



# A value-based Aswaja curriculum approach to strengthen moderate Islamic character in higher education

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# A value-based Aswaja curriculum approach to strengthen moderate Islamic character in higher education

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the weakening internalisation of Islamic values in Islamic higher education, focusing on Nahdlatul Ulama institutions where Ahlussunnah Wal-Jama'ah (Aswaja) serves as an ideological foundation for strengthening moderate Islamic character. Using a qualitative multiple case study at Wahid Hasyim University Semarang and Balekambang Polytechnic Jepara, data were collected through in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and analysis of curriculum and institutional policy documents. The findings reveal four key patterns: Aswaja values are more strongly embedded in formal religious activities than in academic learning; institutional policies lack measurable indicators for Aswaja-based character outcomes; campus leadership plays a decisive role in shaping Aswaja institutional culture; and students tend to perceive Aswaja as an institutional identity rather than an ethical framework guiding academic practice. These findings indicate a gap between the normative vision of Aswaja and its practical implementation, resulting in symbolic and fragmented internalisation. This study concludes that strengthening moderate Islamic character requires a systemic Aswaja value-based curriculum integrating conceptual, pedagogical, and institutional dimensions, positioning Aswaja as an epistemological framework rather than merely a cultural symbol.



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## Introduction

The weakening internalisation of moderate Islamic values among students in Islamic higher education institutions represents a serious paradox amid the expansion and institutional strengthening of religious-based universities. This weakening is particularly evident in declining social spirituality, inclusive religious attitudes, and engagement with campus religious life. Recent empirical studies indicate that a significant proportion of students demonstrate low levels of religious tolerance and moderation.

Saputra (2023) reports that 30.16% of students fall into low or very low categories of religious tolerance, while data from the Ministry of Religious Affairs' Religious Moderation and Human Resource Development Agency (2024) show a 12% decline in student participation in campus religious activities. These trends suggest not merely a quantitative decline in religious engagement, but a deeper problem of value internalisation within academic environments. Supporting this concern, several studies highlight limited understanding of religious moderation among young Muslims (Faradhillah, 2025; Nur et al., 2023; Widayat et al., 2025; Zuhri et al., 2023). Together, these findings underscore the urgency of strengthening a curriculum that systematically internalises moderate Islamic values in higher education.

Curriculum plays a central role not only in knowledge transmission but also in shaping students' moral orientation, religious attitudes, and social ethics. Studies on Islamic education curricula consistently emphasise the importance of integrating Islamic values to form students' character and ethical awareness (Alfarisy & Iswandi, 2025; Arizona et al., 2025; Hadi & Prayogi, 2025; Safitri, 2024; Uswatun Khasanah, 2024). Empirical evidence further demonstrates that curricula strengthening affective and spiritual dimensions contribute to higher levels of religious moderation and social responsibility within campus life (Budiman et al., 2024; Kholil et al., 2024; Mukhibat et al., 2024; Shofiyuddin et al., 2024). Other studies confirm that value-based curricula are effective in fostering inclusive and tolerant Islamic identities (Sa'adi, 2025; Salsabila, 2025; Santosa et al., 2025; Ubaidillah & Gürel, 2025). However, most of these studies approach value integration in a general sense and do not sufficiently address the ideological foundations that shape curriculum implementation in specific institutional contexts.

In the context of Nahdlatul Ulama-affiliated higher education institutions, Ahlussunnah Wal-Jama'ah (Aswaja) functions not merely as a theological orientation but as an institutional ideology that informs educational vision, organisational culture, and social ethics. Despite its strategic ideological position, existing studies rarely examine how Aswaja values are operationalised through curriculum structures, learning practices, and institutional policies. Consequently, the relationship between an Aswaja value-based curriculum and the formation of moderate Islamic character remains underexplored. This gap indicates the need for a deeper investigation into how Aswaja values move beyond symbolic affirmation to become a systemic framework guiding academic life.

This study aims to address this gap by positioning the Aswaja value-based curriculum as a key factor in shaping moderate Islamic character in higher education. Specifically, it explores the relationship between the structure of Aswaja values such as tawassuth, tasamuh, tawazun, and i'tidal and the processes through which Islamic character is internalised within academic environments. This relationship reflects not only pedagogical dynamics but also the interaction between institutional ideology, curriculum design, and academic culture. Accordingly, this study seeks to answer the following questions: How are Aswaja values implemented within curricula and academic culture in higher education institutions? How are these values embedded in educational policies and practices to shape moderate Islamic character? And how can an Aswaja value-based curriculum be transformed into a systemic strategy for strengthening religious moderation in higher education?

