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ADMISSION SYSTEMS IN ISLAMIC SECONDARY SCHOOLS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY BASED ON STUDENTS ACHIEVEMENT AND CONSENT

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Abstract

Admission policies are increasingly recognized as strategic tools through which educational institutions project their values and define desired student profiles. While extensive research has examined admissions based on academic achievement, equity, or socio-economic background, little attention has been paid to the affective and aspirational dimensions of student selection, particularly in non-Western and faith-based contexts. This study addresses that gap by exploring how two kinds of Islamic secondary schools in Indonesia (Madrasah and Pesantren), construct and operationalize their admission logics. Employing a qualitative comparative case study design, data were gathered through interviews, observations, and document analysis. Findings reveal two divergent approaches: Madrasah privileges measurable academic excellence, while Pesantren emphasizes *student consent*, defined as a student's expressed willingness to undertake a long-term educational commitment. These criteria reflect not only institutional visions but also produce distinct graduate outcomes. By introducing *student consent* as a novel analytical construct, this study expands existing frameworks of admission policy. The findings offer theoretical insight into the ideological dimensions of student selection and practical guidance for designing mission-aligned admission strategies.

Keywords: Admission Policies; Student enrollment; Islamic Education; Students Consent; Students achievement; secondary school.

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Abstrak

Kebijakan penerimaan siswa semakin dipahami sebagai alat strategis bagi lembaga pendidikan untuk menampilkan nilai-nilai yang mereka anut sekaligus menentukan profil siswa yang diharapkan. Selama ini, banyak penelitian membahas sistem penerimaan yang bertumpu pada prestasi akademik, aspek keadilan, atau latar belakang sosial ekonomi. Namun, perhatian terhadap dimensi afektif dan aspiratif dalam proses seleksi siswa masih sangat terbatas, terutama dalam konteks non-Barat dan lembaga pendidikan berbasis keagamaan. Penelitian ini mengisi kekosongan tersebut dengan mengkaji bagaimana dua jenis lembaga pendidikan Islam jenjang menengah di Indonesia (Madrasah dan Pesantren), merancang dan menerapkan alur logika penerimaan siswa mereka. Menggunakan desain studi kasus komparatif dengan pendekatan kualitatif, data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara, observasi, dan analisis dokumen. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan adanya dua pendekatan yang berbeda. Madrasah lebih mengutamakan keunggulan akademik yang dapat diukur, sementara Pesantren menekankan kesediaan siswa (*student consent*), yang dimaknai sebagai kemauan siswa untuk menjalani komitmen pendidikan jangka panjang. Perbedaan kriteria ini tidak hanya mencerminkan visi kelembagaan masing-masing sekolah, tetapi juga melahirkan karakter lulusan yang berbeda. Dengan memperkenalkan konsep *student consent* sebagai konstruk analitis baru, penelitian ini memperluas kerangka kajian tentang kebijakan penerimaan siswa. Temuan ini memberikan kontribusi teoretis dalam memahami dimensi ideologis dari proses seleksi siswa, sekaligus menawarkan panduan praktis bagi lembaga pendidikan dalam merancang sistem penerimaan yang selaras dengan misi.

Kata kunci: Kebijakan Penerimaan; Pendaftaran Siswa; Pendidikan Islam; Persetujuan Siswa; Prestasi Siswa; Sekolah Menengah.

A. INTRODUCTION

School admission policies are increasingly recognized as more than administrative gatekeeping tools; they are strategic instruments that reflect institutional identity, values, and long-term educational goals (de Visser, Fluit, Cohen-Schotanus, & Laan, 2018); (Bó & Ko, 2021); (Hughes, Park, Christensen-Grant, & Fuentes, 2021); (Lee & Suen, 2023). In many educational systems, especially those influenced by competitive performance regimes, admission processes tend to privilege measurable student's achievements such as academic test scores or academic transcript grades (OECD, 2004); (Tapia, 2023). While, others adopt a zoning system to ensure equitable access (Bulkani, Fatchurahman, & Setiawan, 2023). However, in contexts where religious, moral, or communal values play a central role—such as in Islamic education in Indonesia—admission decisions may be guided by alternative logics that go beyond conventional metrics. Understanding these logics is crucial for unpacking how educational institutions reproduce particular forms of excellence and shape student pathways.

