

Integrating Tolerance and Religious Moderation in Sharia Education at Politeknik Negeri Medan

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ABSTRACT

This study seeks to examine how the values of tolerance and religious moderation are integrated into the process of Sharia education at Politeknik Negeri Medan. In the context of increasing challenges to diversity and the potential rise of radicalism within higher education institutions, this research emphasizes the importance of Sharia-based learning that promotes inclusivity, dialogue, and respect for differences. The study employed a qualitative approach, with data collected through interviews, observations, and document studies involving lecturers, students, and curricula related to Islamic studies courses. Data were analyzed using the Miles and Huberman model, which includes data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings indicate that Politeknik Negeri Medan has implemented the values of religious moderation in Sharia education through several strategies, including the strengthening of materials on wasathiyah (Islamic moderation), the application of dialogical learning methods, and religious activities that foster a sense of togetherness among students from diverse backgrounds. However, the study also found a need to enhance lecturers' capacity to integrate tolerance values more explicitly into teaching materials and learning evaluations. The study concludes that integrating Sharia education with the values of tolerance and religious moderation plays a crucial role in shaping students' character to be ethical, open-minded, and adaptive to diversity. The research recommends the development of an Islamic curriculum based on maqāṣid al-syarī'ah that focuses on nurturing a generation of moderate Muslims.

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1. Introduction

The issue of religious moderation and tolerance has become a central concern in Islamic discourse and higher education in Indonesia. As a nation characterized by pluralism, strengthening religious moderation is not only a social and political agenda but also an integral part of the national education system. Within this context, Sharia education, as implemented through Islamic Religious Education (IRE) courses, plays a strategic role in instilling the values

of Islam rahmatan lil ‘alamin an understanding of Islam that upholds justice, balance, and openness toward diversity. (Azra, 2019).

In recent years, the government, through the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, has continued to emphasize the importance of mainstreaming religious moderation within higher education institutions by encouraging structured programs and aligning campus policies with national moderation goals. Empirical research on Indonesian State Islamic Universities shows that religious moderation initiatives have been successfully integrated into academic and extracurricular frameworks, including curriculum development, orientation activities, and lecturer training, which reinforce moderation values across campus communities. These studies reveal that such programs contribute significantly to embedding moderation into teaching, learning, and institutional culture, demonstrating effectiveness especially where there is strategic alignment with ministry directives and active participation by academic leaders (Anica et al., 2025).

However, empirical research examining how religious moderation values are pedagogically operationalized within Sharia education in non-religious (vocational) higher education institutions particularly from lecturers’ and students’ perspectives remains limited. Most studies have focused on formal Islamic education settings such as Islamic universities (UIN, IAIN) or pesantren while general institutions like Politeknik Negeri Medan have received relatively little scholarly attention. In fact, such institutions represent potential social laboratories where students from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds interact, providing a valuable setting to examine the effectiveness of tolerance and moderation values through Sharia-based education.

However, previous studies have predominantly emphasized policy and curriculum aspects, while paying less attention to pedagogical strategies, practical implementation, and students’ responses to the internalization of religious moderation values. In other words, there remains an empirical gap in understanding how lecturers and students engage within a framework of moderate Sharia education in non-PTKIN campuses. Therefore, this study seeks to fill this gap by conducting an in-depth analysis of the integration of tolerance and religious moderation values in Sharia education at Politeknik Negeri Medan. The main objectives of this study include:

1. Analyzing the forms and mechanisms of integrating moderation values in Sharia learning processes;
2. Identifying the supporting and inhibiting factors in their implementation within a vocational higher education context; and
3. Evaluating the role of Sharia education in shaping students’ moderate, tolerant, and adaptive character toward diversity.

Theoretically, this research is expected to contribute to the development of a moderate Islamic education paradigm within general higher education institutions. Practically, the findings may serve as a reference for vocational higher education institutions in designing curricula and learning approaches grounded in *maqāṣid al-syarī‘ah* values that align with the spirit of religious moderation. Thus, this study not only enriches scholarly discourse in the field of Sharia education but also plays a significant role in reinforcing the foundations of national unity, tolerance, and harmony within Indonesia’s academic sphere.

