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INDUSTRIAL OUTLOOK

What is Holding Back the Establishment of PondokStay?

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Abstract - Malaysia's Muslim-Friendly Tourism and Hospitality (MFTH) ecosystem thrives through structured initiatives such as the Muslim-Friendly Accommodation Recognition (MFAR) and the Muslim-Friendly Tourist Guide (MFTG). However, PondokStay, a spiritually focused retreat centered on traditional Islamic institutions and classical texts, has struggled to gain commercial traction. This viewpoint article consolidates insights from focal institutional and academic stakeholders to examine production constraints, institutional limits, and readiness challenges in establishing PondokStay. It proposes a multi-layered strategic roadmap to bridge spiritual preservation with commercial viability. By reconciling the sacred values of pondok with contemporary tourism frameworks, this article translates theoretical concepts into a practical, scalable operational model for Islamic heritage tourism, expected to enrich the existing niche sector.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Islamic Tourism Center (ITC), an agency under the Ministry of Tourism, Arts, and Culture Malaysia (MOTAC), plays a central role in strengthening the Islamic tourism segment and positioning Malaysia as a Muslim-friendly destination, both domestically and internationally. ITC supports tourism enterprises and operators by facilitating strategic guidance, operational frameworks, and capacity-building programs to enhance industry readiness within the Muslim-Friendly Tourism and Hospitality (MFTH) ecosystem. Significant outcomes include the rollout of Muslim-friendly standards, certification, and recognition programs such as the Muslim-Friendly

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Accommodation Recognition (MFAR) and the Muslim-Friendly Tourist Guide (MFTG).

The MFAR program is designed to help Muslim travelers identify accommodation options that meet Muslim-friendly requirements across Malaysia (Islamic Tourism Center, 2022). The MFAR framework establishes clear standards for focal operational segments, including lodging operators, healthcare facilities, and tourism products (Islamic Tourism Center, 2022). In the meantime, the MFTG program is designed to equip tourist guides with practical competencies and service awareness needed to cater to faith-based travel requirements, thereby enhancing service quality and building visitor confidence (Islamic Tourism Center, 2022). Both programs aim to regulate Muslim-friendly tourism practices and enhance the industry's preparedness to accommodate Muslim tourists, which resulted in building tourists' confidence and helping tourism operators support consistent operational standards (Islamic Tourism Center, 2022).

To illustrate the transition from a pondok to PondokStay, Yayasan Al-Jenderami in Selangor offers a pertinent model (Islamic Tourism Center, 2024, p. 13). Established in 2003, the foundation Yayasan Al-Jenderami manages the pondok, with an initial focus on safeguarding its pedagogical traditions and heritage of religious learning. In due course, its role has transitioned beyond this original function. To maintain traditional teaching practices, the pondok has introduced more comfortable, guest-centric facilities, enabling guests and learners to experience a setting that supports spiritual reflection and reconnection with faith (Islamic Tourism Center, 2024, p. 13).

This transition reflects a broader reorientation of the pondok's role, in which experiential elements are incorporated to support guests' educational and spiritual functions. According to the chairman of Yayasan Al-Jenderami, the foundation remains committed to safeguarding the wisdom and traditions of the pondok, especially its values of continuous learning and spiritual heritage (Islamic Tourism Center, 2024, p. 13). This commitment is expressed through adaptive practices that broaden its relevance to contemporary needs of Muslim spiritual tourists (Islamic Tourism Center, 2024, p. 13).

Furthermore, Yusof and Simpong (2021) note that the tranquil rural ambiance of the pondok, combined with the grounding presence of the Tok Guru, fosters a unique cultural and educational experience, positioning these institutions as vital hubs for Islamic learning and social connectedness. Prolonged challenges such as limited facilities, a shortage of qualified religious teachers, and a need for more effective management hinder their full potential, indicating a strategic gap that must be addressed to enact it (Yusof & Simpong, 2021). Both arguments of reasoning indicate that the internal religious resources of the pondok are pertinent to its transition; however, the challenges must be addressed prior to establishment.

2. BACKGROUND OF PONDOK

The term pondok derives from the Arabic "al-funduq" (الفندق), referring to a place to study and reside (Azizan et al., 2021; Musa et al., 2023). Pondok represents one of the earliest forms of Islamic education in the Malay world, predating colonial rule and playing an instrumental role in shaping Malay religious identity, particularly in states such as Kelantan, Terengganu, Kedah, Pulau Pinang, and Perak (Nasir et al., 2019; Azizan et al., 2021; Musa et al., 2023). Rooted in the scholarly traditions of the Malay Archipelago and the Middle East, pondok functioned not only as centers of religious learning but also as social and spiritual anchors across local communities (Nasir et al.,

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2019; Azizan et al., 2021).