Indonesia's dual system of public and religius-based education provides a unique context to examine how institutional missions influence admission strategies. Within Islamic education contexts, there are 87,576 Madrasahs and 344,130 Pesantrens (Islamic boarding schools) across Indonesia ("EMIS - Kementerian Agama," 2025). In these institutions, graduate outcomes are often measured not only by academic performance, but also by religious knowledge, and character formation (Azra, 2014). As such, both faith-based values and academic excellence are emphasized. In this dual-focus system, selective admission emerges as a critical mechanism for balancing traditional religious objectives with contemporary educational demands.

Despite a growing body of research on school choice, admission mechanisms, and educational stratification (e.g., (Jheng, Lin, Chang, & Liao, 2022); (Traini, 2022); (Vaughn & Witko, 2013)), few studies examine how affective or aspirational dimensions (such as willingness, motivation, or long-term commitment), are operationalized in admission processes. Most existing literature centers on academic performance, socio-economic background, or access-related equity concerns (Mahlangu, 2019); (OECD, 2019), often neglecting the role of institutional intention and student agency (Mameli, Grazia, & Molinari, 2023). Furthermore, within Islamic education scholarship, previous studies specifically explore how Islamic schools design their student recruitment and selection processes, considering academic achievement and religious values as focus (Sormin, Rahmayanti, & Hasanah, 2025) (Suratin et al., 2024). These studies provide valuable insights into selection procedures. However, admission policies remain underexplored, particularly in terms of how they function as tools for aligning students with institutional vision and mission.

This study trying to critically examine how institutional missions are embedded in the admission practices of two different kind of Islamic educational institutions at secondary level (Sekolah Menengah Pertama) in Indonesia. Study focuses on Madrasah and Pesantren in Malang, East Java: Madrasah Tsanawiyah Negeri (MTsN) 1 Kota Malang, a state Islamic junior high school, and Pondok Pesantren Daarul Ukhuwah (PPDU), a private Islamic Boarding School (IBS) operating under pesantren tradition. Both institutions aim to produce high-performing graduates. Madrasah positioning itself as a high-achievement institution, and Pesantren with a mission to produce warrior scholars (*ulama pejuang*). They adopt distinct approaches in selecting incoming students. By comparing how MTsN 1 and PPDU implement differing logics of selection, the research contributes to rethinking admission policies as not only meritocratic or procedural but also deeply ideological and future-oriented. Theoretically, results of the study enriches existing typologies of student selection. This complements broader educational discourses that call for more humanistic and mission-driven frameworks in school governance. Ultimately, this work contributes to the ongoing conversation on how schools can balance academic excellence with affective engagement in shaping future graduates.

B. RESEARCH METHOD

This research employed qualitative research methods with a comparative case study approach. Case studies are considered an effective approach to investigating complex contemporary phenomena, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context remain unclear (Yin, 2003). A multi-site design was applied to identify, compare, and uncover contrasting patterns in admission selection strategies between madrasa and pesantren. According to (Voss, Tsikriktsis, & Frohlich, 2002), the use of multiple cases can increase external validity and reduce the risk of biased observations. In addition, this approach enables the development of more robust and testable theories compared to single case studies (Barratt, Choi, & Li, 2011).

1. Case Selection

The cases were purposively selected from two Islamic education institutions at the secondary school level in Indonesia: Madrasah Tsanawiyah Negeri (MTsN) 1 Malang City and Pondok Pesantren Daarul Ukhuwwah (PPDU) Malang District. These institutions were chosen because they share a common basis in Islamic education, but represent different types of schools: Madrasah and Pesantren. The shared context of Islamic education institutions in Indonesia, which are grounded in Islamic values, provides a similar framework for comparison. The characteristics of the two institutions selected as cases are described in Table B.1.

Table B.1 Characteristics of selected Islamic education institutions

Characteristics	MTsN 1 Malang	PPDU Malang
Institution Type	Madrasah	Pesantren (Boarding school)
Ownership	Government (State)	Foundation (Private)
Competitive Position	Excellent Students/Graduates	Producing "Ulama" (Muslim scholars)
Year established	Since 1978	Since 2009
Number of Students	1.158	1.112

The selected institutions, MTsN 1 Malang City and SMP PPDU Malang District, represent two different types of Islamic education institutions in Indonesia, Madrasah and Pesantren. The competitive positions of these two institutions reflect different educational priorities. While madrasah focus on producing academically excellent students, pesantren (Islamic boarding school) emphasize religious education and leadership development. These different missions not only shape their curricula, but also influence the type of students admitted to each institution. Madrasah prioritize high academic achievement,

while Pesantren focus more on students who are committed to be muslim scholars. While both institutions share a commitment to Islamic education, the differences in their ownership and strategic positioning highlight the different paths that Islamic education institutions in Indonesia can take in pursuit of competitive advantage.