2. Methods

This study employed a qualitative approach with a descriptive research design. This approach was chosen because it is suitable for providing an in-depth depiction of the integration of tolerance and religious moderation values within Sharia education at Politeknik Negeri Medan. The qualitative approach allows the researcher to understand the meanings behind

social actions, interactional processes, and participants lived experiences within their natural and contextual settings (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The research was conducted at Politeknik Negeri Medan, a state vocational higher education institution located in North Sumatra, Indonesia, characterized by its socially and culturally diverse community. The site was selected purposively, based on the consideration that the campus represents a multicultural interaction space, making it relevant for examining the implementation of tolerance and religious moderation values in the context of Sharia education. The data sources in this study consisted of primary and secondary data.

Primary data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observations, and internal campus documentation. The research informants included lecturers teaching Islamic Religious Education (IRE) courses, coordinators of religious activities, and students participating in Sharia-based learning activities. Informants were selected using the snowball sampling technique, which begins with key informants and expands through recommendations from previous participants (Ahmadin, 2022). Secondary data were obtained from official documents such as IRE course curricula, academic guidelines, and publications related to the religious moderation program issued by the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia. In addition, relevant journals, books, and previous studies were also utilized to strengthen the conceptual framework of this research.

Data collection was conducted using the triangulation method, combining interviews, observations, and documentation to obtain more valid and comprehensive findings (Denzin, 2017). The in-depth interviews explored lecturers' and students' perceptions of tolerance and moderation values in Sharia learning. Observations were carried out through non-participant observation in classrooms, campus religious activities, and student organization events. Documentation was used to examine institutional policies, programs, and teaching materials related to the implementation of religious moderation.

Data were analyzed using the the model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which involves three main stages:

- a. Data reduction selecting, focusing, simplifying, and transforming raw data obtained from field notes;
- b. Data display organizing data in descriptive narrative form to facilitate understanding and interpretation; and
- c. Conclusion drawing and verification – interpreting and verifying the meaning of analyzed data to answer the research focus.

To ensure data validity and reliability, both source and method triangulation were applied. Triangulation was conducted by comparing interview results with observations and relevant documents. The credibility of findings was also reinforced through member checking, by seeking informants' confirmation of the researcher's interpretations to avoid meaning distortion (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

All research procedures adhered to ethical principles of qualitative research, including obtaining informed consent, maintaining participants' confidentiality, and respecting the social and cultural values within the academic environment. These measures were crucial to maintaining the methodological rigor, integrity, and validity of the research process (Creswell, 2022). Triangulation of data sources—including interviews, observations, and internal documentation—was applied to enhance the credibility of the findings. Reflexivity was maintained to ensure that the researcher's perspectives did not unduly influence data interpretation. Overall, this methodological framework was designed to provide a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the forms, strategies, and challenges involved in integrating tolerance and religious moderation values within Sharia education at Politeknik Negeri Medan.

3. Results and Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that the implementation of tolerance and religious moderation values at Politeknik Negeri Medan has been carried out through several academic and non-academic mechanisms. At the curricular level, these values are integrated into the Islamic Religious Education (IRE) course, which covers key themes such as *wasathiyah* (moderation), *ukhuwah insaniyyah* (universal brotherhood), and *maqāṣid al-syarī‘ah* (objectives of Islamic law). The IRE lecturers play an active role in designing the Semester Learning Plans (RPS) that emphasize a balance between theological understanding and the practical application of Islamic values within the socially diverse context of the campus.

In addition, the learning approach applied tends to emphasize dialogical and reflective methods, where students are encouraged to discuss contemporary issues such as interfaith tolerance, differences among Islamic schools of thought, and ethical behavior on social media from the perspective of moderate Islam. This approach aligns with Azra's (2019) view that modern Islamic education must foster critical and inclusive thinking, enabling students not only to understand religious teachings normatively but also to contextualize them within social realities.

Extracurricular activities and student religious organizations also serve as effective platforms for promoting moderation values. The Islamic Student Activity Unit (Unit Kegiatan Mahasiswa or UKM) at Politeknik Negeri Medan regularly organizes interdisciplinary discussions such as "Islam and Diversity" and social-humanitarian programs in collaboration with interfaith organizations. These initiatives demonstrate that Sharia-based education at the campus extends beyond the classroom and functions as a mechanism for internalizing moderation values within students' social practices.

