

State Policy, Sharia Principles, and Institutional Transformation in Kuwaiti Islamic Higher Education

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Abstract

This article examines the transformation of Islamic higher education in Kuwait through the interaction of state policy, Sharia principles, privatization, digital modernization, and global higher education models. Using a qualitative library-based approach, combined with policy analysis and an integrative literature review, the study analyzes how Kuwaiti Islamic higher education has moved beyond a primarily religious-knowledge orientation toward a more complex institutional model shaped by governance reform, quality assurance, internationalization, and technological innovation. The findings show that Kuwait's higher education transformation is neither a purely secular modernization project nor a simple continuation of religious tradition. Rather, it is a negotiated process in which state regulation, Sharia-based ethics, private higher education, digital learning, and global academic standards continuously interact. Sharia principles influence curriculum design, institutional governance, financial management, and ethical accountability, while state policy provides the regulatory framework for privatization, accreditation, and modernization. The article contributes by proposing a Hybrid Policy-Sharia Transformation Framework to understand Islamic higher education reform in Kuwait. This framework emphasizes regulatory alignment, Sharia-based governance, pedagogical modernization, participatory reform, and integrated quality assurance as key dimensions for future institutional development.

Keywords

Islamic higher education, Kuwait, state policy, sharia governance, privatization, digital transformation, Gulf higher education.

Introduction

Islamic higher education in Muslim-majority societies is no longer situated only within the traditional question of how religious knowledge is preserved, transmitted, and institutionalized. In many contexts, including the Gulf region, it has become part of a broader conversation about modernization, state formation, knowledge economy, cultural identity, and global academic competitiveness. This shift is not simple. It does not mean that Islamic higher education has abandoned its classical foundations, nor does it mean that modernization always weakens religious authority. Rather, as Al-Asfour (2019) suggests in the Kuwaiti context, the expansion and restructuring of higher education often take place through negotiation between local demand, global models, and state policy. This negotiation becomes even more complex when religious values are not external to the system, but are part of the very grammar through which education, governance, and social legitimacy are understood.

In the Gulf region, higher education reform has often been associated with diversification beyond oil-based economies, the development of human capital, and the adoption of international standards. Kelly (2011) shows that Kuwait's higher education landscape has been strongly influenced by institutional borrowing, particularly through the presence of Western and American-style models. Yet such borrowing is never merely technical. It enters a society with its own religious, legal, and cultural expectations. Ross (2018) similarly helps us see that international educational models, when transferred into Gulf societies, must be adapted to local norms rather than simply reproduced. Here, a small but important question emerges. What happens when the global language of quality assurance, private universities, digital transformation, and internationalization meets the normative force of Sharia, national identity, and public moral expectations? Kuwait offers a particularly meaningful case for examining this question.

Kuwait's transformation of higher education has been shaped by state-led reform, especially since the early 2000s. Al-Atiqi and Alharbi (2009) indicate that the development of higher education policy in Kuwait has involved regulatory and quality assurance concerns, while Al-Asfour (2019) emphasizes that privatization was not driven simply by fiscal crisis, as might be the case elsewhere, but by a more distinctive combination of rising educational demand, global influence, and policy experimentation. The Private Universities Law created space for private higher education institutions and encouraged institutional diversification. At the same time, the state did not disappear from the educational arena. It continued to regulate, supervise, and shape the field through legal frameworks, accreditation procedures, and policy priorities. This makes Kuwait different from a purely market-oriented model. Its higher education transformation reflects neither full liberalization nor complete state control, but a hybrid arrangement in which autonomy, regulation, and religious-cultural accountability remain intertwined.

This hybrid character becomes clearer when Sharia principles are placed at the center of analysis. In Kuwait, Sharia is not merely a symbolic reference added to institutional discourse. Almutairi and Quttainah (2019), along with Albarrak and El-Halaby (2019), show in related governance contexts that Sharia compliance affects institutional structures, ethical accountability, and supervisory mechanisms. Although much of this literature has been developed in relation to Islamic finance and corporate governance, its implications for Islamic higher education cannot be ignored. Islamic universities and programs operate within a moral environment in which curriculum design, financial management, institutional ethics, and decision-making are expected to reflect Islamic values. Alajmi and Al-Shammari (2024) and BenSaid and Quttainah (2024) further remind us that Sharia governance depends not only on formal rules, but also on the effectiveness of supervisory bodies, ethical interpretation, and institutional implementation. It is therefore reasonable to view Sharia in Kuwaiti Islamic higher education as a normative and operational framework at the same time.

