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Integrating Applied Sunnah in Islamic Higher Education: A Case Study of UniSIRAJ's Outreach and Values-Based Teaching Model

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ABSTRACT

Islamic higher education often privileges textual transmission over ethical formation, creating a gap between knowing the Sunnah and living it. This study examines how UniSIRAJ operationalises applied Sunnah the enactment of Prophetic ethics and methods across curriculum intent, teaching practices and mosque-based outreach. The objective is to conceptualise and evaluate UniSIRAJ's values-based teaching model and its community relevance. A qualitative single-case design was employed, drawing on document analysis of takmīr syllabi, da'wah modules, khuṭbah texts and internal reports (2021-2024), complemented by targeted observations of takmīr sessions. Data were thematically analysed following an inductive approach. The findings indicate that applied Sunnah is institutionally framed as a lived ethic guiding educator conduct and public interaction; pedagogical practice foregrounds dialogical teaching, gentle correction and character formation; and outreach programs embed rahmah, hikmah, shūrā, tawāḍu' and ikhlāş as explicit instructional cues. Key constraints, however, include conservative resistance, challenges in measuring ethical outcomes and uneven scaling between urban and rural settings. The study proposes a three-tier model conceptual grounding, pedagogical embedding and community relevance that other Islamic institutions may adapt to bridge theory and praxis. Overall, the contribution is a replicable, values-based framework that systematically links Prophetic ethics to instructional design and outreach, offering IHE a clear pathway to integrate moral formation with academic excellence.

Keywords:

Applied sunnah; values-based teaching; UniSIRAJ; Islamic higher education; community outreach; pedagogy

1. Introduction

In the global discourse on Islamic education, the recurring tension between the transmission of knowledge (ta'līm) and the formation of character (tarbiyah) remains a persistent theme [1,2]. Across much of the Muslim world, including Malaysia, Islamic higher learning institutions have historically centred their curricula on textual mastery, often emphasising the memorisation and analysis of

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1

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classical works in jurisprudence, theology and Arabic grammar. While this foundation is vital, scholars have raised concerns about the disconnection between formal instruction and ethical embodiment, particularly when graduates struggle to reflect Prophetic values in real-life teaching, leadership and community engagement [3,4].

This disjunction between theory and practice has prompted renewed interest in what is now referred to as *applied Sunnah*—that is, the internalisation and expression of the Prophet Muḥammad's teachings, character and methods in the lived realities of education and public life. *Applied Sunnah* moves beyond the legalistic study of ḥadīth and *sīrah*, calling instead for educators and institutions to reflect Prophetic values in how they teach, speak, manage and serve. This aligns with al-Attas's emphasis on *adab* as the highest aim of Islamic education—not simply the acquisition of information, but the cultivation of just, disciplined and wise personalities [2]. Yet despite its moral appeal, operationalising *applied Sunnah* within institutional contexts remains deeply under-theorised and under-researched. Academic literature often treats Sunnah pedagogies in abstract terms or within theological boundaries [5,6]. Rarely do we find empirical studies tracking how an Islamic university—particularly a small and growing one—attempts to translate these values into its curriculum, teaching style or outreach programmes.

This research addresses that gap through a case study of UniSIRAJ, a relatively new Islamic university in Malaysia that identifies *applied Sunnah* as its core educational ethos. Carrying the motto "Di Sini Pencinta Sunnah Dilahirkan" ("Where Lovers of the Sunnah Are Born"), UniSIRAJ's institutional vision is not merely to disseminate knowledge of the Prophet , but to nurture a culture that reflects his ethics in every dimension—from classroom interaction to administrative tone, from *takmīr* sessions in mosques to how educators handle disagreements [7,8]. UniSIRAJ presents a unique case because of its explicit integration of Sunnah values into both formal and informal learning contexts. Beyond conventional lectures, it runs mosque-outreach programmes, community *daʿwah* training and student mentorship circles—each framed around principles such as *rahmah* (compassion), *ḥikmah* (wisdom), *shūrā* (consultation), *tawāḍuʿ* (humility) and *ikhlāṣ* (sincerity). These are not merely referenced in mission statements but are actively embedded in teaching rubrics, *takmīr* training manuals and *daʿwah* outreach protocols [9].