Pondok employs the *Talaqqi* method, which entails the direct transmission of religious insights through reading, explanation, and dialogue between the *Tok Guru* and students (Azizan et al., 2021; Musa et al., 2023). This approach focuses on experiential learning, repetition, memorization, and deep engagement with classical Islamic texts (Azizan et al., 2021). Students' progress is at their own pace and driven by intrinsic motivation rather than predetermined curricula or examination schedules, and the assessments are informal (Azizan et al., 2021). Furthermore, Azizan et al. (2021) stated that personal and dispositional aspects of learning, such as proper conduct (*adab*), discipline, and students' spiritual attachment to their teacher, are posited to facilitate the attainment of blessing (*barakah)*. Aligned with this holistic view of *pondok* education, Nasir et al. (2019) had previously proposed that the *pondok's* role should extend beyond formal instruction to encompass broader communal functions.

3. CORE INSIGHTS AND ARGUMENT DEVELOPMENT

To facilitate a more robust understanding of these dynamics, insights from Haji Juhaidi bin Ahmad of Malaysia Pondok Development Foundation (Yayasan Pembangunan Pondok Malaysia), Puan Nur Alyssa Caroline Hussin of the Islamic Tourism Center, and Assoc. Prof. Dr. Azizan Che Embi of the International Islamic University Malaysia has consolidated into four thematic pillars. The following analysis is systematically segmented into the shared governance framework, spiritually integrated programs, infrastructural readiness, and financing mechanisms as depicted in Figure 1.

3.1 Duality in Action: A Shared Governance Framework Adapted from Giddens' Structuration Theory

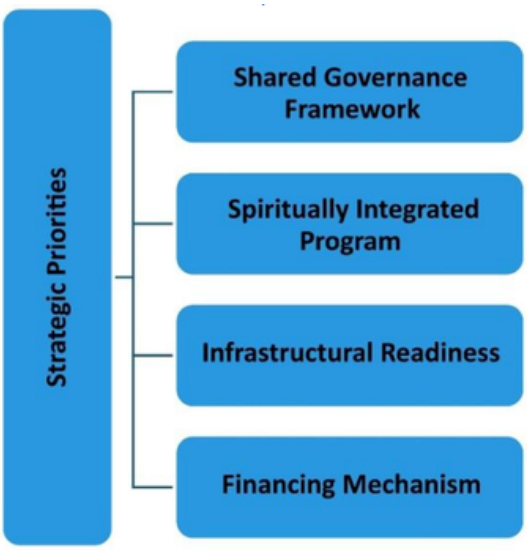

Figure 1. Strategic Priorities

Grounded in Giddens' structuration theory, as articulated by Gunawan et al. (2026), the framework models the continuous, dynamic interplay between structural conditions and institutional agency. Adapted to the PondokStay context, the proposed shared governance framework illustrates how "policy support agencies" and "the structure" co-participate in decision-making, resource management, and standard formulation, as depicted in Figure 2.

The policy support agencies, including Yayasan Pembangunan Pondok Malaysia, PINTA Kebangsaan, International Islamic University Malaysia, Jabatan Standard Malaysia, and ASEAN Member States, operate accordingly. These entities inject industrial insight, institutional data, and custodial protection of traditional values into the system. These inputs drive the "Structuration Processes" mediated by the Islamic Tourism Center (ITC), which functions as a dynamic facilitator rather than a rigid, top-down commander by setting

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specific goals, tailoring standards, and disseminating information.

PINTA Kebangsaan and YPPM function as focal institutional voices, representing administrative interests and traditional values within madrasah and pondok in Malaysia. PINTA Kebangsaan plays a crucial role in national advocacy and administrative representation for pondok and madrasah (Gabungan Persatuan Institusi Tahfiz Al Quran Kebangsaan (PINTA), 2026). Meanwhile, YPPM is dedicated to protecting the pondok (Yayasan Pembangunan Pondok Malaysia, 2026). Their involvement could significantly help streamline the data repository, as the existing data is currently dispersed, according to Dato' Dr. Mashitah Ibrahim, executive chairman of YPPM (Yayasan Pembangunan Pondok Malaysia, 2026). By concentrating data collection efforts on these focal entities, we could establish a clearer baseline and avoid the unnecessary complexity of gathering information from auxiliary sources. At this stage, focusing on data quality is more critical than increasing the number of institutions represented.