Interviews further indicate that lecturers play a key role in applying moderation values. Several lecturers adopt contextual teaching approaches, linking Islamic teachings to social phenomena such as interreligious conflicts, radicalism, and cultural globalization. The lecturers thus function not only as instructors but also as value models, exemplifying moderate attitudes and respectful interaction with diversity in daily campus life.

Beyond classroom-based strategies, another important approach involves institutional collaboration, particularly between IRE lecturers, the Student Affairs Division, and the Counseling Unit. This collaboration focuses on shaping students' religious character while maintaining respect for diversity and pluralism. Such institutional collaboration is in line with the concept of religious moderation-based education, which emphasizes that the cultivation of religious values and attitudes of moderation must be carried out systematically at the institutional level, not merely relying on the personal initiatives of individual educators (Habibie et al., 2021).

The main supporting factors for the implementation of religious moderation at Politeknik Negeri Medan include strong institutional and policy support. The university leadership places religious education as a central component of character formation. Moreover, the multicultural social environment on campus fosters an atmosphere conducive to openness and mutual respect.

However, the study also identifies several inhibiting factors. First, there is a lack of specialized pedagogical training for lecturers in teaching religious moderation, resulting in the continued use of textual-normative approaches that limit dialogue, contextual understanding, and critical reflection. Second, there is a shortage of contextual learning resources, such as case-based materials and interactive multimedia, which are crucial for helping students relate moderation values to contemporary social realities. Empirical evidence shows that the success of religious moderation programs in higher education is largely determined by lecturers' pedagogical competence and the adaptability of curricula to socio-cultural contexts, particularly in plural societies (Mukhibat et al., 2024).

Based on thematic analysis, the integration of Sharia education with the values of tolerance and moderation at Politeknik Negeri Medan occurs at three interconnected levels:

3.1 Conceptual level, where moderation values are internalized within the curriculum and teaching materials

At the conceptual level, the integration of Sharia education with the values of tolerance and religious moderation at Politeknik Negeri Medan represents a deliberate effort to reinterpret Islamic teachings in alignment with the realities of Indonesia's multicultural and plural society. Within the framework of Islamic Religious Education (IRE), the curriculum is not merely designed to convey theological doctrines, but to internalize ethical orientations that reflect the essence of *wasathiyah* the principle of moderation that balances religious commitment with openness, justice, and compassion. This conceptual orientation ensures that Sharia education functions not as a means of exclusivism or dogmatic indoctrination, but as an instrument of social cohesion and civic responsibility (Azra, 2019; (Habibie et al., 2021).

The development of this conceptual framework is evident in the structure of the Semester Learning Plan (Rencana Pembelajaran Semester), which explicitly includes learning outcomes such as understanding *maqāṣid al-syarī'ah* (the higher objectives of Islamic law), promoting *ukhuwah insāniyyah* (universal brotherhood), and fostering appreciation for religious and cultural differences. This marks a significant shift from traditional models of Islamic education that emphasize normative knowledge transmission toward a transformative and contextual paradigm. In this sense, Sharia education at Politeknik Negeri Medan is conceptually positioned as a value-based education that contributes to the holistic formation of students' character in line with Indonesia's national identity and pluralistic ethos.

Comparatively, Islamic Higher Education Institutions (Perguruan Tinggi Keagamaan Islam Negeri /PTKIN), such as Universitas Islam Negeri (UIN) and Institut Agama Islam Negeri (IAIN), have formally institutionalized religious moderation through structured curricula, policy alignment with the Ministry of Religious Affairs, and comprehensive academic discourse embedded in teaching and campus culture; this includes integrating moderation values across courses and co-curricular activities that are supported by faculty development and institutional frameworks (Anica et al., 2025). In contrast, non-Islamic vocational institutions like Politeknik Negeri Medan often lack such formalized and doctrinal frameworks, relying instead on the creativity and interpretive agency of lecturers to contextualize Islamic teachings within technical and applied learning environments, which may result in more ad-hoc and individualized interpretations of moderation. This distinction underlines a crucial point: while PTKIN institutions pursue moderation as a doctrinally articulated ideal supported by national policy and academic structures, vocational institutions operationalize religious moderation through praxis by connecting moral values to the lived experiences of students in secular academic spaces, often without the same level of institutional support or curriculum standardization.