Curriculum is one of the most visible spaces in which this negotiation occurs. Alkandari and Alsuwailan (2019) argue that curriculum planning in Kuwait is affected by religious, political, and social pressures, making reform a sensitive process rather than a neutral technical exercise. Al-Nakib (2012) also points to the broader civic and cultural tensions that shape educational discourse in Kuwait. These observations are important because Islamic higher education does not simply ask what should be taught. It also asks what kind of human being should be formed, what kind of society should be sustained, and how modern knowledge can be placed within an Islamic moral horizon. The question may sound philosophical, but in practice it appears in very concrete forms, such as course content, language policy, teacher preparation, institutional governance, and the acceptance or rejection of certain pedagogical innovations.

The transformation of Islamic higher education in Kuwait is also connected to digital modernization. Alhasan (2024) and Alkandari (2024) indicate that Kuwait's development

agenda, especially in relation to Kuwait Vision 2035, has encouraged digital transformation, smart education, and technology-enhanced learning. Alkandari et al. (2024) further suggest that digital systems are increasingly becoming part of educational modernization. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this process, and Alkhalidi et al. (2024) show that e-learning experiences brought both opportunities and limitations, particularly regarding interaction, engagement, and pedagogical readiness. For Islamic higher education, however, digital transformation raises an additional concern. It is not enough to ask whether technology makes learning more efficient. One must also ask whether digital pedagogy supports ethical formation, religious understanding, intellectual discipline, and socially responsible learning.

At the same time, educational reform in Kuwait faces political and bureaucratic constraints. Alhouti (2023) identifies centralization, political pressures, and institutional limitations as significant challenges in education policy and reform. AlAjmi et al. (2026) further discuss how political-administrative realities, including Wasta, affect governance and decision-making. Alsaleh (2019) similarly shows that teacher policy and professional development are shaped by centralized structures and limited institutional autonomy. These challenges matter because even the most carefully designed reforms may become fragile when implementation is constrained by bureaucratic inertia, political intervention, or weak participation from educators. This is one of the reasons why a purely policy-oriented reading of Kuwaiti higher education is insufficient. Reform must be understood as a lived institutional process, shaped by formal regulation as well as informal power relations.

Existing scholarship has provided valuable insights into different dimensions of Kuwait's higher education transformation. Al-Asfour (2019), Kelly (2011), and Shammari (2022) illuminate privatization, governance, and institutional adaptation. Alkandari and Alsuwailan (2019), Alhouti (2023), and Al-Nakib (2012) help explain political and curricular tensions. Alhasan (2024), Al-Sharhan (2018), and Almutairi et al. (2022) contribute to the discussion of technology and digital learning. Meanwhile, Al Matar (2023), Kitamura and Alowaiyesh (2025), Muqowim (2021), Rashimbetov et al. (2025), and Alsaleh (2023) point toward broader debates on Islamic education, reform, and the need for more integrated perspectives. Yet much of this literature remains fragmented. State policy, Sharia principles, governance reform, privatization, and digital transformation are often discussed separately, even though in practice they interact continuously.

This article therefore argues that the transformation of Islamic higher education in Kuwait should be understood as a hybrid process in which state policy, Sharia principles, globalization, digital modernization, and political-bureaucratic realities mutually shape one another. It asks how state policies influence institutional transformation, how Sharia principles are embedded in curriculum, governance, finance, and ethics, what tensions emerge between privatization, global models, digital innovation, and Islamic educational identity, and how an integrated framework can better explain Islamic higher education reform in Kuwait. The aim is not to present Kuwait as a perfect model, nor to reduce its educational transformation to contradiction. Rather, this article seeks to understand Kuwait as a serious and instructive case, where the future of Islamic higher education is being negotiated within the overlapping demands of faith, state, market, technology, and society.

Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

Islamic Higher Education in the Gulf Context

Islamic higher education in the Gulf region cannot be understood only as an institutional space for teaching theology, jurisprudence, Arabic, or Islamic civilization. It is also part of a broader social and political project through which states seek to shape citizens, preserve cultural legitimacy, and participate in global knowledge economies. Safi (1986) already reminds us, in a more foundational sense, that Islamic education has always carried a civilizational function, because knowledge in Islam is not separated from ethical formation,

social responsibility, and the ordering of public life. In the Gulf context, this civilizational function becomes more complicated because Islamic higher education operates within modern state systems, national development agendas, and increasingly competitive global academic environments.

The Gulf states have invested significantly in higher education as part of national modernization. Yet modernization in this region rarely appears in a purely secular form. Kelly (2011) shows that higher education in Kuwait and the wider Gulf has been influenced by international institutional models, especially Western and American models, but these models are continuously adjusted to local legal, cultural, and religious expectations. Ross (2018) similarly indicates that educational transfer in Gulf societies involves adaptation rather than simple imitation. This is important because Islamic higher education in Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates is expected to respond to global standards while also maintaining continuity with Islamic identity. In other words, the university becomes a site where religion, state authority, and global modernity meet, sometimes smoothly, sometimes awkwardly.

Kuwait provides a distinctive example within this larger Gulf landscape. Al-Asfour (2019) argues that Kuwait's higher education reform has been shaped by privatization, policy innovation, and local social demand, not merely by economic necessity. This point matters because Kuwait, as an oil-rich state, did not privatize higher education simply because the state lacked resources. The reform was also connected to the desire to diversify educational provision, absorb rising student demand, and introduce new institutional models. Shammari (2022) further suggests that private higher education has become a significant part of Kuwait's educational structure, creating a more plural institutional landscape.

At the same time, Islamic higher education in Kuwait remains tied to national identity and public morality. Al-Nakib (2012) shows that education in Kuwait is often entangled with debates about citizenship, culture, and civic belonging. Alrashidi and Alrashidi (2026) also point to the challenges of cultural diversity and inclusion in educational settings. These debates are not marginal. They shape how Islamic higher education imagines its purpose. Is it primarily a producer of employable graduates, a guardian of religious identity, a vehicle of state development, or a space for critical intellectual formation? The answer, perhaps unsurprisingly, is not one thing. It is all of these, though not always in perfect balance.

State Policy, Privatization, and Higher Education Governance

The literature on Kuwaiti higher education shows that the state has played a decisive role in shaping institutional transformation. Al-Atiqi and Alharbi (2009) explain that higher education reform in Kuwait has been closely associated with regulatory development, quality assurance, and the need to improve institutional performance. This state role did not disappear with privatization. Rather, privatization created a new governance environment in which private providers entered the field while the state continued to regulate standards, licensing, accreditation, and public accountability. This is why the Kuwaiti case should not be reduced to marketization in a narrow sense.

Al-Asfour (2019) provides one of the central arguments in this discussion by showing that privatization in Kuwait emerged from a particular combination of local educational demand, global influence, and policy experimentation. The Private Universities Law of 2000 opened the door for private institutions and encouraged the diversification of higher education. Yet the growth of private universities did not mean that the state abandoned its supervisory authority. Kelly (2011) notes that Western-style institutional models, including American-style governance structures, entered Kuwait through private higher education, but these models remained subject to Kuwaiti legal, political, and cultural conditions. This produces what may be described as a hybrid governance system, although the term must be used carefully because hybridity here is not always harmonious.

The question of institutional autonomy is central. Alajmi (2022) suggests that autonomy in Kuwaiti education remains limited by accountability structures and centralized decision-making. Alhouthi (2023) similarly observes that bureaucratic inertia and policy centralization can weaken reform implementation. In practical terms, universities may be encouraged to innovate, adopt international standards, and develop modern management systems, while still being constrained by state control, administrative procedures, and political sensitivities. It is understandable, then, if reform sometimes moves unevenly.

Privatization also affects funding and institutional sustainability. Althaqeb et al. (2025) show, in relation to financial structures and Sharia-sensitive contexts, that financial management in Kuwait cannot be separated from ethical and legal expectations. In Islamic higher education, this issue becomes even more relevant because funding models, tuition structures, investment practices, and institutional accountability may be expected to avoid practices inconsistent with Islamic values. Bashir and Babiker (2023), together with Ginena and Hamid (2015), help clarify that Islamic financial governance is not only about avoiding interest-based transactions, but also about promoting ethical responsibility, transparency, and social justice. For Islamic higher education, these principles may influence how institutions justify their economic decisions.

