

Research-Based Learning in Islamic Higher Education: A Comparative Policy Study of Indonesia and Malaysia

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Article History	Abstract
Received : 08-13-2026 Revised : 09-18-2026 Published : 10-01-2026	Islamic universities in Southeast Asia are expected simultaneously to expand access, to raise research productivity, and to produce graduates capable of independent inquiry, yet these expectations are governed by policy instruments that address research and teaching as separate domains. This article aims to compare how Indonesian and Malaysian higher education policy structures the relationship between research and undergraduate teaching, to identify the mechanisms through which each system does or does not translate institutional research activity into student learning, and to derive design implications for Islamic universities. The study is a qualitative comparative policy analysis employing document analysis of national regulatory and strategic instruments, read through the teaching-research nexus literature, with functional comparison as the organising method; no institutional performance data were collected. The findings indicate that both systems have strengthened research governance considerably while leaving the nexus to institutional discretion, that Indonesian policy provides the stronger structural opening through flexible learning arrangements that permit research to be credited as coursework, that Malaysian policy provides the stronger institutional differentiation through research-university status and outcome-based quality assurance, and that in both systems incentive structures reward research output over research-based teaching. The article concludes that the nexus is weakened less by the absence of research capacity than by the absence of mechanisms translating capacity into curriculum, and recommends crediting supervised inquiry within degree structures, recognising research-based teaching in academic promotion, and embedding inquiry as a programme-level learning outcome.
Keywords: Comparative education policy; Indonesia; Islamic higher education; Malaysia; Research-based learning.	

I. INTRODUCTION

The proposition that university teaching should be informed by research is among the oldest commitments of the modern university, traceable to the Humboldtian conception of an institution in which teacher and student are jointly engaged in inquiry rather than in the transmission of settled knowledge. It is also among the least reliably realised. Empirical investigation has repeatedly found that the correlation between individual research productivity and teaching effectiveness is close to zero, a finding that unsettles the assumption that a research-active academic will necessarily teach in a research-informed way.¹ The subsequent literature reframed the question: what matters

¹John Hattie and H. W. Marsh, "The Relationship between Research and Teaching: A Meta-Analysis," *Review of Educational Research* 66, no. 4 (1996): 507–542.

is not whether a teacher conducts research but whether the curriculum positions students as participants in inquiry rather than as recipients of its results.²

That reframing has direct policy consequences. If the nexus is a property of curriculum design rather than of staff activity, then policy instruments that increase research output will not by themselves produce research-informed teaching, and the mechanisms that translate institutional research capacity into student learning must be examined separately. Healey and Jenkins' widely used framework distinguishes curricular arrangements by whether students are audience or participants, and by whether the emphasis falls on research content or research processes, yielding four modes: research-led, research-oriented, research-tutored, and research-based.³ Only the last positions students as producers of inquiry.

Islamic universities in Indonesia and Malaysia face this problem under particular conditions. Both systems have invested substantially in research governance over the past decade. Indonesia restructured national research administration and revised its higher education quality assurance framework, while introducing flexible learning arrangements permitting students to undertake activities outside conventional coursework.⁴ Malaysia pursued institutional differentiation through research-university designation and an outcome-based quality assurance regime administered by a statutory agency.⁵ Both expect Islamic universities to contribute to national research performance while expanding undergraduate provision. Neither has made the teaching-research nexus an explicit object of policy.

Comparative research on higher education in the two systems has examined governance, quality assurance, and internationalisation, and a substantial literature addresses the transformation of Islamic higher education institutions into universities with broader mandates. What has not been examined is how the policy instruments of each system structure, enable, or obstruct the translation of research capacity into undergraduate learning, and what this implies for Islamic universities specifically. That is the gap addressed here.

The objectives are to compare how the two systems structure the research-teaching relationship, to identify the translating mechanisms each provides, and to derive design implications. Three research questions follow: what does each national framework require and permit with respect to the integration of research into undergraduate curricula; which mechanisms in each system function as translators of research capacity into student learning; and what design implications follow for Islamic universities operating under these frameworks?

²Angela Brew, *The Nature of Research: Inquiry in Academic Contexts* (London: RoutledgeFalmer, 2001), 1–20.

³Mick Healey and Alan Jenkins, *Developing Undergraduate Research and Inquiry* (York: Higher Education Academy, 2009), 5–10.

⁴Law Number 12 of 2012 concerning Higher Education, Articles 45–47; Regulation of the Minister of Education and Culture Number 3 of 2020 concerning National Higher Education Standards, Article 15(1)–(3).

⁵Malaysian Qualifications Agency Act 2007 (Act 679), sections 3 and 32; Ministry of Education Malaysia, *Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015–2025 (Higher Education)* (Putrajaya: Ministry of Education, 2015), chap. 3.