This paper argues that the effectiveness of an Aswaja value-based curriculum in shaping moderate Islamic character is not determined solely by formal curriculum structures, but by the broader academic ecosystem in which it operates. Current higher education practices tend to prioritise cognitive and instrumental learning outcomes, while affective, ethical, and value dimensions remain marginal. This condition is exacerbated by limited policy integration, inconsistent pedagogical practices, and insufficient role modelling by lecturers and institutional leaders. Therefore, strengthening Aswaja values requires a paradigm shift that views education as a holistic process of character formation and social morality development. Such transformation demands the systematic integration of Aswaja values across curriculum design, teaching practices, institutional policies, and academic culture, enabling Aswaja to function as both a pedagogical and epistemological foundation for Islamic higher education.

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## Method

This study explores the integration of Ahlussunnah Wal-Jama'ah (Aswaja) values in shaping moderate Islamic character in higher education. The research focuses on the Aswaja value-based curriculum approach as a material object because it plays a strategic role in forming students' moderate and contextual Islamic identity. Understanding how Aswaja values are articulated institutionally requires examining the curriculum, institutional policies, and academic culture across different types of Islamic higher education institutions.

### Research Design and Case Selection

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach using a multiple case study design. A qualitative approach was chosen because the internalisation of values is a complex, context-dependent process that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative methods alone. The two cases selected—Wahid Hasyim University Semarang and Balekambang Polytechnic Jepara—represent two models of Islamic higher education: urban community-based campuses and pesantren-based campuses. The boundaries of each case were defined by institutional policies, curriculum structures, and campus culture related to Aswaja values.

### Data Sources and Participants

Primary data were collected from 24 key informants (12 per institution) including 6 lecturers, 4 students, and 2 institutional leaders at each university. Informants were purposively selected based on their involvement in curriculum design, teaching, and policy implementation related to Aswaja values. Secondary data were obtained from relevant literature (Alfarisy & Iswandi, 2025; Budiman et al., 2024; Mukhibat et al., 2024; Prabowo Adi Widayat et al., 2025; Sa'adi, 2025; Salsabila, 2025; Santosa et al., 2025; Shofiyuddin et al., 2024; Ubaidillah & Gürel, 2025) to contextualize findings.

### Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected using three main techniques: semi-structured in-depth interviews with lecturers, students, and institutional leaders to explore perceptions, experiences, and reflections on Aswaja value integration; participatory observation of classroom activities, co-curricular programs, and social interactions to capture the practical manifestation of Aswaja values in teaching, learning, and institutional culture; and documentation analysis of Semester Learning Plans (RPS), curriculum guidelines, religious activity reports, and policy documents, focusing on materials that explicitly guide learning, assessment, and campus culture.

### Data Analysis

Data were analysed using thematic coding, which allowed identification of patterns, relationships, and contradictions in the integration of Aswaja values across the two institutions. Triangulation across interviews, observations, and documents enhanced validity. Additionally, preliminary findings were shared with selected informants (*member checking*) to ensure accuracy and reduce researcher bias. Patterns were then interpreted in relation to institutional ideology, curriculum design, and pedagogical practices to understand how Aswaja values contribute to moderate Islamic character formation.

### Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured by assigning codes to all informants and institutions. Participation was voluntary, and participants could withdraw at any stage without consequence.

## Results and Discussions

This section outlines three key findings that describe the actual conditions of the implementation of Aswaja values in Islamic higher education institutions. First, the absence of a standardised Aswaja-based curriculum model across study programmes indicates that the internalisation of Aswaja values remains sectoral and dependent on the initiatives of individual study programmes. Second, Aswaja learning is still dominated by a cognitive approach that focuses on mastery of concepts and memorisation, without touching on the affective and practical dimensions that shape student character. Third, the integration of Aswaja values in campus policies and academic culture is still

minimal and not yet systemic, as seen in the weak application of Aswaja values in institutional indicators and everyday academic culture. These three aspects indicate that strengthening Aswaja values in higher education still requires a more comprehensive and sustainable curriculum design and policy.