In translating standard protocols into practice, which offers clear, immediate benefits that could heighten institutional readiness, strategic clarity, and tangible socioeconomic gains for host communities, the real test lies beyond policy or standard design. These initial wins naturally feed into broader empowerment outcomes, driving policy adjustments, inter-agency collaboration, and sustained local involvement. In theory, this continuous feedback loop enables policy support agencies to refine overarching tourism strategies while safeguarding the structural legitimacy and grassroots integrity of PondokStay.

However, drafting standards is the easy part; enforceability is where the framework threatens to stall. For instance, the governance of short-term rental accommodation (STRA) remains notoriously fraught, particularly regarding licensing (Ariff, 2025). From my perspective, a similar situation could emerge for the *PondokStay*. Consider a situation where the Islamic Tourism Center (ITC) can aggregate input from policy support agencies and establish baseline standards, but collecting responses differs from enforcing compliance. The absence of a statutory licensing authority, even with the most well-designed framework, threatens to undermine it as an advisory document rather than an operational reality.

3.2 Spiritually Integrated Programs: The Rules of Partnership

Although government and institutional actors continuously promote the value creation of pondok, a critical gap remains in understanding the readiness of institutional founders. It remains unclear whether they (the founders of those pondok's) genuinely accept the transformation of their sacred spaces into commercial tourism products. This shift can introduce severe friction regarding institutional intent, personal privacy, and value preservation. If founders reject these proposals, a fundamental disconnect will emerge between national strategies to enrich Muslim-friendly tourism and the reality on the ground, fueling clashes of intent, disrupting the traditional educational system, eroding trust, and fostering alienation among operators who feel forced into an uncomfortable compromise.

Against this backdrop, *PondokStay* offers a compelling alternative. It maintains the core religious mission of the traditional pondok while shifting the target demographic. Dissimilar to the traditional approach, which demands a rigorous, full-time commitment that many modern professionals cannot accommodate, PondokStay offers a flexible, short-term opportunity. In doing so, it functions as an accessible gateway for a

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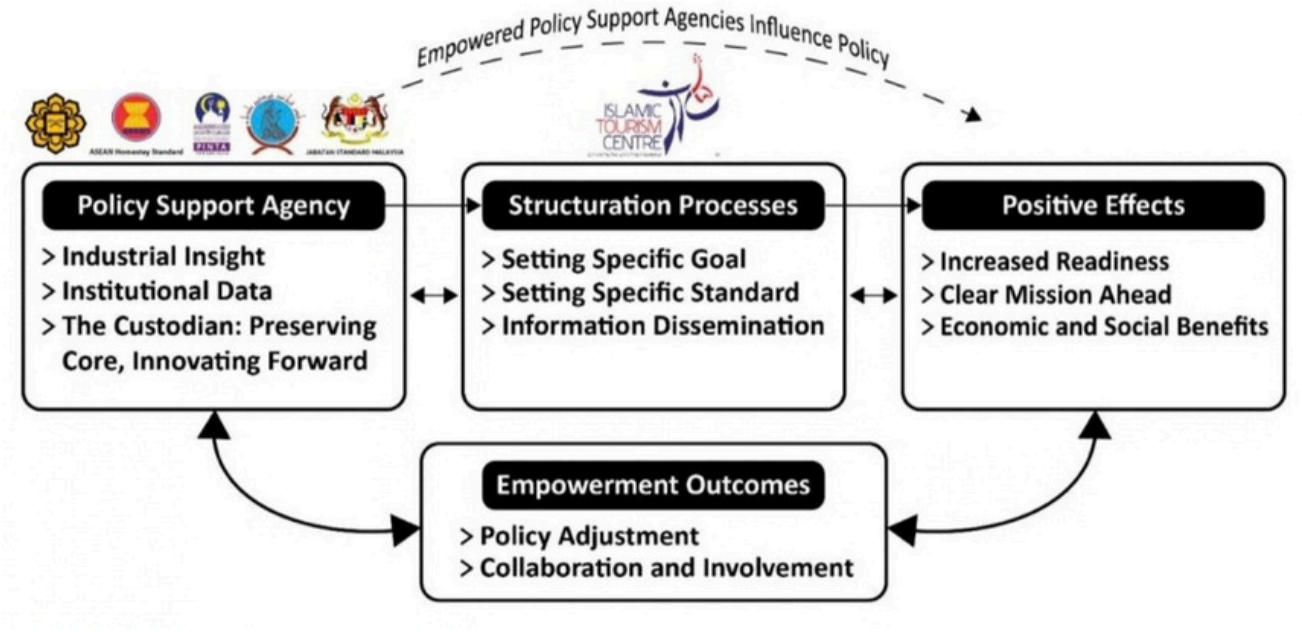