II. RESEARCH METHODS

This study is a qualitative comparative policy analysis. Comparison proceeds functionally, asking how each system addresses the same problem rather than whether its institutions resemble one another, a method appropriate where legal and administrative structures differ but the underlying function is shared.⁶ The standard caution applies: functional comparison can obscure differences in institutional culture that determine actual outcomes, and the findings are therefore framed as statements about what policy enables rather than about what institutions do.

The design is document analysis. The Indonesian corpus comprises the Higher Education Law, the ministerial regulation on higher education quality assurance, the regulation providing for flexible learning arrangements, and instruments governing the research mandate of state Islamic universities. The Malaysian corpus comprises the framework establishing the quality assurance agency and its qualifications framework, together with the national strategic blueprint for higher education and instruments governing research-university designation. Secondary literature on the teaching-research nexus supplies the analytical framework. No institutional performance data, interviews, or survey instruments were used, and the study therefore makes no claims about comparative research productivity or teaching quality.

Analysis proceeded in three stages. First, each corpus was coded for provisions bearing on three functions: the specification of research as an institutional obligation, the specification of inquiry as a student learning outcome, and the provision of credit or workload mechanisms permitting research to count within a degree structure. Second, the coded provisions were arrayed against the four modes of the Healey and Jenkins framework to determine which modes each policy environment supports. Third, points of convergence and divergence were interpreted to identify the translating mechanisms present or absent in each system. The limitation of the design is that policy permission is not policy effect; the study identifies structural conditions, not outcomes.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Research as Institutional Obligation in Both Systems

The first finding is one of convergence. Both systems treat research as a core institutional obligation and have strengthened its governance considerably. Indonesian law establishes the threefold obligation of education, research, and community service, and requires that research contribute to knowledge and to national welfare;⁷ national research administration was subsequently consolidated in a single agency.⁸ Malaysian policy pursued differentiation, designating a limited number of institutions as research

⁶Konrad Zweigert and Hein Kötz, *An Introduction to Comparative Law*, 3rd ed., trans. Tony Weir (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 34–36.

⁷Law Number 12 of 2012, Articles 1(9) and 45.

⁸Presidential Regulation Number 78 of 2021 concerning the National Research and Innovation Agency, Articles 2–3.

universities and orienting the national blueprint toward research performance and knowledge-based development.⁹

The convergence extends to quality assurance. Indonesia's current framework requires programmes to formulate graduate learning outcomes and to align curriculum, process, and assessment accordingly.¹⁰ Malaysia's qualifications framework and programme standards operate on outcome-based principles, requiring programmes to demonstrate the attainment of stated learning outcomes.¹¹ Both systems therefore possess the formal apparatus through which inquiry could be specified as a learning outcome and assessed as such. Neither requires it.

This is the analytically important point. The instruments in both systems are directed at two separate objects: institutional research performance on one side and programme learning outcomes on the other. The nexus, which is the relationship between them, is nobody's explicit responsibility. It is left to institutional discretion in exactly the manner that the nexus literature identifies as producing weak outcomes, since discretion without incentive tends to be exercised in favour of the activities that are measured.

B. Divergence in Translating Mechanisms

The second finding concerns divergence in the mechanisms available for translating research capacity into student learning. Table 1 summarises the comparison.

Table 1. Comparative Policy Provision for the Teaching–Research Nexus

Function	Indonesia	Malaysia
Research as institutional obligation	Statutory threefold obligation; consolidated national research administration	Institutional differentiation through research-university designation
Inquiry as learning outcome	Permitted, not required, under outcome-based quality assurance	Permitted, not required, under outcome-based programme standards
Credit mechanism for supervised inquiry	Flexible learning arrangements permit research to be credited as coursework	Final-year project standard; less flexibility outside it
Incentive alignment for staff	Promotion and accreditation reward publication output	Promotion and institutional rating reward publication output
Supported nexus modes	All four modes permitted; research-based mode structurally enabled	Research-led and research-tutored modes dominant

Source: Analysis of national policy instruments, 2026.

The Indonesian framework provides the stronger structural opening. Flexible learning arrangements permit a student to spend a substantial portion of the degree in activities outside conventional coursework, including research conducted under

⁹Ministry of Education Malaysia, *Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015–2025 (Higher Education)*, chap. 5.

¹⁰Regulation of the Minister of Education, Culture, Research and Technology Number 53 of 2023 concerning Quality Assurance of Higher Education, Articles 5 and 17.

¹¹Malaysian Qualifications Agency, *Malaysian Qualifications Framework*, 2nd ed. (Cyberjaya: MQA, 2017), 8–15.

supervision, with those activities recognised for credit.¹² This is precisely the mechanism that the research-based mode requires, since the principal obstacle to positioning students as producers of inquiry is that sustained inquiry does not fit the credit architecture of a conventional semester. Indonesian policy has removed that obstacle, though the removal was motivated by employability rather than by the nexus.