Conceptually, the integration of tolerance and moderation within Sharia education at Politeknik Negeri Medan resonates with what Madjid (2020) describes as inclusive Islam an intellectual tradition that views faith as a source of ethical wisdom rather than a rigid set of dogmas. By embedding this understanding into the curriculum, lecturers encourage students to perceive Islamic values not as exclusive truths but as universal principles that support peaceful coexistence. This approach is further strengthened by the inclusion of interdisciplinary materials linking Islamic law with social ethics, civic education, and contemporary issues such as globalization, environmental responsibility, and interfaith dialogue. Such integration demonstrates that the conceptual framework of Sharia education has evolved from being theology-centered to becoming humanity-oriented.

The findings also reveal that curriculum design at Politeknik Negeri Medan intentionally incorporates moderation discourse into thematic modules. For instance, topics such as Islam

and Multiculturalism, Religious Ethics in the Workplace, and Social Responsibility in Islamic Perspective serve as vehicles for instilling the values of tolerance and civic virtue among students from diverse backgrounds. This approach echoes the call of Hasan (2021) that Islamic education must function as a moral bridge—connecting faith-based ethics with civic culture to promote national unity and global citizenship. By doing so, the institution aligns Sharia education with the broader goals of Indonesia’s Religious Moderation Blueprint (Ministry of Religious Affairs, 2019), which positions education as a strategic domain for countering exclusivism and radicalism.

From a conceptual standpoint, this study suggests that moderation in Sharia education is not only a theological construct but also an epistemological stance. It redefines the way knowledge about Islam is produced and disseminated—shifting from textual rigidity toward interpretive flexibility that acknowledges cultural diversity and plural realities. This aligns with Alwasilah’s (2021) argument that moderate Islamic education requires a paradigm reconstruction in which knowledge is contextual, dialogical, and emancipatory. The conceptual reorientation found at Politeknik Negeri Medan, therefore, reflects a paradigm of applied religiosity one that integrates Sharia principles into professional and social life without compromising pluralist values.

Moreover, the curriculum development process in this context involves collaboration among lecturers, curriculum designers, and institutional stakeholders to ensure that moderation values are embedded not only in course content but also in learning outcomes and evaluation systems. Assessment methods increasingly emphasize ethical reasoning, empathy, and cooperation rather than mere memorization of religious doctrines. This indicates that moderation is conceptualized as a multidimensional construct encompassing knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors. In this regard, Politeknik Negeri Medan exemplifies what Huda and Kartanegara (2022) term as “experiential Islamic education” a model that situates religious learning within the lived context of diversity and technological modernity.

Finally, the conceptual level of integration also manifests in the institutional vision and policy statements. The inclusion of religious moderation and tolerance within the university’s strategic plan signals that these values are not peripheral but central to the institution’s educational philosophy. This alignment between institutional vision and curricular design strengthens the coherence of Sharia education and its role in nurturing students who are spiritually grounded yet socially open. Thus, conceptually, the integration of Sharia education with tolerance and moderation at Politeknik Negeri Medan represents both an ideological commitment and a structural innovation within Indonesia’s broader educational landscape.

3.2 Pedagogical level, through dialogical and reflective learning strategies

At the pedagogical level, the integration of tolerance and religious moderation in Sharia education at *Politeknik Negeri Medan* manifests through dialogical, reflective, and participatory teaching practices that prioritize students’ active engagement and critical reasoning. Unlike conventional Islamic learning models that emphasize one-way knowledge transmission, lecturers at the institution employ interactive methods that position students as co-creators of meaning. This approach embodies Paulo Freire’s (2005) *critical pedagogy* a pedagogical philosophy that challenges authoritarian teaching and promotes mutual dialogue as a means to achieve intellectual and moral emancipation.

In classroom settings, discussions often revolve around contemporary issues that directly relate to students lived experiences, such as interreligious relations in multicultural societies, ethical dilemmas in digital spaces, and the challenge of maintaining Islamic identity in a globalized environment. These dialogical sessions enable students to express differing viewpoints and reflect on how Islamic teachings, particularly *wasathiyyah* (moderation), can guide them in navigating diversity without falling into either relativism or exclusivism. Such reflective learning processes reinforce Azra’s (2019) assertion that modern Islamic education

must cultivate *inclusive reasoning* a cognitive framework that allows believers to engage critically and empathetically with plurality.