### The Lack of a Standardised Aswaja-Based Curriculum Model in Higher Education Institutions

Private Islamic universities generally do not yet have a standardised Aswaja-based curriculum model across study programmes. One Wahid Hasyim University lecturer stated, "Aswaja values have actually been internalised into all learning, but their application has not been maximised in each study programme. Religious study programmes are already quite strong, but general study programmes are still searching for the right form." A similar statement was made by a lecturer at Balekambang Polytechnic, "Efforts to integrate Aswaja values are already underway, but their implementation is not yet uniform because they are still limited to certain courses." Based on documentation, around 70% of Semester Learning Plans still place Aswaja values as a complementary aspect, not as the main foundation of learning outcomes. Table 1 (Integration of Aswaja Values in Semester Learning Plans, 2024) shows significant variations between study programmes in strengthening Aswaja values at the curriculum level.

**Table 1.** Integration of Aswaja Values in Semester Learning Plans

Higher Education Institution	Study Programme	Number of Semester Learning Plans Analysed	Percentage of Aswaja Value Integration	Implementation Category
Wahid Hasyim University	Islamic Education	15	85%	Very Strong
Wahid Hasyim University	Arabic Language Education	12	78%	Strong
Wahid Hasyim University	Islamic Family Law	10	73%	Strong
Wahid Hasyim University	Medicine	14	58%	Moderate
Balekambang Polytechnic	Software Engineering	10	65%	Moderate
Balekambang Polytechnic	International Business Administration	8	60%	Moderate
Balekambang Polytechnic	Public Financial Accounting	9	55%	Fair
<b>Average</b>			<b>68%</b>	<b>Moderate</b>

The data in Table 1 shows significant variation in the level of integration of Aswaja values between study programmes. Religious-based study programmes at Wahid Hasyim University, such as Islamic Religious Education and Islamic Family Law, show high levels of integration, reaching 85% and 73% respectively. In contrast, general study programmes at Balekambang Polytechnic, such as Public Financial Accounting and International Business Administration, range from 55% to 60%, indicating a moderate to fair level of integration. The overall average integration of Aswaja values only reached 68%, indicating that the implementation of the Aswaja-based curriculum is not yet fully uniform across all fields of study. Thus, the implementation of Aswaja values still tends to be centred on the religious sphere and has not yet found its ideal form in the context of general study programmes.

From the field findings, several main patterns emerged regarding the lack of a standardised Aswaja-based curriculum model in Islamic higher education institutions. First, there is a gap in understanding between study programmes regarding the meaning and purpose of integrating Aswaja values, resulting in each study programme interpreting it differently. Second, there are no institutional guidelines regulating the standards for applying Aswaja values in learning outcomes, resulting in partial and sporadic implementation. Third, some lecturers show great enthusiasm for integrating Aswaja values,

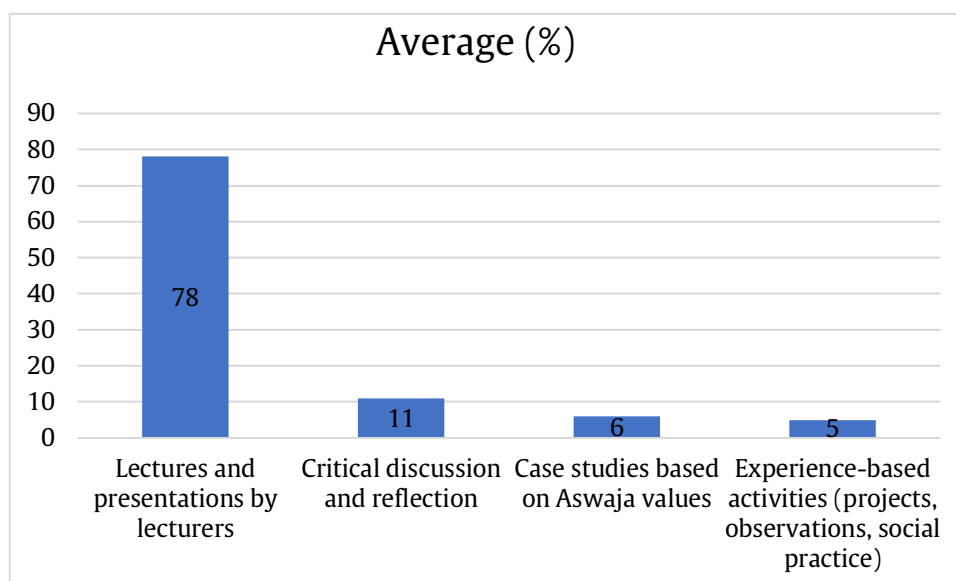
but are constrained by their pedagogical abilities and lack of applicable references. Fourth, institutional support is not yet optimal, especially in the form of training and academic supervision oriented towards a curriculum based on Aswaja values. These patterns reinforce the urgency of establishing an integrated curriculum model that can be implemented systematically across study programmes.

