to Sharia principles in all activities, which include justice and sustainability. The application of these values in daily life not only facilitates the development of competence in management but also serves to establish moral exemplars for other students. This principle underscores the significance of cultivating robust character as a prerequisite for future success.

This equilibrium between academic, spiritual, and managerial roles is an integral component of Gontor's comprehensive educational approach. Gontor instructs students on how to effectively organise their daily schedules, manage competing priorities, and maintain dedication to each role. The provision of guidance and support from mentors and more senior colleagues is also a crucial factor in enabling students to effectively manage the pressures and responsibilities they face. This process yields individuals who are not only intellectually proficient but also emotionally and spiritually resilient.

In sum, this combination of roles—student, teacher, and manager—provides a robust foundation for Gontor students to navigate the challenges of the real world. In addition to academic qualifications, graduates emerge from the program with practical skills and a well-developed character. Consequently, this approach constitutes an efficacious model of Islamic education, which produces individuals of superior calibre who are prepared to make substantial contributions to society.

CHALLENGES BEING AS A TEACHER, STUDENT, AND MANAGER

The role of teacher, student, and business unit manager at Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor presents a distinctive and intricate challenge. At Gontor, teachers/ustadz are tasked with the dual responsibility of facilitating learning and education for students, while simultaneously pursuing their own studies and assuming managerial duties within the business unit. This dual role requires the ability to multitask effectively, to manage time efficiently, and to demonstrate a high level of commitment to responsibilities in a variety of fields. A significant challenge is the scheduling of lectures, teaching activities, and business operations, which frequently overlap.

One of the most significant challenges is maintaining the quality of instruction in the context of competing responsibilities. As educators, they must ensure that all content meets academic standards and reflects the Islamic values at the core of Gontor education. However, these responsibilities often conflict with their obligations as students, such as attending lectures, completing academic assignments, and taking exams. This can lead to physical and mental fatigue, especially if not managed effectively.

As business unit managers, educators face the additional challenge of managing the daily operations of the business. It is incumbent upon them to guarantee the seamless functioning of

the enterprise, encompassing stock management, financial operations, and marketing strategies while maintaining strict adherence to Sharia principles. Furthermore, team dynamics present an additional challenge, requiring leaders to direct individuals with limited work experience. Furthermore, the necessity to attain business objectives while upholding Islamic principles frequently contributes to the intricacy of their role.

Another challenge is maintaining equilibrium between the spiritual and professional roles. As a teacher who serves as a role model for the *santri*, it is imperative that they ensure their behaviour and decisions align with Islamic values. On the other hand, in their roles as both students and managers, they must exercise critical and strategic thinking, often facing situations where modern business values clash with traditional *pesantren* principles. This necessitates emotional and intellectual maturity to integrate all aspects of their lives within a unified framework.

Although the challenges are formidable, these experiences provide deep learning and invaluable skills. Teachers/teachers who successfully overcome these challenges often have exceptional time management skills, leadership prowess, and maturity in the face of pressure. More importantly, they become individuals who are not only able to effectively fulfil multiple roles but also make Islamic values their primary guides in every aspect of life. Thus, despite the challenges, the roles of teacher, student, and manager at Gontor create individuals who excel and contribute significantly to society.

Question

1. How does the waqf-based education system in Gontor support economic sustainability while shaping the character of *santri*?
2. What are the main challenges faced by *santri*, who carry out dual roles as students, teachers, and business managers in Gontor?
3. What is the impact of internalizing *pesantren* values in the management of business units in Gontor on the *santri* and the surrounding community?