2. Data Collection

Data collection was mainly conducted through semi-structured or in- depth interviews with 10 informants, as listed in Table B.2. The researcher used an interview guide to ensure the investigation focused on admission selection. The two main research questions that guided the interviews were: (1) What are the student selection criteria in the admission system and why? and (2) How does the admission process affect student and graduate performance? Interviews were conducted both face-to-face and over the phone (Creswell, 2014). Telephone interviews were conducted with informants, mainly parents, who live in different regions. In addition to interviews, observation and document analysis were conducted to support the investigation. Observations, including school visits and documentation of physical evidence such as trophies, posters, and facilities. Document analysis, including admission brochures, policy documents, and institutional vision–mission statements.

Table B.2. List of informants

Institution	Informant	Code
MTsN 1 Malang (Madrasah)	1. Madrasah's Principal	Inf01-M
	2. Vice Principal's of Curriculum	Inf02-M
	3. Vice Principal's of Public Relation	Inf03-M
	4. Student	Inf04-M
	5. Student's parent	Inf05-M
PPDU Malang (Pesantren)	1. *Mudir*/Head of the boarding school	Inf01-P
	2. Junior High School Principal	Inf02-P
	3. Head of Public Relations	Inf03-P
	4. Student (*Santri*)	Inf04-P
	5. Student's parent	Inf05-P

3. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed in two stages: individual case analysis and cross-case analysis. For the individual case analysis, the researcher used the interactive data analysis model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014), which includes data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/validation. Cross-case analysis was conducted to compare and contrast the findings from each case, with the aim of identifying key differences and patterns (Yin, 2003). Data categorization was used to facilitate this process,

ultimately leading to the identification of new concepts that explain admissions selection as an institutional strategy. Themes related to admission criteria, rationale, and impacts on outcomes were identified and then compared across the two institutions. To maintain trustworthiness, triangulation across sources (documents, interviews, observations) ensured credibility of findings.

C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study demonstrates that admission criteria in Islamic education are not merely gatekeeping mechanisms but are profound strategic instruments used to align institutional identity with long-term educational visions. Our comparative analysis between MTsN 1 Kota Malang and Pondok Pesantren Daarul Ukhuwah (PPDU) reveals a fundamental dichotomy in Islamic educational admission logic: the Achievement-Based Model versus the Consent-Based Model (Tabel C.1).

Table C.1. Comparative Analysis of Admission System at Two Sites

Category	Madrasah	Pesantren	Cross-site findings
Admission Selection Criteria	1. Students with academic or non- academic achievements 2. Students of feeder school partnership through the integrated track 3. Students who are motivated to apply early	1. Students who have basic ability to read the Qur'an 2. Students who are motivated to follow the 6-year boarding school education system 3. Students who have family ties with pesantren's students	Madrasah emphasizes *student achievement*, while Pesantren emphasizes *student consent*
Impact of admission selection on student's output	1. Increased national and international achievements 2. Graduates admitted to top schools.	1. Improve knowledge, abilities and religious attitudes 2. Graduates admitted to global universities	Both share a commitment to producing high-quality graduates. Admission criteria serve as strategic instruments for realizing visions.

1. Student Achievement as Admission Logic in Madrasah

Madrasah Tsanawiyah Negeri (MTsN) 1 Kota Malang is one of the leading Islamic educational institutions that positions itself competitively as a *"Madrasah Mandiri Berprestasi"* (*Self-Reliant and Achieving Madrasah).* Guided by its vision of becoming a high-quality institution of international standards, the madrasah emphasizes the cultivation of academically and non-academically outstanding students at both national and international levels. To realize this vision, the institution offers a variety of flagship and specialized programs. Among its three main excellence tracks are: the Bilingual Program, the Olympiad Program, and the Tahfidz and Arabic Language Program. Beyond these, the madrasah also provides ample opportunities for students to develop their individual talents and interests.