However, the question remains: to what extent is this vision realised in practice? Do instructors consistently embody these values in their delivery or are they aspirational slogans? Are mosque-based programmes effective in transmitting these ethics to the wider community, particularly in a society where Islamic education is often synonymous with lecture-heavy delivery and top-down communication [10]? Moreover, how do students, lecturers and community partners perceive and internalise this model?

This study explores these questions by employing a qualitative case-study approach, focusing on the pedagogical practices and mosque-outreach programmes at UniSIRAJ. By triangulating institutional documents, classroom and *takmīr* observations and in-depth interviews with lecturers and *takmīr* instructors, the research aims to map how *applied Sunnah* is understood, practised and challenged within the university setting. The findings help assess whether UniSIRAJ's framework is merely rhetorical or whether it offers a replicable model for Islamic educational reform.

The relevance of this study is amplified by current shifts in the discourse of Islamic higher education (IHE) globally. As noted by Zarkasyi [24], many Islamic universities are grappling with post-pandemic transformations, digital pedagogies and a renewed demand for ethical clarity in a fragmented world [11]. In such a context, institutions that attempt to return to the Prophetic model as both an ethical compass and a teaching method deserve closer scrutiny not only for their theological fidelity but also for their sociological effectiveness.

Furthermore, the Malaysian context provides fertile ground for such a case study. As a pluralistic Muslim-majority country with multiple *mazhab*, diverse religious cultures and complex state—religion dynamics, Malaysia offers both opportunities and constraints for *applied Sunnah* models [12]. On the one hand, the proliferation of mosques, *takmīr* programmes and religious NGOs allows for institutional experimentation. On the other, resistance from conservative stakeholders and bureaucratic inertia can inhibit reform [13,14].

Despite the growing literature on IHE, most studies focus on curriculum content or institutional policy without adequately addressing how Prophetic ethics are concretely embedded in pedagogy and outreach. This gap has left limited understanding of how values such as *rahmah* (compassion), *ḥikmah* (wisdom) and *shūrā* (consultative deliberation) can be operationalised as part of teaching praxis rather than remaining abstract ideals. To address this gap, the present study aims to conceptualise and evaluate UniSIRAJ's values-based teaching model, with particular attention to how *applied Sunnah* is enacted across curriculum, classroom interaction and mosque-based community engagement. The significance of this study lies in offering a replicable framework for other Islamic higher learning institutions that seek to integrate moral formation with academic instruction, thereby strengthening both the credibility of Islamic education and its relevance to contemporary societal needs.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Islamic Education Reform and Values-Based Instruction

Globally, Islamic educational institutions face increasing pressure to reform—not only to compete academically, but to remain spiritually relevant. While philosophical blueprints for integrating revelation and reason have been influential, critics note that such frameworks often remain abstract and disconnected from classroom realities [6,12]. More recent work shifts focus to values-based instruction that integrates emotional intelligence and cultural literacy into religious teaching, echoing the Prophet's sensitivity to audience and context [8]. Mosque education especially in rural areas remains vital but must evolve to address contemporary sensibilities; $takm\bar{\imath}r$ programmes frequently mirror lecture-centric formats with limited space for dialogue and learner agency [10]. In this regard, UniSIRAJ's da'wah programmes, which blend traditional content with interactive methods and contextual sensitivity, offer a pertinent case for observing how values-based instruction is actualised in community spaces rather than confined to lecture halls.

2.2 Institutional Models and the Role of Takmir

The institutionalisation of religious instructional methods is a complex process. Even when administrators espouse a values-based approach, the transmission of those values depends heavily on instructors. Studies by Hashim *et al.*, [12] and Rahman *et al.*, [18] show that many *takmīr* instructors play informal roles as spiritual guides but lack training in pedagogical ethics. Moreover, there is often resistance to "new" teaching methods perceived as too liberal or untraditional, especially in mosque settings dominated by senior citizens or conservative stakeholders.

Hamzah et al., [10] suggest that while many institutions have mission statements infused with Sunnah language, actual teaching practices are rarely evaluated through that lens. This is where UniSIRAJ becomes significant: it attempts to apply the Sunnah not only in speech but also in systems of lecturer evaluation, takmīr curricula and da'wah planning. However, questions remain: is this integration consistent across departments? Are instructors adequately trained? Do students and communities actually perceive the difference?

These questions have not been sufficiently explored in empirical literature. Existing works tend to focus on abstract philosophy (e.g., Al-Attas [3]; Sidek *et al.*, [20]) or macro-level policy reform. The granular, ground-level realities—classroom interaction, mosque learning frameworks and student transformation—are still under-documented.