Pedagogically, lecturers at Politeknik Negeri Medan adopt several strategies to ensure that moderation values are internalized through experience rather than mere theoretical understanding. The most common strategy involves *contextual learning*, where lecturers relate Sharia concepts to local socio-cultural issues in North Sumatra, such as interethnic cooperation and communal harmony. This localized approach ensures that students perceive tolerance not as an abstract moral ideal, but as a practical necessity in sustaining peaceful coexistence. Another important strategy is *problem-based learning (PBL)*, where students collaboratively analyze real-world cases—such as religious intolerance or online hate speech—and propose solutions grounded in Islamic ethics. These pedagogical innovations transform Sharia education into a laboratory for ethical reflection and civic dialogue.

A comparative look at Islamic Higher Education Institutions (PTKIN), particularly UIN Walisongo Semarang and UIN Raden Mas Said Surakarta, reveals that similar dialogical pedagogies and institutional advocacy for religious moderation are being increasingly adopted within their faculties, supported by both academic activities and state-mandated campus initiatives. However, the pedagogical emphasis in PTKIN often remains anchored in theological discourse and curriculum frameworks shaped by national religious moderation policy, with structured integration of moderation values across both academic and non-academic programs, reflecting a strong theological literacy orientation (Muhammad & Illiyyun, 2024). In contrast, vocational institutions like Politeknik Negeri Medan tend to contextualize moderation through applied case studies, ethical frameworks, and praxis-oriented learning that link moral values to practical, secular academic environments. This distinction reflects different epistemic priorities PTKIN emphasizes theological and doctrinal knowledge, while vocational campuses emphasize ethical pragmatism embedded in real-world professional settings. Nevertheless, both models contribute to the broader agenda of developing religious literacy that promotes tolerance, inclusive civic engagement, and social harmony within their respective educational missions.

Interviews conducted during this research highlight that the effectiveness of dialogical learning depends heavily on lecturers' pedagogical competence and personal disposition. Lecturers who embody *akhlaq al-karimah* including modesty, empathy, and intellectual humility tend to create a more open, inclusive, and respectful classroom atmosphere. Recent studies on character-based religious education emphasize that pedagogical moderation is inseparable from the educator's moral character, as lecturers function not only as transmitters of knowledge but also as living role models whose attitudes and behaviors significantly influence students' perspectives on diversity and pluralism (Habibie et al., 2021).

This perspective reinforces the view that effective religious moderation in higher education is enacted through everyday pedagogical interactions that model ethical conduct in practice.

Reflective learning techniques are also central to the pedagogical implementation of moderation. For instance, students are often assigned reflective essays or journals where they analyze their personal encounters with diversity whether religious, cultural, or ideological and relate them to Islamic principles of justice and compassion. These reflective practices encourage self-awareness and moral introspection, fostering an internalized understanding of moderation. As highlighted by (UNESCO, 2019), reflection-based learning is a key component of *global citizenship education*, enabling learners to connect local values with universal human ethics. In the context of Politeknik Negeri Medan, reflective assignments thus serve as a pedagogical bridge between Sharia education and civic responsibility.

Additionally, classroom observations reveal that dialogue-based learning often incorporates interfaith and interdisciplinary perspectives. In one example, a class session invited a Christian lecturer from another department to discuss shared moral values across religions. This pedagogical inclusion promotes what Alatas (2020) calls *intellectual civility* the willingness to

engage respectfully with different worldviews as part of academic inquiry. Such practices challenge the misconception that Sharia education is inherently exclusivist, instead demonstrating that Islamic instruction can serve as a medium for pluralistic engagement and peace education.