Quality assurance adds another layer to this discussion. Al-Atiqi and Alharbi (2009) and Shammari (2022) indicate that accreditation and regulatory oversight are central to Kuwait's higher education reform. Still, quality assurance in Islamic higher education cannot be understood only through universal performance indicators. It must also ask whether institutions protect academic quality, religious integrity, ethical governance, and social relevance. This dual expectation is difficult, but it is precisely what makes the Kuwaiti case academically significant.

Sharia Principles, Maqasid al-Shariah, and Institutional Governance

Sharia principles in Islamic higher education should not be treated as a decorative religious layer attached to modern institutions. They function as a legal, ethical, and epistemological framework. Almutairi and Quttainah (2019) show that Sharia-oriented governance in Kuwait involves accountability, supervision, and institutional compliance. Albarrak and El-Halaby (2019) further suggest that Sharia governance requires mechanisms that can translate religious norms into organizational practice. Although these studies are often developed in relation to Islamic finance and corporate governance, their relevance to Islamic higher education is clear. Universities are also institutions of governance, resource allocation, ethical decision-making, and public trust.

The concept of maqasid al-shariah is particularly important here. Warno et al. (2025) and Prasojo et al. (2025) frame maqasid not merely as legal objectives, but as ethical aims concerned with human welfare, justice, responsibility, and the protection of essential human interests. In education, maqasid can help explain why Islamic higher education should not be limited to technical skill formation or professional certification. It should also cultivate moral reasoning, spiritual responsibility, intellectual discipline, and social contribution. This does not mean that Islamic universities should reject modern sciences or global academic standards. Rather, it means that such standards need to be interpreted within an Islamic ethical horizon.

Curriculum is one of the most direct expressions of this horizon. Alkandari and Alsuwailan (2019) show that curriculum planning in Kuwait is shaped by religious expectations, political pressure, and social sensitivities. Their analysis is useful because it shows that curriculum reform is never a neutral administrative task. It involves decisions about knowledge, values, identity, and public acceptability. Al-Nakib (2012) also helps us understand why educational content in Kuwait is often connected to larger debates about citizenship and cultural belonging. For Islamic higher education, therefore, curriculum

design becomes a delicate process of integrating classical Islamic knowledge, contemporary disciplines, national priorities, and global competencies.

Sharia governance also requires institutional mechanisms. Alajmi and Al-Shammari (2024) argue that Sharia supervisory structures can support ethical oversight, although their effectiveness depends on authority, expertise, and institutional integration. BenSaid and Quttainah (2024) add that variations in supervisory capacity may affect the consistency of Sharia implementation. This is a significant point. A university may formally declare Islamic commitments, but without credible mechanisms of governance, those commitments may remain rhetorical. Al Matar (2023), Kitamura and Alowaiyesh (2025), and Muqowim (2021) each point, in different ways, to the need for a more integrated approach to Islamic education reform, one that connects religious principles with policy design, institutional practice, and knowledge development.

There is also the issue of social responsibility. Ginena and Hamid (2015) and Bashir and Babiker (2023) suggest that Islamic governance involves ethical accountability beyond narrow legal compliance. Applied to Islamic higher education, this means that universities should be evaluated not only by graduate employability, publication output, or international ranking. They should also be assessed by how they contribute to justice, public welfare, moral education, and social cohesion. This may sound ambitious, but it is difficult to speak seriously about Islamic higher education without raising these questions.

Digital Transformation and Smart Education in Kuwait

Digital transformation has become a major theme in Kuwait's educational reform, especially in relation to the national development agenda. Alhasan (2024) and Alkandari (2024) indicate that Kuwait Vision 2035 has encouraged the adoption of smart education, e-learning systems, and technology-enhanced learning. Alkandari et al. (2024) further show that digitalization is increasingly viewed as part of institutional modernization. In this sense, digital transformation is not an additional feature of higher education. It is becoming one of the main languages through which reform is imagined.