Figure 2. Conceptual Framework Illustrating the Interactions between Policy Support Agencies, the Structuration Process, Positive Effects, and Empowerment Outcomes of PondokStay (Adapted from: Gunawan et al., 2026)

broader audience to deepen their religious insights without disrupting their existing external obligations. As an analogy for *PondokStay* operators, the strategies of *umrah* operators could serve as a starting point.

Umrah operators are demonstrating that modern spiritual journeys can seamlessly transcend ordinary boundaries. If thoughtfully designed, these outdoor programs do not detract from the core spiritual experience; rather, they facilitate the experiential extension of faith. Mirroring this umrah blueprint, the PondokStay context cannot focus explicitly on indoor academic programs. Instead, PondokStay operators must host outdoor and community-based activities and leverage nearby attractions, which is a mandatory requirement for official homestay program registration (MOTAC, 2021). Just as the Taif excursions rely on the pedagogical proficiency of the Mutawwif to maintain spiritual sanctity, PondokStay operators must ensure that their cross-sector partners and local guides are trained to interpret local assets through a reflective, faith-based lens.

Delivering these diversified offerings requires creativity, and this transition cannot be executed blindly. Structured capacity building and tailored training are essential to equip *PondokStay* operators to navigate predictable operational demands, such as regulatory compliance, and to buffer against unforeseen liabilities that could harm an early-stage venture. The joint force of academia and industry practitioners must be responsible for designing targeted training modules that translate abstract concepts into actionable frameworks. By shifting the paradigm from problem-solving to guided execution, these programs facilitate operators with concrete, uniform steps tailored to their immediate operational challenges.

Despite the promise of building bridges beyond initial institutional boundaries, successful execution depends on strict foundational rules for cross-sector partnerships, especially regarding non-

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Muslim guests. *PondokStay* operators must ensure potential partners do not conflict with their core values or daily rhythms, such as aligning operational hours with prayer schedules and dress codes. Clear boundaries must be drawn to prevent role encroachment, ensuring that the services of the *pondok* and the external partner remain distinct yet complementary. Finally, they must rigorously vet the reputations of potential partners. In this context, vetting is not an opportunistic exercise to leverage an external partner's brand, but rather a defensive strategy to safeguard the sanctity of the *pondok*. To achieve this, *PondokStay* operators must identify and align with reliable partners across the operational spectrum: upstream (*regulators)* and downstream *(tourism service extenders*).

3.3 Infrastructure Readiness: Meeting the adaptive ASEAN Homestay Standard and Muslim-friendly Hospitality Services (MS 2610:2015).

Currently, growth is constrained by physical infrastructure designed for communal education rather than commercial hospitality. Overcoming this limitation requires proactive institutional leadership and targeted strategic funding. To establish a viable baseline, facilities must comply with core structural and operational standards across primary spaces, specifically residential units, sleeping quarters, and sanitation facilities. Ensuring these physical environments remain safe, hygienic, and structurally sound provides an adaptable foundation for *PondokStay*.

Expecting operators to maintain bedroom tidiness, for instance, does not require significant expense; it is the basic standard for a PondokStay. Differing from modern commercial hotels, this simple tidiness is the foundation of the experience. At this point, referring to both standards is practical because, without formal regulatory frameworks and compliance standards, the ecosystem could discourage motivated operators, thereby stalling production. It can be argued that the battlefield is psychological alignment rather than physical assets alone, and it needs to be understood in advance.

A comparative analysis reveals that the primary divergence between the two standards centers on physical premises, capacity limits, and dedicated religious amenities. Beyond structural requirements, operational execution during periods such as offering *Sahur (pre-dawn meal)* and *Iftar (breaking the fast)* during Ramadhan, enforcing strict prohibitions on *Haram* (prohibited) activities, and restricting entertainment to Shariah-permissible activities remains critical. Rather than adopting a single standard, the most viable path forward lies at the intersection of both standards. Establishing this baseline consensus must be the prerequisite before drafting actionable guidelines.