Importantly, the vision declared by the institution is not merely rhetorical. This commitment is vividly reflected in the numerous achievements of its students across various fields of specialization. Observations revealed a strong culture of recognition within the school environment: large billboards inside and outside the school display the portraits and names of accomplished students, while hundreds of trophies are neatly arranged along the school corridors. Such evidence illustrates the consistency between the school's declared vision and its lived practices. Notably, MTsN 1 Kota Malang has even been recognized as the institution with the highest number of student achievements in Malang City (Kemenag, 2021).

According to the Vice Principal for Curriculum, the institution's current success is closely linked to its selective admission process. This rigorous selection began after the madrasah produced its first international-level award-winning student. That achievement not only elevated the school's reputation but also significantly increased public interest in enrolling their children. The Vice Principal recalled: "Back then, MTs started to gain attention around 2005 or 2006, if I'm not mistaken, when one of our students won first place at the International Junior Science Olympiad (IJSO). It was a big achievement at the international level. From that moment, people began to recognize our madrasah, and the number of applicants suddenly surged…" (Inf02-M).

This shift led the madrasah to establish a structured admission system that not only relies on the regular entrance test but also offers *excellence* and *integrated tracks*. These pathways are designed to attract and accommodate highly motivated students, particularly those with proven achievements. Priority is given to applicants who demonstrate both academic and non-academic accomplishments from their previous education. To support its international competitiveness, the madrasah provides a special merit-based admission route. This includes recognition of academic excellence, but also extends to achievements in non-academic areas such as sports, arts, and Qur'an memorization. As the principal of the madrasah explained: "We focus on selecting the best students. That's why we have an achievement-based admission pathway. This allows us to target students who will later achieve even more. We also have a regular admission pathway, which is for students who are also promising, serving

to strengthen our pool of talented students. So, the first point is that our admission process includes an achievement-based pathway. Achievement here isn't limited to academics. For example, we might consider a student with exceptional talent in table tennis. That's not academic, but it's something we value and pay attention to." (Inf01-M).

The school's admission brochure clearly outlines the selection process designed to identify high-achieving students through two primary pathways: "jalur unggulan" (the *Excellence Track*) and "jalur terpadu" (the *Integrated Track*). The Excellence Track specifically targets students with strong academic records, winners of academic or non-academic competitions, and those with outstanding Qur'anic memorization.

As explained by the Vice Principal for Curriculum, preference is given to applicants who have attained achievements at the national level. These students are granted admission priority, even if their academic test scores are slightly lower than those of other candidates. However, the school maintains a standard that such students must still demonstrate a solid academic performance in the entrance examination. This approach reflects the institution's commitment to balancing recognition of prior achievements with academic rigor, ensuring that students admitted through special pathways continue to meet the madrasah's high standards. He explained during the interview: "...including arts, like painting, singing... we have a talented vocalist, the one who sang recently... She was a finalist in Kids Voice back when she was in elementary school. That's why when she applied to our madrasah, I didn't even consider her academic scores too much... but her scores were decent. At Her elementary school, She was always in the top five. But during the test, She couldn't compete as well... for example, if we were selecting 180 students, she might rank 200 or 250. Still, we accepted her as a student. Why? Because of her achievement..." (Inf02-M).

The second pathway is the *Integrated Track*. Due to the geographical proximity of the madrasah to a feeder institution with high-achieving students at the primary level—MIN 1 Malang City—the madrasah provides a special admission quota for graduates of MIN 1 through this pathway. This ensures that the best students from MIN 1 have direct access to MTsN 1. As explained by the Vice Principal for Curriculum: "…We have a partnership pathway with MIN 1, an integrated pathway…" (Inf02-M).

In addition, the madrasah also implements an *early admission program*, which is particularly attractive to high-achieving students. By opening its admissions earlier than most schools, the madrasah not only secures top candidates but also provides applicants with the advantage of having alternative school options if they are not admitted. As explained by the Vice Principal for Public Relations: "We start earlier, in February. Our intention is to recruit students early, but it also gives them a good opportunity. If they don't pass here, they still have time to choose another place." (Inf03-M).