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this transition. Alkhaldi et al. (2024) show that e-learning experiences in Kuwait revealed the importance of interaction, readiness, and pedagogical support. Digital platforms made continuity possible, but they also exposed inequalities in access, teacher preparation, and student engagement. Alkandari and Alabdulhadi (2023) discuss pedagogical innovations such as active learning and flipped classrooms, while Almisad et al. (2024) and El Tayara et al. (2026) point to the growing interest in virtual reality and advanced digital tools. Al-Sharhan (2018) and Almutairi et al. (2022) also contribute to the discussion by showing that digital education requires infrastructure, institutional capacity, and sustained policy support.

For Islamic higher education, however, the question is not only whether digital technology improves efficiency. The more difficult question is whether digital transformation can remain compatible with Islamic educational values. Can online learning sustain *adab*, reflective learning, ethical dialogue, and the relational dimension of Islamic pedagogy? Can artificial intelligence, virtual reality, and smart platforms be used without reducing education to data, speed, and performance metrics? These are not anti-technology questions. They are questions of educational purpose. Islamic higher education in Kuwait must therefore develop digital pedagogy that is technically strong, culturally grounded, and ethically accountable.

2.5. Conceptual Framework. The Hybrid Policy-Sharia Transformation Framework

The literature reviewed above suggests that the transformation of Islamic higher education in Kuwait cannot be explained through a single variable. State policy matters, but it does not act alone. Sharia principles matter, but they are mediated through institutions, regulations, and social expectations. Globalization matters, but it is filtered through local culture and national identity. Digital transformation matters, but it must be interpreted

through educational ethics. Al-Asfour (2019), Kelly (2011), and Ross (2018) help establish the importance of policy, privatization, and international models, while Almutairi and Quttainah (2019), Alajmi and Al-Shammari (2024), and Albarrak and El-Halaby (2019) show that Sharia-based governance adds another layer of institutional complexity.

This article therefore proposes the Hybrid Policy-Sharia Transformation Framework as a conceptual lens for understanding Kuwaiti Islamic higher education. The first dimension is state policy and regulatory reform. This includes privatization, accreditation, quality assurance, public oversight, and national development agendas. The second dimension is Sharia principles and ethical governance. This includes curriculum ethics, maqasid al-shariah, Sharia supervision, financial responsibility, and institutional accountability. The third dimension is globalization, privatization, and international academic models. Sellami (2025), Hillman (2022), Al Qenai and Wright (2025), and Ibrahim and Barnawi (2022) help show that global academic models influence language policy, curriculum, institutional identity, and market-oriented reform. The fourth dimension is digital transformation and institutional innovation, as discussed by Alhasan (2024), Alkandari (2024), Alkandari et al. (2024), and Alkhaldi et al. (2024).

These four dimensions interact continuously. They may support one another, but they may also create tensions. A digital reform may strengthen access while weakening ethical formation. A private university may improve institutional diversity while raising questions about marketization. Sharia governance may protect moral integrity while facing difficulties in standardization and implementation. State regulation may ensure accountability while limiting autonomy. This framework, therefore, does not assume harmony too quickly. It begins from a more realistic assumption, that Islamic higher education in Kuwait is being transformed through negotiation, adjustment, and sometimes unresolved tension between faith, policy, market, technology, and society.

Method

This article adopts a qualitative library-based research design, combined with policy analysis and an integrative literature review. This design is considered appropriate because the study does not seek to measure causal relationships statistically, but to interpret how state policy, Sharia principles, governance reform, privatization, and digital transformation interact in shaping Islamic higher education in Kuwait. Al-Asfour (2019) and Kelly (2011) provide important foundations for understanding privatization and institutional adaptation, while Alkandari and Alsuwailan (2019) help illuminate the political and curricular dimensions of educational reform. In this sense, the study is interpretive and analytical rather than experimental.

The term integrative literature review is used because the article brings together studies from different but related fields, including higher education policy, Islamic education, Sharia governance, digital pedagogy, and Gulf modernization. It does not treat these fields as isolated bodies of literature. Rather, it reads them together in order to construct a more coherent understanding of Kuwaiti Islamic higher education. This is important because, as Alhouti (2023) and Alsaleh (2023) indicate, educational reform in Kuwait often involves overlapping administrative, political, cultural, and institutional factors. A narrowly disciplinary method would likely miss these intersections.