### The Dominance of The Cognitive Approach in Teaching Aswaja Values

The teaching of Aswaja values in Islamic universities is still dominated by a cognitive approach that emphasises conceptual knowledge and doctrinal memorisation. One lecturer explained, 'We more often explain the concepts of tawassuth, tawazun, and tasamuh theoretically, because lecture time is limited for field practice.' Based on observations of eight classes at two campuses, around 78% of learning activities are still centred on lectures and presentations, while the remaining 22% involve critical discussions and experience-based activities. The Semester Learning Plan and teaching materials also show a strong focus on knowledge attainment, such as 'students understand the concept of Aswaja in a social context,' without accompanying affective or psychomotor indicators. These findings are summarised in Table 2 and visualised proportionally in Figure 1 below. This data shows a tendency for cognitive aspects to dominate in the implementation of Aswaja values in formal learning.

**Table 2.** Percentage of Types of Learning Activities at Two Universities

Types of Learning Activities	Wahid Hasyim University (%)	Balekambang Polytechnic (%)	Average (%)
Lectures and presentations by lecturers	80	76	78
Critical discussion and reflection	10	12	11
Case studies based on Aswaja values	5	7	6
Experience-based activities (projects, observations, social practice)	5	5	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>



**Figure 1.** Average Percentage of Types of Learning Activities at Two Universities

The findings illustrate that the teaching of Aswaja values in higher education is more focused on knowledge transfer rather than internalisation of values. Lecturers and students tend to understand Aswaja as a set of theories that need to be memorised and tested, rather than as ethical guidelines or social practices. This situation highlights the gap between the ideal curriculum and teaching practices. Although some lecturers attempt to relate the material to current phenomena, such as religious moderation and tolerance issues, the learning process still does not touch on the affective and transformative dimensions. As a result, students can explain Aswaja concepts academically, but do not yet fully display behaviour that reflects these values in social interactions and campus life.

From the overall data, four main patterns emerged. First, Aswaja learning is still oriented towards knowledge transfer, not value transformation. Second, lecturers tend to prioritise cognitive achievement due to time constraints and administrative demands. Third, reflective and applicative learning activities are still sporadic, generally only appearing in co-curricular activities. Fourth, there are no institutional guidelines that explicitly direct Aswaja learning towards the affective and psychomotor domains. These patterns reinforce the picture that the cognitive approach is still dominant, while the practical dimensions of Aswaja have not been systematically accommodated in the Islamic higher education curriculum.

### The Lack of Integration of Aswaja Values in Campus Policies and Academic Culture

The application of Aswaja values in most Islamic universities has not been fully internalised in campus policies and academic culture. Based on observations of policy documents, only around 35% of institutional work programmes explicitly mention the strengthening of Aswaja values in their vision, mission or strategic activities. One institutional leader stated, 'Aswaja values are the moral identity of the campus, but not all policies are geared towards instilling these practices in everyday academic life.' These findings are visualised in Table 3, which illustrates the distribution of Aswaja values integration in policy documents and institutional activities at two campuses.

**Table 3.** Comparison of the Implementation of Aswaja Values at Two Universities with Different Contexts

Aspects of Aswaja Value Integration	Wahid Hasyim University (Urban Context)	Balekambang Polytechnic (The Context of Islamic Boarding Schools)	Average Implementation Percentage
The institution's vision and mission include Aswaja values	Explicitly listed in the vision and mission documents	Listed and elaborated in the Statutes and Academic Guidelines	100%
Academic policies (Semester Learning Plans, curriculum, learning guidelines) integrate Aswaja values	Partially listed, not yet a learning achievement indicator	Integrated into general and applied courses based on Islamic boarding school	60%
Institutional Aswaja activities (halaqah, mujahadah, Aswaja Day, seminars)	Routine, but their impact on student character has not been measured	Scheduled weekly as part of co-curricular activities	80%
Aswaja-based reward/assessment system	Not yet implemented in lecturer and student performance indicators	Limited implementation for students with achievements in religious fields	30%
Aswaja-based academic culture and campus ethics	Visible in certain activities, but not yet comprehensive	Become social norms and campus etiquette	70%