The Malaysian framework provides stronger institutional differentiation and a more mature outcome-based apparatus, which supports systematic curriculum design and external verification of outcome attainment.¹³ Its constraint is that the principal vehicle for student inquiry remains the final-year project, a single terminal experience which, as the nexus literature notes, concentrates all inquiry into one high-stakes episode rather than distributing it developmentally across the programme.

The two systems thus exhibit complementary strengths and a shared weakness. Indonesia has the credit flexibility but weaker outcome verification; Malaysia has the outcome apparatus but weaker credit flexibility. Both reward research output rather than research-based teaching in the promotion and rating mechanisms that actually govern academic behaviour, which is the decisive common limitation.

C. Implications for Islamic Universities

The third finding concerns the position of Islamic universities within these configurations. Three considerations are specific to them.

First, the transformation of Islamic institutes into universities with broader disciplinary mandates has produced institutions in which research capacity is unevenly distributed, typically stronger in the established religious disciplines and weaker in the newer faculties. A nexus strategy that relies on institutional research strength will therefore reproduce that unevenness. A strategy that relies on curriculum design will not, because positioning students as inquirers does not require that their teachers be leading researchers; it requires that teaching make inquiry visible and that the curriculum provide occasions for it.¹⁴

Second, the Islamic scholarly tradition possesses an indigenous model of research-based learning that the current policy vocabulary does not capture. The classical apprenticeship in which a student worked through texts under a scholar's direction, defended positions, and was licensed upon demonstrated competence is, in the functional terms of the nexus literature, a research-tutored and research-based arrangement. Recovering this as a design resource is more promising than importing arrangements wholesale, and it addresses a recurrent criticism that modernisation in Islamic higher education has proceeded by adopting external forms while abandoning indigenous pedagogical strengths.¹⁵

¹²Regulation of the Minister of Education and Culture Number 3 of 2020, Article 18(1)–(3).

¹³Malaysian Qualifications Agency, *Malaysian Qualifications Framework*, 12–18.

¹⁴Healey and Jenkins, *Developing Undergraduate Research and Inquiry*, 6–9.

¹⁵Azyumardi Azra, *Pendidikan Islam: Tradisi dan Modernisasi di Tengah Tantangan Milenium III* (Jakarta: Kencana, 2012), 55–70.

Third, the disciplinary character of research in Islamic legal and religious studies favours the research-based mode. These are text-interpretive fields in which an undergraduate can, with guidance, undertake genuine inquiry on a delimited question using accessible primary materials, in contrast to laboratory sciences where meaningful participation requires resources students rarely command. The structural barrier in these fields is therefore lower than in many others, which makes the failure to exploit it more striking.

Three design implications follow. Supervised inquiry should be credited within the degree structure rather than confined to a terminal thesis, using the flexibility Indonesian policy already provides and which Malaysian institutions may create within programme design. Research-based teaching should be recognised in promotion criteria, since no curricular reform survives an incentive structure that ignores it. And inquiry should be specified as a programme-level learning outcome and assessed accordingly, which both quality assurance regimes permit and which converts an aspiration into a verifiable claim.

D. Limitations and Comparative Caution

Two cautions are required. The first concerns the limits of functional comparison: the Indonesian and Malaysian systems differ in federal structure, in the constitutional position of religion, and in the governance of Islamic institutions, so the transferability of mechanisms is not automatic. The second concerns the evidentiary basis: document analysis establishes what policy permits, and the gap between permission and practice in both systems is known to be substantial. The findings should therefore be read as identifying structural opportunity rather than as describing institutional behaviour, and they generate hypotheses for empirical testing rather than conclusions about comparative performance.

IV. CONCLUSION

This study compared how Indonesian and Malaysian higher education policy structures the relationship between research and undergraduate teaching. It found that both systems have strengthened research governance while leaving the teaching-research nexus to institutional discretion, so that the relationship between institutional research capacity and student learning is not an explicit object of policy in either. It found that the two systems provide complementary translating mechanisms, Indonesia through credit flexibility that permits supervised inquiry to count within the degree, Malaysia through institutional differentiation and a mature outcome-based apparatus, and that both share a decisive limitation in incentive structures that reward research output rather than research-based teaching.

The theoretical implication is that the nexus should be analysed as a translating problem rather than as a capacity problem: increasing research output does not produce research-informed teaching in the absence of curricular and incentive mechanisms that connect the two. The practical implications for Islamic universities are to credit supervised inquiry within degree structures rather than confining it to a terminal thesis, to recognise research-based teaching in promotion criteria, to specify inquiry as an assessed programme-level learning outcome, and to recover the indigenous

apprenticeship model as a design resource rather than importing arrangements wholesale. Subsequent research should test these propositions empirically by examining programmes that have adopted flexible credit arrangements, comparing the quality of student inquiry under distributed and terminal designs, and assessing whether promotion criteria that recognise research-based teaching measurably change instructional practice.

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