Policy analysis is also employed to examine how state regulation, privatization, quality assurance, and national development agendas shape institutional change. Al-Atiqi and Alharbi (2009), together with Shammari (2022), show that Kuwaiti higher education reform cannot be separated from legal and regulatory frameworks. The study therefore reads policy not merely as formal government text, but as a structure that influences institutional behavior, curriculum planning, governance arrangements, and educational priorities.

The data for this study consist of academic journal articles, policy-related literature, government vision documents, reports on Kuwaiti higher education, and studies concerning Sharia governance, curriculum planning, digital education, and educational reform. The literature was selected because of its relevance to the central problem of the article, namely the transformation of Islamic higher education in Kuwait under the combined influence of state policy, religious principles, globalization, and technological modernization.

Studies on privatization and higher education governance form one important group of sources. Al-Asfour (2019), Kelly (2011), Al-Atiqi and Alharbi (2009), and Shammari (2022) are used to understand how private higher education emerged, how governance models changed, and how state oversight continued to operate. Literature on political and bureaucratic challenges, including AlAjmi et al. (2026), Alajmi (2022), Alhouti (2023), and Alsaleh (2019), is used to examine the constraints that affect reform implementation, institutional autonomy, and teacher policy.

Another group of sources focuses on Sharia principles and institutional ethics. Almutairi and Quttainah (2019), Albarrak and El-Halaby (2019), Alajmi and Al-Shammari (2024), BenSaid and Quttainah (2024), Ginena and Hamid (2015), Bashir and Babiker (2023), Warno et al. (2025), and Prasojo et al. (2025) are used to conceptualize Sharia governance, ethical accountability, Islamic finance, and maqasid al-shariah. Although some of these studies do not directly examine Islamic higher education, they provide conceptual resources for understanding how Sharia principles may be institutionalized in educational governance.

The study also draws on literature about digital transformation and smart education. Alhasan (2024), Alkandari (2024), Alkandari et al. (2024), Alkhaldi et al. (2024), Al-Sharhan (2018), Almutairi et al. (2022), Alkandari and Alabdulhadi (2023), Almisad et al. (2024), and El Tayara et al. (2026) are used to examine technology-enhanced learning, e-learning, virtual reality, and digital readiness in Kuwait. These sources help connect educational modernization with the ethical question of whether digital transformation can remain compatible with Islamic educational values.

The data were analyzed through thematic analysis. This procedure was chosen because the study aims to identify recurring patterns, conceptual relationships, and tensions across different bodies of literature. The analysis began by reading the selected sources repeatedly and identifying key concepts related to state policy, Sharia principles, governance reform, curriculum development, digital transformation, and institutional adaptation. Braun and Clarke's thematic logic is not applied here as a rigid technical formula, but as a practical analytical orientation that helps organize diverse sources into coherent themes.

The first theme concerns state policy and privatization. Al-Asfour (2019), Kelly (2011), Al-Atiqi and Alharbi (2009), and Shammari (2022) are examined to understand how privatization since the early 2000s introduced new institutional forms while maintaining strong state supervision. The second theme concerns Sharia-based governance and curriculum. Alkandari and Alsuwailan (2019), Al-Nakib (2012), Almutairi and Quttainah (2019), and Alajmi and Al-Shammari (2024) are used to interpret how Islamic norms shape curriculum design, governance mechanisms, ethical accountability, and institutional legitimacy.

The third theme focuses on digital transformation. Alhasan (2024), Alkandari (2024), Alkandari et al. (2024), and Alkhaldi et al. (2024) are read in relation to Kuwait Vision 2035, smart education, and the post-pandemic expansion of e-learning. The fourth theme concerns political and bureaucratic constraints. AlAjmi et al. (2026), Alhouti (2023), Alajmi (2022), and Alsaleh (2019) are used to analyze Wasta, centralization, political interference, and limited institutional autonomy. The fifth theme concerns hybridization and institutional adaptation. Ross (2018), Sellami (2025), Hillman (2022), Al Qenai and Wright (2025), and Ibrahim and Barnawi (2022) are used to explain how global academic models, English-

language education, and neoliberal pressures are adapted within local Islamic and national contexts.