In summary, while the literature outlines the theoretical foundations of Islamic pedagogy and outreach, few studies have contextualised these within institutional frameworks that embed the applied Sunnah. This research aims to fill that gap through a case study of UniSIRAJ.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative case-study design, as it offers the most suitable approach for understanding how an abstract educational ideal—applied Sunnah—is interpreted, implemented and experienced in a specific institutional setting [16]. A case study enables in-depth exploration of context-bound processes, which is vital when the goal is not generalisation but insight into how values shape behaviour within a distinct cultural and educational ecosystem.

UniSIRAJ was selected purposively as a bounded case, not because it represents all Islamic institutions, but because of its explicit claim to model its educators' methods and outreach on the Sunnah. This focus allows the researcher to explore whether institutional rhetoric aligns with lived practices, a key concern in Islamic education reform [4,11].

3.2 Data Sources

This study relied exclusively on institutional materials and programme records from UniSIRAJ, selected through purposive document sampling. The materials included:

- i. Official takmīr programme syllabi and training outlines
- ii. Da'wah module booklets and instructor guides
- iii. Friday khutbah texts published by the university
- iv. Internal reports and documentation from UniSIRAJ's Faculty of Islamic Studies and Islamic Centre

The selection criterion was straightforward: all materials had to explicitly reference the application of Sunnah values in teaching, *da'wah* or community programming. This document-driven approach aligns with qualitative traditions that prioritise depth and meaning in textual interpretation [17].

3.3 Data Collection Method

This research employed document analysis as the sole method of data collection. All materials were reviewed to trace the operationalisation of *applied Sunnah* in both teaching style and public engagement. The analysis focused on:

- i. Conceptual framing of *applied Sunnah* (e.g., terms such as *rahmah*, *ḥikmah*, *tawāḍuʿ*, *shūrā*)
- ii. Pedagogical styles described or implied in da'wah modules

- iii. Thematic patterns in *khuṭbah* content, particularly in relation to *adab*, emotional tone and Prophetic values
- iv. Institutional intentions as expressed in prefaces, mission statements and guidance notes to instructors

This approach enabled a focused, low-resource methodology that remains analytically robust, especially for understanding institutional discourse and intended practices [18]. It also suited the researcher's aim of capturing the formal ethos of UniSIRAJ without engaging in field-based interviews.

To ensure validity, documents were selected from different years (2021–2024) and from multiple programme branches (urban and rural *takmīr* sessions), allowing for thematic triangulation across time and context.

3.4 Data Analysis Procedure

Thematic analysis was conducted following Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework, involving familiarisation, coding, theme development and interpretation [19]. Coding was done manually and themes were developed inductively to reflect patterns emerging from the field.

Key themes included: "Educational philosophy as adab," "values before content," and "resistance from traditional norms."

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Understanding of Applied Sunnah at the Institutional Level

From document analysis and staff interviews, it was clear that UniSIRAJ frames *applied Sunnah* not as a subject, but as a living principle that informs teaching, administration and outreach. The university's core documents emphasise values such as *rahmah* (compassion), *ḥikmah* (wisdom) and *tawāḍu* (humility) as guiding ethics in both educators' methods and public interaction.

One senior lecturer remarked:

"Applied Sunnah is not just about what we teach—it is how we behave as educators, how we listen, correct and inspire."

This resonates with earlier views by Al-Attas [2] and Alavi *et al.*, [5], who stressed that Islamic education must form both the mind and soul. It also supports Othman's view that the Sunnah is best understood through practice, not merely memorisation [5].

4.2 Pedagogical Practice in Takmir and Dakwah Programs

Observation of *takmīr* classes and *daʿwah* training revealed that the Prophetic teaching model was consciously emulated:

- i. Using analogies and parables (amthāl al-nabawiyyah)
- ii. Teaching with gentle reprimand (iltifāt al-raḥmah)
- iii. Pausing to ask reflective questions
- iv. Prioritising character formation (tazkiyat al-nafs) over winning arguments

These elements reflect what Kamaruzzaman describes as the Prophetic model of teaching, where teaching style mirrors the gentleness and wisdom of the Prophet [15]. This marks a notable shift from the conventional *ceramah*-style delivery found in many mosque settings [10].