Technology-enhanced learning also supports the pedagogical integration of moderation values. During the pandemic, lecturers utilized digital platforms such as Google Classroom and YouTube to share multimedia content on topics like Islam and diversity and digital da'wah ethics. These digital materials combine religious instruction with visual and narrative elements, making the learning process more relatable for Generation Z students who are highly visual and social-media oriented. Research on Islamic religious learning in the digital era shows that technology-based interactive methods, such as educational videos, interactive quizzes, and social media discussions, significantly increase engagement and help students understand religious concepts in ways that are applicable and relevant to their daily lives. These methods not only enhance interest and participation but also facilitate the internalization of *akhlaq* and tolerance values through contextualized digital content and pedagogical design that aligns with Generation Z learning preferences (Rafsanjani et al., 2024). Thus, digitalization represents a crucial frontier in contemporary religious pedagogy, where moderation can be taught through both the content of the material and the communication style embedded in digital learning environments.

However, several challenges persist. Some lecturers still rely heavily on lecture-based instruction, limiting opportunities for dialogical engagement. Moreover, the absence of systematic training on the pedagogy of moderation leaves educators to rely on intuition rather than structured methods. This aligns with the findings of Huda and Kartanegara (2022), who emphasize that the success of moderation education depends on the institutionalization of teacher capacity-building programs. Therefore, the study recommends the establishment of *Teaching Innovation Workshops* at Politeknik Negeri Medan, focusing on dialogical pedagogy, inclusive communication, and the integration of *maqāṣid al-syarī'ah* into vocational contexts.

In sum, at the pedagogical level, the integration of tolerance and moderation in Sharia education at Politeknik Negeri Medan transcends the conventional teacher-centered paradigm. It transforms classrooms into dialogical spaces where faith meets reason, and where theology interacts with everyday ethics. This pedagogical transformation supports Alwasilah's (2021) argument that moderate Islamic education must foster *critical religiosity* a disposition that harmonizes conviction with compassion. Through dialogical and reflective learning, Politeknik Negeri Medan not only imparts religious knowledge but also nurtures emotionally intelligent, ethically grounded, and socially aware graduates who embody the spirit of *Islam rahmatan lil 'alamin*.

3.3 Cultural level, through the strengthening of campus culture that fosters mutual respect among students

At the cultural level, the integration of Sharia education with the values of tolerance and religious moderation at *Politeknik Negeri Medan* extends beyond the classroom and becomes embedded in the everyday life of the campus community. The institutional culture reflects an ecosystem that values diversity, empathy, and respectful dialogue as integral components of moral and intellectual development. This cultural embedding ensures that the principles of *wasathiyyah* are not confined to theoretical instruction but are manifested in interpersonal relationships, organizational practices, and community engagement.

One of the key cultural mechanisms through which moderation values are internalized is through the activities of student organizations, particularly the *Unit Kegiatan Mahasiswa Islam* (UKMI), which regularly organizes social and interfaith programs such as humanitarian drives, blood donation events, and cultural dialogues. These initiatives bring together students from different religious, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds, fostering an atmosphere of *ukhuwah*

insaniyyah (universal brotherhood) and mutual care. Such activities illustrate that Sharia-based education at Politeknik Negeri Medan operates within a *living culture of tolerance*, where Islamic principles inspire collaboration rather than segregation.

Moreover, cultural integration of moderation is supported by the synergy between various institutional bodies, including the Islamic Religious Education lecturers, the Student Affairs Division, and the Counseling and Guidance Unit. Together, these units coordinate activities aimed at promoting ethical behavior, conflict resolution, and emotional resilience among students. As (Habibie et al., 2021) emphasizes, the institutionalization of religious moderation requires *structural coherence* where educational values are translated into institutional culture, policies, and practices. The collaboration across departments at Politeknik Negeri Medan demonstrates this coherence by embedding moderation not only in formal learning but also in student welfare and community life.

Campus rituals and public communication also serve as vehicles for reinforcing moderation culture. For example, during campus-wide religious events such as Maulid Nabi or Ramadhan lectures, invited speakers are carefully selected based on their inclusive perspectives and moderate discourse. The language used in campus bulletins, banners, and public announcements intentionally emphasizes unity, compassion, and civic responsibility, reflecting the institution's commitment to preventing polarizing narratives. Research on diversity and student engagement in higher education demonstrates that inclusive communication practices, such as celebrating diverse religious festivals and visibly acknowledging different worldview traditions in official campus messaging, are associated with greater intergroup trust, pluralistic orientations, and harmonious relations among students of diverse backgrounds. These practices help create a campus environment where symbolic communication plays a key role in sustaining social cohesion and reducing susceptibility to conflict or extremist influences (M. D'Orazzi, 2025). Thus, inclusive rituals and public discourse contribute significantly to building a campus climate that embodies moderation and mutual respect.