Through this procedure, the study does not merely summarize previous literature. It attempts to build a conceptual synthesis. The aim is to show how Islamic higher education in Kuwait is transformed through the interaction of policy, religion, market forces, global academic standards, and digital innovation. This analytical move is modest, of course, but it is necessary because the literature often discusses these issues separately.

Results and Discussion

Historical and Policy Context of Islamic Higher Education in Kuwait

Islamic higher education in Kuwait has developed within a social landscape where religion, state formation, cultural identity, and modernization are closely intertwined. Safi (1986) reminds us that Islamic education has historically carried a civilizational function, because knowledge in the Islamic tradition is not merely a collection of information but a means of forming ethical persons and socially responsible communities. In Kuwait, this function has not disappeared, even though the institutional environment has changed considerably. Islamic higher education continues to serve as a space for transmitting religious knowledge, but it also participates in the broader national agenda of producing skilled graduates, strengthening citizenship, and preparing society for economic and technological transformation.

The early development of Islamic higher education in Kuwait was closely connected to the preservation of religious learning and the cultivation of Islamic moral consciousness. Religious education provided a foundation for social continuity, especially in a society where Islam shaped law, public ethics, family life, and communal identity. Yet over time, this relatively traditional role became more complex. Al-Nakib (2012) shows that education in Kuwait has been involved in debates over citizenship, civic formation, and national belonging. This means that Islamic education could no longer be understood only as a religious matter. It became part of the state's effort to shape social cohesion, national identity, and public morality.

The transformation became more visible as Kuwait entered a phase of higher education expansion and institutional diversification. Al-Asfour (2019) explains that higher education reform in Kuwait was influenced by growing local demand, policy innovation, and global educational models. Unlike countries where privatization emerged from fiscal pressure, Kuwait's reform took place in a wealthy oil-based economy. This is an important distinction. Privatization in Kuwait did not simply reflect state withdrawal from education. It reflected a policy decision to diversify educational opportunities, accommodate increasing student demand, and expose the system to global academic practices. The state remained present, but the field became more plural.

Kelly (2011) helps clarify how this pluralization was shaped by imported institutional models, particularly American-style higher education. These models introduced new ideas about governance, curriculum, student services, accreditation, and institutional mission. Ross (2018), however, reminds us that educational models do not travel unchanged. Once they enter Kuwait, they are filtered through local law, Islamic norms, family expectations, language politics, and national priorities. This produces a distinctive form of educational adaptation. Kuwait does not simply copy Western higher education, nor does it preserve traditional Islamic learning in a closed form. It negotiates between the two.

This negotiation is also shaped by the state's developmental vision. Alhasan (2024) and Alkandari (2024) show that Kuwait Vision 2035 has placed digital transformation, smart education, and modernization at the center of national reform. Islamic higher education therefore faces a double expectation. It must remain faithful to Islamic values while also responding to technological innovation, labor-market change, quality assurance, and

international competitiveness. This is not an easy task. A university that emphasizes only religious continuity may be seen as insufficiently responsive to contemporary needs. A university that follows global models without careful ethical grounding may be criticized for weakening Islamic identity. The challenge lies in holding these expectations together, even when they pull in different directions.

The historical trajectory of Islamic higher education in Kuwait thus reveals a movement from a primarily religious-knowledge orientation toward a more complex institutional model. Al-Atiqi and Alharbi (2009) indicate that quality assurance and regulatory development have become increasingly important, while Shammari (2022) shows that private higher education now forms a significant part of the national system. These developments suggest that Islamic higher education is no longer defined only by what it teaches, but also by how it is governed, financed, accredited, digitized, and connected to global academic systems. The religious function remains central, but it now operates within a denser institutional field.

This historical and policy context is crucial for understanding the rest of the discussion. Islamic higher education in Kuwait should not be approached as a static religious inheritance or as a simple modernization project. It is a dynamic formation shaped by memory and reform, Sharia and state regulation, national identity and international standards. If there is a central pattern here, it is hybridity. Yet hybridity should not be romanticized. It involves adjustment, tension, selective borrowing, and sometimes institutional uncertainty. Kuwait's experience shows that the transformation of Islamic higher education is not a linear movement from tradition to modernity. It is a more layered process in which tradition itself is reinterpreted through modern institutions.