Through its strategy of early admission and multiple entry tracks, the madrasah has successfully recruited excellent students from both within and beyond the city. Social class and geographical background do not serve as significant barriers in the selection process. The principal emphasized this inclusivity: “InsyaAllah, our students now come from various regions across Indonesia and from all walks of life…What we aim for, InsyaAllah, is to provide the best service to everyone, regardless of where they come from or their background, as long as they meet the admission requirements.” (Inf01-M).

Nevertheless, by prioritizing high-achieving students, the madrasah naturally attracts a large proportion of families from middle- to upper-class backgrounds. This dynamic was acknowledged by both the Vice Principal for Curriculum: “The majority of our students are from middle- to upper-class families… but that’s not because it’s specifically targeted. Compared to public schools, our fees are indeed higher. However, we also have students from lower-income families. For those who are less fortunate, the school committee usually provides exemptions—some don’t even have to pay at all.” (Inf02-M). The Vice Principal for Public Relations also explained: “Here, if I may explain, when we offer the Kartu Pintar program (a scholarship for underprivileged students), many parents choose not to apply. The number of applicants doesn’t even reach 100 students.” (Inf03-M).

Interviews with students and parents further reveal that their preference for the madrasah is largely influenced by its reputation for enhancing both academic performance and character development. Although the tuition fees are relatively higher than public schools, cost does not appear to be a decisive factor. Instead, the community places greater value on quality education. As one parent expressed: “Since it’s still at the middle school level, it’s better to choose a madrasah, especially for character development.” (Inf04-M). Similarly, another parent added: “Cost… it’s not really a factor. It’s more about quality. The fees are still affordable and cheaper compared to private schools.” (Inf05-M).

The effectiveness of the madrasah’s admission strategies is evident in the increasing number of student achievements and the consistently high percentage of graduates accepted into prestigious upper secondary schools. The institution continues to produce high-quality graduates who are able to secure placements in reputable educational institutions. This was confirmed by one student who shared that they had been accepted into their preferred school, SMAN 3 Malang, through the achievement-based admission route (Inf04-M).

According to the principal, the most important outcome is ensuring that students can continue their education at institutions of even higher quality. He explained: “The most important thing for us is that after graduation, they can continue to a higher level, one that’s of good quality. So, for our students, just yesterday, 198 of them were accepted into MAN 2. It’s not easy to get into MAN 2, the selection is really strict.” (Inf01-M).

Based on the field data presentation above, it was found that MTsN 1 Kota Malang has established a highly selective and diversified admission system as a strategic response to its vision of becoming a competitive, high-quality Islamic educational institution of international standards. The admission criteria can be grouped into three main categories:

a. Academic and non-academic achievement. Students with proven records of achievement, particularly at the national or international level, are given priority in admission. This includes winners of academic competitions, outstanding performers in non-academic fields such as sports and arts, and students with exceptional Qur'anic memorization. The rationale behind this criterion lies in the school's aim to maintain and strengthen its reputation as a center of excellence, ensuring that the student body reflects the institution's competitive positioning.
b. Feeder school partnership through the integrated track. Graduates of MIN 1, a nearby high-achieving primary institution, are granted access to a special quota under the integrated pathway. This partnership guarantees a steady supply of high-quality students while strengthening institutional ties between primary and secondary levels. The selective requirement of a minimum average grade ensures that only the best candidates from MIN 1 are admitted.
c. Early admission program. By initiating the admission process earlier than most schools, the madrasah successfully attracts high-performing students who have a wider range of options. This strategy not only secures top candidates but also provides families with flexibility, enhancing the institution's appeal.

These criteria reflect a deliberate effort to align admission practices with the madrasah's vision of excellence. By targeting students with outstanding potential, the school cultivates an environment where achievement is both a prerequisite and a continuous expectation. The impact is clearly visible in several outcomes. First, the school has consistently produced students who excel in academic and non-academic competitions at various levels. Second, its graduates demonstrate strong progression rates, with a high percentage successfully admitted into prestigious upper secondary institutions such as MAN 2 and elite public schools like SMAN 3 Malang.

Beyond measurable achievements, the criteria also influence the broader character development of students. Parents and students alike highlighted the institution's role not only in enhancing academic performance but also in nurturing values and discipline, which they considered equally important. While the admission policies tend to attract students from middle- to upper-class families, provisions for underprivileged students through scholarships and fee exemptions ensure inclusivity and uphold the school's commitment to equitable access.