The cultural approach at Politeknik Negeri Medan mirrors what Huda and Kartanegara (2022) describe as a *grassroots model* of religious moderation, where values are propagated organically through daily interaction rather than imposed through top-down policies. Students learn moderation not through formal lectures but through lived experiences of cooperation, dialogue, and shared community service. This experiential process contributes to what Alatas (2020) calls *intellectual civility*, a cultural disposition to disagree respectfully and seek common ground. Such civility forms the ethical foundation of pluralistic societies and represents the ultimate expression of *Islam rahmatan lil 'alamin* within educational contexts.

Comparatively, the cultural implementation of moderation in Islamic Higher Education Institutions (PTKIN) is often characterized by formalized programs such as *Moderation Centers (Pusat Moderasi Beragama)* and government-sponsored training modules. These programs provide structured frameworks but sometimes risk becoming bureaucratic exercises detached from students' everyday realities. In contrast, at non-Islamic institutions like Politeknik Negeri Medan, the cultural approach is more spontaneous and relational, emerging from students' shared experiences in academic and extracurricular life. This bottom-up dynamic enables the development of authentic, peer-driven expressions of tolerance that may be more sustainable in the long run. The comparison thus reveals that moderation culture flourishes not only through institutional regulation but also through organic social interaction.

Furthermore, the study's observations show that the multicultural composition of the student body at Politeknik Negeri Medan plays a pivotal role in shaping the moderation culture. Students come from diverse religious affiliations, ethnic groups (Batak, Javanese, Malay, Minangkabau, Chinese-Indonesian), and socio-economic backgrounds. This diversity provides a natural laboratory for intergroup learning, where differences become sources of enrichment rather than division. Research on educational diversity demonstrates that exposure to a culturally heterogeneous student body especially where friendships and sustained interactions

across groups occur can significantly foster tolerance, intergroup understanding, and socially cohesive identities within educational settings. Findings from studies on school and university environments highlight that diverse student interactions are associated with higher levels of trust and tolerant attitudes, underscoring the importance of diversity as a driver for inclusive social outcomes in educational communities (Bleck et al., 2025). Thus, the daily coexistence among students itself becomes an informal curriculum for tolerance.

Importantly, this cultural integration is sustained by institutional leadership that actively promotes openness and inclusivity. The Director and academic administrators frequently emphasize moderation and civic virtue in their speeches and policy decisions, such as providing equal access to worship facilities and supporting interfaith volunteer initiatives. This leadership alignment ensures that moderation is not perceived as an abstract religious agenda but as a shared institutional value guiding governance, discipline, and community relations. As Hasan (2021) notes, leadership commitment to pluralism is one of the strongest predictors of a sustainable culture of moderation in higher education.

However, maintaining this inclusive culture presents ongoing challenges. One challenge lies in balancing the moral identity of Sharia education with the secular and technical nature of a vocational institution. Some conservative student groups occasionally express concerns that openness to other beliefs might dilute religious authenticity. Addressing this tension requires continuous cultural mediation—emphasizing that tolerance and moderation do not contradict faith, but rather actualize its ethical dimensions. This is consistent with Alwasilah's (2021) argument that the pedagogical and cultural integration of moderation must involve *de-theologizing exclusivism*, reframing faith as a dynamic source of social harmony.

Another significant challenge is the lack of systematic institutional documentation and empirical research on moderation practices, especially in higher education settings where daily moderation activities often remain informal and unrecorded. This absence of documentation hampers the ability of institutions to evaluate the long-term impact of their efforts in shaping student attitudes toward pluralism and tolerance. Recent research highlights that while religious moderation has gained broader academic attention, studies remain fragmented and rarely focus on institutional evaluation frameworks or systematic assessments of outcomes in educational contexts such as universities and polytechnics. Global mapping of the literature suggests an increasing trend in publications on religious moderation and its role in fostering peace and inter-group understanding, yet stresses the need for more comparative, data-driven, and evaluative research that goes beyond descriptive reporting of practices. Therefore, future efforts at Politeknik Negeri Medan should include establishing a Religious Moderation Task Force with the explicit mandate to document initiatives, develop tools for measuring student attitudes toward pluralism, and publish findings that contribute not only to institutional improvement but also to the national and international discourse on moderate Islamic education.