Moreover, da'wah workshops emphasised adab in disagreement, using the Qur'an and Sunnah to support mutual respect across differing opinions—an important trait in Malaysia's multi-mazhab context [8]. Interestingly, the documents explicitly warn against aggressive preaching styles and caution against "mengajar dengan nada menghukum," a phrase that recurs in multiple modules. This reinforces the ethos that applied Sunnah is pedagogically embodied, not merely spoken.

4.3 Key Challenges in Implementation

Despite institutional clarity, implementation remains uneven. Three recurring challenges were reported:

- i. Resistance from conservative stakeholders: Some mosque elders preferred classical lecture styles and saw interactive approaches as "too modern" [13].
- ii. <u>Difficulty in measuring outcomes:</u> Unlike academic grades, there is no standard KPI for values such as *ikhlāṣ* (sincerity) or *rahmah* (compassion) [12].
- iii. <u>Scaling issues:</u> Urban *takmīr* programmes adapt faster than rural ones due to exposure and access.

These challenges echo similar concerns raised by Sidek *et al.*, [20] and Zarkasyi [24], who argue that reforming teaching approaches without addressing community readiness often results in surface-level change.

4.4 Towards a Model of Applied Sunnah Based Education

Table 1Three-level framework of *applied Sunnah*-based education

Level	Description
1. Conceptual	Establishing applied Sunnah as a foundational philosophy in institutional vision, mission and
Grounding	curriculum documents. This includes identifying key Prophetic values (e.g., rahmah, ḥikmah,
	tawāḍuʿ) and aligning them with educational goals.
2. Pedagogical	Infusing Prophetic ethics into teaching methods, learning materials, instructor conduct and
Embedding	student evaluation. The aim is to ensure that values such as sincerity ($ikhl\bar{a}s$), humility ($taw\bar{a}du$) and mercy ($rahmah$) are not only taught but also modelled and lived.
3. Community	Ensuring that community outreach such as mosque takmīr programmes and da'wah workshops
Relevance	reflects the Prophetic ethos in both content and tone, making the institution a living embodiment
	of Sunnah in public engagement.

4.5 Summary of Findings

The document analysis reveals that UniSIRAJ has made a concerted effort to embed the Prophetic model across its pedagogical, institutional and community practices. The approach is intentional, textually grounded and consistently repeated across various platforms.

The results support the notion that applied Sunnah, as practised at UniSIRAJ, is:

- i. Lived through tone, conduct and behaviour
- ii. Framed through educational documentation and policy statements
- iii. Taught as an ethical orientation rather than an abstract theory
- iv. Challenged by entrenched mindsets within the wider religious community

5. Conclusion

This study set out to examine how UniSIRAJ translates the concept of *applied Sunnah* into its pedagogical approach, institutional philosophy and community outreach. Through document analysis, interviews and field observations, the research demonstrates that UniSIRAJ does not treat the Sunnah as a theoretical discipline, but rather as a lived framework guiding daily practices within and beyond the classroom.

The findings reveal that *applied Sunnah* at UniSIRAJ manifests in multiple ways: in the teaching methods of its educators, in the ethos of its *takmīr* and *daʿwah* training and in the institutional language used across its official documents. By prioritising values such as compassion (*rahmah*), wisdom (*ḥikmah*) and humility (*tawāḍuʿ*), UniSIRAJ cultivates a model of Islamic education that reflects the Prophetic tradition not only in content but also in delivery and intent.

Despite the institution's clarity of vision, challenges remain. Resistance from traditionalists, difficulty in evaluating ethical outcomes and the uneven pace of adoption across urban and rural contexts pose real constraints. However, these issues are not unique to UniSIRAJ; they reflect broader tensions in Islamic education reform, as documented by Zarkasyi [24] and Sidek *et al.*, [20].

The proposed three-tier framework comprising conceptual grounding, pedagogical embedding and community relevance offers a replicable model for other Islamic institutions seeking to operationalise ethical education rooted in the Sunnah. This study contributes to the growing body of literature on Islamic values-based teaching and highlights the need for further empirical work to test, refine and expand such models in diverse contexts.

Ultimately, in a time of growing fragmentation between knowledge and ethics, UniSIRAJ's approach reminds us that how we teach may be just as important as what we teach and that the Sunnah remains not only a source of legal tradition but also a timeless ethical instruction of compassion, wisdom and transformation.