In sum, the selective admission system at MTsN 1 Kota Malang is not merely an administrative mechanism but a strategic instrument. By carefully defining who gains entry and under what conditions, the madrasah effectively

shapes the quality of its student body, strengthens its institutional reputation, and ensures that its graduates are well-positioned for success in both academic achievement and character development.

2. Student Consent as Admission Logic in Pesantren

Pondok Pesantren Daarul Ukhuwah (PPDU) introduces itself with the slogan *"Mencetak Ulama Pejuang"* (*Nurturing Warrior Scholars*). This slogan encapsulates the institution's vision: *"*To establish PPDU as both a field of worship and a leading Islamic educational center that nurtures a Rabbani generation committed to producing warrior scholars.*"* Guided by this vision, PPDU aspires to develop graduates with the characteristics of a *Rabbani* generation: firm faith, correct worship, independence and progress, active proficiency in Arabic and English, broad knowledge and love of learning, noble character, strong discipline, and memorization of at least six chapters (*juz*) of the Qur'an.

The leaders of PPDU consistently emphasize that the school's core service is directly aligned with this vision. As the *mudir* (head of the pesantren) explained: "From the beginning, our vision has been to establish Daarul Ukhuwah as both a place of worship and a model Islamic educational center that nurtures a Rabbani generation of warrior scholars. The point of 'warrior scholars' is always emphasized in our vision—we even post it in visible places to remind everyone" (Inf01-P), supported by the principal of the junior high school: "Our Kyai often says that the mission of the pesantren is to eventually establish at least one pesantren in every province. Beyond that, the goal is to nurture 1,000 warrior scholars. That's what he always reminds us" (Inf02-P).

To realize this vision, PPDU integrates a boarding school environment with formal education. It operates both a junior high school (SMP) and a senior high school (MA), offering a structured six-year educational program followed by an additional year dedicated to service (*pengabdian*) and Qur'anic memorization (*tahfidz*). Given its long-term vision, PPDU places significant emphasis on selecting students who are not only competent in basic religious knowledge but also committed to the full six-year program. New students are required to demonstrate basic Qur'anic literacy and agree to remain in the pesantren until completion. As the head of SMP explained: "The test includes basic sixth-grade mathematics, Qur'an reading, and an interview to assess their commitment to completing six years of study. Because our goal is to produce warrior scholars, Kyai requires at least six years of study. If someone only wants to join for junior high school, we cannot accept them. They must commit to the six-year boarding school program" (Inf02-P). And the head of public relations also explained: "Whether or not they are willing to commit to six years—that's the priority. This is not just a school, but a boarding institution with a holistic education. They must stay for six years, plus one year of service. If they only stay for three years, the formation is incomplete." (Inf03-P)

To further strengthen this commitment, PPDU prioritizes applicants with family members already enrolled, ensuring that incoming students and their families are familiar with the pesantren's culture and expectations. As noted by the Head of Public Relations: "When there are family members, for example a sibling applying here, we prioritize them. During the admission process—whether for new santri or school entry—we include this in the questionnaire. If they have a sibling here, we give them priority to ensure they can be admitted" (Inf03-P).

This approach has proven effective. Students shared that their decision to enroll was influenced by the presence of siblings or acquaintances already studying at PPDU: "I used to visit my brother here often, and when the girls' boarding school opened, I thought, 'I want to be like him.' That's why I joined" (Inf04-P). Parents also shared: "My son learned about PPDU through a friend whose older sister studied here. After hearing stories about how great it was—the strong language use, the activities—we visited and observed the environment ourselves. It reminded me of Gontor, especially the way they communicate in Arabic. It felt right, so we registered." (Inf05-P)

Despite its structured program, PPDU seeks to remain financially accessible. The pesantren maintains relatively affordable tuition fees to accommodate students from diverse economic backgrounds, while still ensuring the sustainability of facilities and programs. As the *mudir* explained: "We really want to make it affordable. We try to keep the costs as low as possible so more students can join, especially from an economic standpoint. Of course, we need to balance this with facilities, so we cannot reduce the fees too much. But we believe the fees are reasonable, and we still try to offer financial relief whenever possible." (Inf01-P)

Interviews with students and parents indicate high satisfaction with PPDU's outcomes, particularly in Arabic proficiency and Qur'an memorization: "Now I can speak Arabic and memorize the Qur'an. We follow the KMI system from Gontor, and there's also a special tahfidz program. Students join based on their ability. If someone can manage all 30 juz, they go to the special class. At the very least, we aim to memorize 5–6 juz while studying here" (Inf04-P); "The first thing I wanted to observe was the communication. I really wanted to see if the students were truly speaking Arabic. After walking around, I found that nearly 100% of their communication is in Arabic" (Inf05-P).