Future research needs to empirically examine it through the lens of entrepreneurial motivations and the entrepreneurial ecosystem, which is centered around intrinsic, extrinsic, and the interconnected network of actors, institutions, and processes, such as founders, investors, universities, and government policies that foster, support, and sustain new business ventures within a specific geographic region or industry. Since it is an emerging concept, future studies should evaluate entrepreneurial performance using non-financial metrics rather than revenue performance; instead, the research should focus on multi-faceted outcomes.

3.4 Financing Mechanism

Successful deployment of alternative accommodation frameworks, such as the PondokStay model, requires addressing critical institutional and financial constraints. Currently, funding remains stalled due to a paucity of collateral, a lack of uniform operational frameworks, and a non-traditional tourism structure

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that blends accommodations, transportation, and local attractions. Because commercial financial institutions classify these irregular, operator-dependent projects as high-risk ventures, standard commercial lending routes often prove to be a dead end.

In response to this gap, the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture (MOTAC) intervened in 2021 by approving the extension of the Tourism Fund loan incentive under enhanced procedures. Effective April 1, 2021, the Tourism Fund Convergence Committee (Jawatankuasa Pinjaman Tabung Pelancongan) mandates a dual-stage screening process: applications must first pass a commercial financial institution's initial risk assessment before advancing to the ministry for formal endorsement. While this ensures strict due diligence in public loan disbursement, it also highlights the ongoing reliance on conventional banking metrics, leaving many micro-operators stranded.

Besides, complementary funding models must be explored outside mainstream commercial banking, notably donation-based crowdfunding. As discussed by Dinh et al. (2024), this mechanism relies on non-reciprocal donor contributions driven by a blend of egoistic desires, such as social recognition, and altruistic motivations. For niche tourism ventures such as PondokStay, leveraging the "Warm-Glow Effect," the intrinsic psychological satisfaction donors experience when giving is vital (Dinh et al., 2024). However, capturing these funds depends on the campaign's "Framing Effect"; operators cannot rely on standard commercial pitches (Dinh et al., 2024). Instead, marketing narratives must be framed around community preservation and cultural altruism to align directly with the core values of prospective donors (Dinh et al., 2024). Because micro-operators often lack the baseline institutional backing to validate these public narratives, alternative structures rooted in community trust must be examined.

Beyond public incentives and crowdfunding, field insights from academic informants underscore Islamic social finance or *waqf* as a resonant mechanism for the production of *PondokStay*. *Waqf* involves the perpetual dedication of assets, including immovable properties such as agricultural land and movable assets such as cash *waqf*, to generate continuous income for socio-economic development (Azganin et al., 2021). Despite its structural promise, integrating *waqf* into a scalable national tourism strategy remains complex. The primary operational hurdle at present is macro-governmental: the regulatory and legislative frameworks governing *waqf* are non-uniform across Malaysia's states. This fragmentation creates a restrictive compliance landscape for prospective tourism entrepreneurs, as state regulators lack a shared baseline for codifying *PondokStay*, thereby preventing the allocation of cash waqf funds to them.

4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, charting a sustainable pathway for PondokStay requires moving past isolated fixes and embracing a holistic, multi-layered approach. By anchoring the mechanism of a shared governance framework that balances structure and policy-support agencies, ITC and the policy-support agencies could draft and prepare specific standards for PondokStay. Secondly, to ensure that the programs offered do not focus on specific age groups, the existing or potential PondokStay operators should include religiously infused programs that require cross-sectoral partnerships. However, please ensure that the rules are adhered to curb friction.

Social and religious values are the soul of PondokStay, but lifeblood is the infrastructure.

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Adapting local infrastructure to meet the adapted ASEAN Homestay Standards and the Muslim-friendly hospitality services (MS 2610:2015), ensuring that guests enjoy a reliable, enriching experience without stripping communities of their local charm, could serve as a starting point. As time goes by, these standards can be dynamically tailored to reflect practical, on-site realities.

From a strategic perspective, operators could opt for donation-based financing (*either crowdfunding or waqf*), which is preferred over commercial debt financing because the latter introduces financial uncertainties that could trap operators in debt. Lastly, the concept must be applicable in the first place to reduce confusion, as one might consider our approach more closely related to *PondokStay* than to other approaches. In conclusion, the establishment is expected to revitalize *pondok*, and its ongoing responsibilities are examined before the discussion of tourism receipts. The context must be confronted in chronological order.

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