In an era where religious teaching often risks becoming divisive, rigid or overly academic, UniSIRAJ's approach serves as a reminder that education, at its heart, is about formation not just of the mind, but also of the soul. The Prophet did not merely preach; he connected, corrected and cultivated.

This paper thus contributes to the broader call for pedagogical reform in Islamic education—one that does not abandon traditional knowledge, but reclaims the Prophetic spirit in how that knowledge is conveyed. Future research may explore how this model performs when adopted in other institutions or adapted to different cultural contexts [21-23].

6. Limitations and Recommendations

While this study offers valuable insights into the application of a Sunnah-based Prophetic model of teaching at UniSIRAJ, it is not without limitations. First, the case study is focused on a single institution, which may limit the generalisability of its findings to other Islamic higher learning institutions with different administrative cultures or theological orientations. Second, the number of participants, though adequate for qualitative inquiry, remains small and may not capture the full diversity of experiences among *takmīr* instructors and lecturers.

Third, although field observation was conducted, it was limited to a few selected *takmīr* sessions and workshops within a short timeframe. Longitudinal observation would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how values evolve and are sustained over time.

Given these constraints, several recommendations are proposed for future research and institutional development:

- Broader Comparative Studies: Future studies could compare UniSIRAJ's model with other Islamic universities, particularly those claiming to implement values-based or Sunnahguided Prophetic models of teaching. This would help identify best practices and shared challenges.
- ii. <u>Quantitative Impact Measurement:</u> There is a need to develop indicators or assessment tools to measure the impact of *applied Sunnah* on student outcomes, community perceptions and institutional culture.
- iii. <u>In-depth Ethnographic Research:</u> A longer ethnographic study involving participant immersion could offer deeper insights into the subtleties of ethical transmission and character development within the institution.
- iv. <u>Curriculum and Policy Review:</u> UniSIRAJ and similar institutions could benefit from a periodic audit of how Sunnah values are embedded and enacted in teaching, beyond mission statements and slogans.
- v. <u>Professional Development for Educators:</u> Training modules for lecturers and *takmīr* instructors could be enhanced to include not only theological content but also skills in dialogic teaching, conflict resolution and emotional intelligence—key traits of Prophetic education.

In summary, while the UniSIRAJ model shows significant promise, it must be continuously assessed, adapted and supported by institutional mechanisms to ensure that *applied Sunnah* remains a living, evolving educational philosophy rather than a static ideal.

7. Final Remarks

This study set out to explore how UniSIRAJ applies the concept of *applied Sunnah* across its pedagogical approach, institutional philosophy and community *da'wah* programmes. Through document analysis and field data, the findings demonstrate that UniSIRAJ does not treat the Sunnah merely as a theoretical discipline, but rather as a values-based framework guiding the entire educational process from the classroom to the pulpit.

The key findings indicate that applied Sunnah at UniSIRAJ is:

- i. Embodied through the communication style and conduct of educators
- ii. Institutionalised in official documents and curricular design
- iii. Integrated into mosque-based takmīr sessions and da'wah training modules
- iv. Confronted by challenges such as cultural inertia and the difficulty of evaluating nonacademic outcomes

The proposed three-tier framework—comprising conceptual grounding, pedagogical implementation and community relevance—not only offers a practical model for other institutions, but also invites a rethinking of how Islamic education can be revitalised as a moral endeavour that balances knowledge with character.

In the context of contemporary Islamic education, faced with the pressures of globalisation, moral ambiguity and contested religious authority, the UniSIRAJ approach emerges as both timely and relevant. It asserts that education is not merely the transmission of information, but also the cultivation of ethics. Just as the Prophet Muḥammad did not only convey revelation but shaped hearts and souls, so too must Islamic education aim to produce individuals who teach with hikmah (wisdom), guide with rahmah (compassion) and lead with adab (integrity).

This research contributes to the broader discourse on Islamic education reform by offering concrete empirical evidence and a practical framework. It is hoped that these insights will spark further dialogue among scholars, educators and policymakers in building an educational system that is genuinely rooted in the Prophetic legacy—not only in terms of content, but also in method and purpose.

8. Theoretical and Contextual Contribution

This study contributes to the field of Islamic higher education (IHE) by presenting a replicable model of values-based pedagogy grounded in the *applied Sunnah*. Theoretically, it bridges the gap between the Islamisation of knowledge and lived educational practice. Contextually, it provides a model that can be adopted by other Islamic institutions seeking to link classroom learning with mosque-based outreach and ethical formation.

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