The success of this educational model is reflected in the achievements of PPDU alumni, many of whom continue their studies at prestigious international universities in Turkey, Medina, Sudan, and Egypt. For some students, this global opportunity is a key motivation to join PPDU, as confirmed by one female student whose relative is already studying in Egypt. As the head of SMP PPDU explained: "The results are clear from our students. Much of the information comes from parents themselves, who spread the word to relatives and neighbors. That's how it usually happens. Now that we have alumni, many of them are in Turkey, Medina, Sudan, and Egypt" (Inf02-P).

The findings from Daarul Ukhuwah Islamic Boarding School (PPDU) reveal that the institution's admission strategy is deeply intertwined with its vision of producing ulama pejuang (warrior scholars). Unlike schools or madrasahs that tend to emphasize prior academic achievements as admission criteria, PPDU places significant weight on the students' willingness and consent to commit to the full six-year educational journey. This emphasis on "student consent" (the readiness and voluntary acceptance of the long-term educational path), emerges as a defining feature of the pesantren's admission system.

The selection process not only evaluates basic competencies in Qur'anic literacy and mathematics but also probes the students' and families' acceptance of the pesantren's vision. This is reinforced by the policy of prioritizing applicants with existing family ties in the pesantren, ensuring that students enter with familiarity and informed consent about the learning environment. By anchoring admission decisions in student consent, PPDU minimizes the risk of attrition, cultivates stronger alignment between institutional vision and student expectations, and fosters a coherent educational culture across generations.

The outcomes of this strategy are evident. Students not only achieve notable levels of Qur'anic memorization and Arabic fluency but also demonstrate resilience in completing the full six-year cycle. Alumni success stories (ranging from acceptance into international universities in Egypt, Sudan, Turkey, and Medina, to recognition in religious scholarship), further underscore the effectiveness of this consent-based admission model.

3. Discussion

The findings reveal two different approaches of students admission system in two kinds of Islamic secondary school (madrasah and pesantren): Madrasah privileges student achievement, while Pesantren emphasizes student consent.

Madrasah (MTsN 1 Malang) follows a meritocratic trajectory prevalent in global competitive schooling. By prioritizing measurable indicators (academic rankings and non-academic trophies), the Madrasah employs admission as a signaling device to the public. The achievement-based model adopted by MTsN 1 aligns with global trends in competitive schooling, where measurable performance indicators such as competition results, academic rankings, and extracurricular achievements are used as signals of institutional quality (Suleiman, Hanaf, & Bin Taslikhan, 2016). This resonates with the literature on merit-based selection that underscores the importance of visible excellence in securing public recognition and ensuring pathways for students into higher education (Molin, 2024). Strict selection criteria can concentrate on academically talented students, which can further enhance the academic profile of the institution (Takaku, 2020).

In stark contrast, Pesantren (PPDU) introduces a dimension that is significantly underexplored in existing literature: Student Consent. While previous scholarship has extensively debated student commitment as a factor of retention (Wang & Wildman, 1995) (Davidson, Beck, & Milligan, 2009); (Gonçalves, Serra,

Storopoli, Scafuto, & Rafael, 2024), our study distinguishes consent as a pre-enrollment institutionalized agreement. At PPDU, admission is not about "who is the smartest," but "who is most ready to endure." By making Qur'anic literacy and the 6-year commitment the primary filters, PPDU utilizes admission as a risk-mitigation strategy to prevent "educational leakage" (dropouts) and ensure the transmission of deep-rooted "Warrior Scholar" values. Research suggest that more selective admission criteria are associated with lower dropout rates (Iannelli, McMullin, & Smyth, 2024).

The divergent criteria then also result in two distinct types of institutional excellence. The Madrasah's focus on achievement creates a Performance Advantage. This environment fosters a competitive culture where exclusivity breeds prestige, reinforcing the public's belief in meritocracy (Timer & Clauson, 2011); (Gebre-Medhin et al., 2022). Research shows that high selectivity is often associated with better educational outcomes and superior learning practices (Pascarella et al., 2006).