The data in Table 3 shows that the integration of Aswaja values in two Islamic universities is still uneven across institutional aspects. Although the vision and mission of the institutions have explicitly included Aswaja principles (100%), their application in academic policies has only reached around 60% because not all study programmes have made them learning outcome indicators. Institutional activities such as halaqah, mujahadah, and Aswaja seminars are already running regularly (80%), but the Aswaja-based reward and assessment system is still very limited (30%). In addition, the Aswaja-based academic culture has only reached 70% because its implementation is not yet comprehensive across all campus

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units. Overall, the average integration of Aswaja values has reached 68%, indicating that the process of internalising these values has not been systematic and sustainable.

From the results of the data analysis above, four main trends can be seen: first, the integration of Aswaja values is more prominent in formal religious activities than in academic activities; second, institutional policies have not yet established measurable indicators of the success of Aswaja values; third, the role of campus leaders is crucial in determining the direction of strengthening Aswaja culture; and fourth, students tend to view Aswaja values as institutional attributes rather than ethical guidelines for learning. Thus, the integration of Aswaja values into academic culture still requires a systemic design so that it does not remain at a symbolic level.

The findings of this study indicate that the integration of Aswaja values in Islamic higher education institutions is still at a conceptual stage and has not yet become systemic. Values such as *tawassuth*, *tawazun*, and *tasamuh* serve as moral orientations but have not yet become structural components in learning policies and practices. This condition shows that there is a gap between the normative vision and the reality of implementation. This pattern shows that the internalisation of Aswaja values is still symbolic and fragmentary, depending on the individual awareness of lecturers and institutional leaders. Thus, Aswaja has not yet played a role as an epistemological paradigm that guides the development of science and academic culture as a whole in Islamic universities.

When compared to Islamic universities under the auspices of Islamic boarding schools, the integration of Aswaja values in public institutions tends to be weaker and more administrative (Mudhofi et al., 2025; Saida & Said, 2024). Islamic boarding school-based universities make Aswaja values part of their academic habitus—integrated into daily rituals, learning, and social ethics (Asman et al., 2025; Kadi & Tamam, 2024; Kurniasih et al., 2024; Siswati et al., 2023). Meanwhile, in non-pesantren higher education institutions, Aswaja is more evident in the form of formal policies without the support of a habit-forming system (Kodijah et al., 2025). Bureaucratic institutional structures also slow down the internalisation of values (Pambudi et al., 2025; Yorman et al., 2025). This comparison confirms that the successful implementation of Aswaja values depends on the extent to which institutional culture supports transformative practices, not just declarative ones.

In order for Aswaja values to be systematically internalised, an integrated curriculum design is required that connects conceptual, pedagogical, and institutional aspects (Boluk, 2023; Kuwar & Acharya, 2024; Torbica, 2023; Wibowo & Sujarwo, 2022). The initial steps include the development of guidelines for the implementation of Aswaja values across study programmes and Aswaja-based pedagogical training for lecturers. Furthermore, an evaluation system needs to be implemented that assesses students' affective and social success, not just cognitive aspects. Campus policies must also be directed towards the formation of a reflective academic culture, where Aswaja values become the basis for decision-making and social interaction. Thus, the integration of Aswaja can develop from a mere formality into a transformation of character and scientific paradigm.

## Conclusions

This study reveals that the implementation of Aswaja values in Islamic higher education institutions remains unsystematic and fragmented across programs and institutional activities, indicating that these values have not yet become an integrated academic culture in policy and learning. The findings highlight that the success of Aswaja-based education depends not only on curriculum content but also on the alignment between institutional vision, academic culture, and leadership practices. The study contributes theoretically by developing the integrative Aswaja curriculum model, which connects policies, curriculum, and academic culture, positioning Aswaja as an epistemological and ethical foundation for shaping moderate Islamic character. Practically, the results provide guidance for reformulating higher education policies to foster both knowledge and character. However, the study is limited to two universities and a small sample, suggesting the need for further research across diverse contexts using broader and mixed-method approaches to systematically integrate Aswaja values into higher education.

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