Ultimately, the cultural integration of Sharia education with tolerance and moderation at Politeknik Negeri Medan demonstrates that education is not only about knowledge transmission but also about cultivating a moral ecosystem. Through its inclusive campus culture, the institution provides a living example of how moderate Islamic values can coexist harmoniously with modern vocational education. This aligns with the *maqāṣid al-syarī'ah* principle of preserving human dignity (*hifz al-nafs*) and social harmony (*hifz al-'ird*), reaffirming that the essence of Sharia is to promote justice, compassion, and coexistence.

Therefore, the cultural dimension completes the conceptual and pedagogical levels discussed earlier, forming an integrated model of Sharia education that is both spiritually grounded and socially adaptive. This triadic model conceptual, pedagogical, and cultural—offers a replicable framework for other non-Islamic higher education institutions seeking to embed moderation within their educational ethos. It also contributes to the theoretical development of *moderate Islamic education* as a holistic paradigm that bridges theology,

pedagogy, and culture in nurturing a new generation of ethical, tolerant, and globally conscious Muslim professionals.

These findings confirm that the implementation of moderate Islamic education is not merely a theological matter, but also reveals tensions between normative religious teachings and practical pedagogical challenges within vocational (Alwasilah, 2021). The integration of Sharia education with religious moderation values in vocational higher education reflects a paradigm shift that resonates with global discussions on faith-based education, pluralism, and social cohesion from an indoctrinative approach toward a dialogical and participatory model, which is more relevant to Indonesia's multicultural context.

Theoretically, this research expands the understanding of moderate Islamic education within non-Islamic higher education institutions (non-PTKIN) a domain that remains underexplored in academic literature. Practically, the study recommends that higher education policymakers institutionalize religious moderation through formal regulations, lecturer training programs, and standardized learning outcomes within vocational curricula, enhance lecturers' pedagogical competence, and develop teaching materials grounded in *maqāsid al-syarī'ah* and national values to nurture a generation of Muslims who are moderate, inclusive, and adaptive to global diversity.

4. Conclusion

This study affirms that the integration of Sharia education with the values of tolerance and religious moderation at Politeknik Negeri Medan has been implemented through conceptual, pedagogical, and cultural approaches. At the conceptual level, the values of *wasathiyah* (moderation), *ukhuwah insaniyyah* (universal brotherhood), and *maqāsid al-syarī'ah* (objectives of Islamic law) have been integrated into the Islamic Religious Education (IRE) curriculum. At the pedagogical level, lecturers employ dialogical, contextual, and reflective learning methods that enable students to understand Islamic teachings rationally and to remain open to diversity. At the cultural level, the campus fosters an inclusive social environment through religious and social activities involving students from diverse religious, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds.

The findings further indicate that the effectiveness of integrating religious moderation values in Sharia education is not determined solely by the curriculum but also by lecturers' pedagogical competence, institutional support, and an academic culture that values diversity. Politeknik Negeri Medan represents a relevant model for implementing Sharia education within non-religious higher education institutions, positioning religious moderation as the foundation for developing students' religious, tolerant, and nationally oriented character.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the development of a moderate Islamic education paradigm by extending the discourse of religious moderation into the context of non-PTKIN vocational higher education institutions, an area that has received limited scholarly attention. Practically, the findings can serve as a reference for general higher education institutions in designing curricula and learning strategies grounded in religious moderation and national values to prevent the rise of intolerance within campus environments.

Nevertheless, this study has certain limitations regarding its research scope, institutional focus, and reliance on qualitative data, which may limit the generalizability of the findings and the number of informants. Future research is therefore recommended to expand the investigation across various vocational higher education institutions in Indonesia to obtain a more comprehensive understanding. Furthermore, future studies are encouraged to explore technology-based and digital media oriented pedagogical models of religious moderation, such as blended learning or digital storytelling, to address contemporary student learning behaviors, considering the increasingly dynamic learning behavior of the student generation.

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