Conversely, the Pesantren's focus on *consent* yields a commitment advantage. By prioritizing applicants with family ties and informed consent, PPDU ensures that the student body is already "pre-socialized" into the pesantren's rigorous ecosystem. This finding challenges the conventional view that high-stakes testing is the only path to institutional quality. In the context of Islamic boarding schools (pesantren), the "willingness to stay" (consent) is a more critical predictor of institutional success than "the ability to perform" at the entry level. Students enrolled in pesantren face emotional and psychological challenges, such as homesickness (Hadwen, 2015) and mental health issues (Chen, Chen, & Zhao, 2020). The move to a boarding school environment can lead to feelings of loneliness, making it important for students to form new friendships that provide emotional support (Reardon, Lushington, Junge, Crichton, & Agostini, 2023). Pesantren addresses this by prioritizing readiness and commitment in their student selection process.

The primary theoretical contribution of this study lies in the reconceptualization of Student Consent, shifting it from a mere ethical formality to a strategic selection category within educational management. To date, educational literature has largely confined student consent to the realm of research ethics. For instance, Rees et al. (2007) noted that only 13% of studies actively seek direct consent from young people. Even in legally advanced jurisdictions like the UK, the application of active consent remains predominantly restricted to social interventions or surveys (Bonell et al., 2023). This research breaks that impasse by integrating the concept of consent into the domain of institutional management and sustainability.

In the context of Islamic educational institutions such as *pesantren*, where students undergo long-term immersion in a boarding environment, the educational ecosystem faces high risks regarding long-term commitment. In this high-stakes setting, consent functions as an essential initial filter. While

conventional selection processes often prioritize "skill" (academic merit), the findings at PPDU demonstrate that selecting for "will" (formalized through informed consent), is strategically vital. This approach ensures a deep alignment of values between the student and the institution from the very beginning.

Furthermore, this study addresses the tendency in existing literature to conflate “consent**”** with “commitment”. Our data clarifies the fundamental distinction between the two: Student commitment is a psychological bond that evolves and matures during the educational process (Einolander et al., 2017; Strauss & Volkwein, 2004). Student Consent, conversely, is the foundational prerequisite that must exist before that process even commences.

In an intense boarding environment, consent acts as the **"**gatekeeper of commitment." By institutionalizing consent as an admission requirement, the institution proactively mitigates the risk of "educational leakage" (student attrition or disengagement). This evidence strengthens the theory of student empowerment proposed by Rees et al. (2007); through the mechanism of consent, students are no longer viewed as passive objects "placed" by their parents, but as active "partners" in an educational contract starting from day one. These findings offer a critical strategic dimension to student admission practices, particularly as modern pesantren face intensifying institutional competition and must adopt robust strategic management (Rahmatullah, Maisyarah, & Mutamakin, 2025), alongside innovative programming (Irwandi & Zulhimma, 2025) to maintain their competitive edge.

D. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that admission systems in Islamic educational institutions are not merely technical filters but are profound manifestations of institutional ideology. While the achievement-based model at MTsN 1 Kota Malang successfully positions the institution within the global meritocratic landscape, the consent-based model at PPDU offers a critical alternative for institutions where long-term character formation and mission-continuity are the primary goals. The emergence of "Student Consent" as a distinct conceptual framework represents the most significant contribution of this research. By shifting the focus from “what a student has achieved*”* (past performance) to “what a student is willing to endure” (future commitment), this study provides a new lens to understand student retention and institutional stability. This finding suggests that in high-commitment environments like Pesantrens, informed consent at the point of entry is a more reliable predictor of success than standardized academic metrics.

Practically, these findings suggest that educational policymakers and school leaders should not view admission criteria as a "one-size-fits-all" meritocratic tool. For institutions facing high attrition rates or those with specialized ideological missions, integrating consent-based assessments (such as evaluating family alignment and pre-enrollment psychological readiness), could be

more effective than purely academic testing. Theoretically, the introduction of student consent invites further scholarly inquiry. Future research should explore the empirical measurement of consent and furthermore, investigating how this model can be adapted to non-religious boarding schools would provide valuable insights into the universal applicability of "consent" as a strategic admission pillar.

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