State Policy, Privatization, and the Reconfiguration of Governance

State policy has played a decisive role in reconfiguring higher education governance in Kuwait. Al-Asfour (2019) argues that privatization became one of the most important turning points in Kuwait's higher education reform, especially after the introduction of the Private Universities Law in 2000. This legal shift allowed private universities to emerge and created a more diversified higher education landscape. Yet, as Kelly (2011) shows, privatization did not mean that the Kuwaiti state gave up control over education. The state continued to regulate institutional licensing, accreditation, quality assurance, and compliance with national priorities. In this sense, privatization produced not a purely market-based system, but a regulated hybrid system.

This hybrid governance is visible in the way private universities adopt international models while remaining subject to Kuwaiti oversight. Kelly (2011) identifies the strong influence of American-style higher education, particularly in institutional structure, curriculum organization, and academic administration. Ross (2018) similarly emphasizes that global models are adapted to local contexts rather than transferred mechanically. This point is essential. A private university in Kuwait may use English-medium instruction, liberal arts structures, credit-hour systems, or American-style student services, but it still operates within a legal and cultural environment shaped by state authority, Islamic expectations, and public moral norms. The imported model is never simply imported. It is translated.

Al-Atiqi and Alharbi (2009) show that regulatory oversight and quality assurance became central concerns as Kuwait's higher education system expanded. This is understandable because private expansion can create opportunities but also risks. It may increase access, diversify programs, and introduce innovation. At the same time, it may produce uneven quality, market-driven priorities, and tensions between educational purpose and commercial logic. Shammari (2022) indicates that private higher education has become increasingly significant in Kuwait, which makes the state's regulatory role even more important. Quality assurance, accreditation, faculty standards, program approval, and

institutional evaluation are therefore not merely administrative matters. They are instruments through which the state seeks to protect public interest.

The reconfiguration of governance also affects institutional autonomy. Alajmi (2022) suggests that autonomy in Kuwaiti education remains constrained by centralized accountability mechanisms and political-administrative structures. This creates a familiar but difficult tension. On one side, universities are expected to innovate, internationalize, and compete. On the other side, they remain dependent on state approval, regulatory procedures, and public policy priorities. Alhouti (2023) further notes that centralized bureaucracy can weaken reform implementation, especially when institutional leaders have limited room to adapt policies to local needs. One may ask, quite reasonably, how far innovation can go when autonomy remains partial.

Privatization also changes the financial logic of higher education. Althaqeb et al. (2025) show that financial decision-making in Kuwait, especially in Sharia-sensitive contexts, is shaped by questions of sustainability, capital structure, and ethical compliance. In Islamic higher education, financial governance cannot be reduced to efficiency or profitability. Ginena and Hamid (2015) and Bashir and Babiker (2023) emphasize that Islamic financial governance involves transparency, accountability, avoidance of prohibited transactions, and commitment to social welfare. This means that tuition policies, investment practices, funding strategies, and institutional partnerships may need to be evaluated not only through economic criteria but also through ethical and Sharia-based considerations.

The state's role in this environment is therefore complex. It is regulator, funder, planner, guardian of public values, and mediator between global models and local norms. Alazmi (2025) suggests that Kuwait's educational transformation is shaped by the interplay between reform agendas and Islamic-cultural commitments. This interplay appears clearly in governance. The state encourages modernization and institutional diversification, but it also seeks to maintain social cohesion and religious legitimacy. In practice, this may produce policies that support private growth while preserving oversight, or encourage internationalization while expecting cultural alignment. This is not necessarily contradictory, but it is certainly demanding.

Political and bureaucratic realities complicate the picture. AlAjmi et al. (2026) discuss the role of *Wasta* and political-administrative dynamics in shaping governance practices. *Wasta*, broadly understood as the use of personal connections or informal influence in institutional processes, can weaken meritocracy, accountability, and reform consistency. Alhouti (2023) similarly shows that political interference and administrative inertia may hinder effective policy implementation. These challenges matter because governance reform is not only about designing laws and organizational charts. It also depends on the behavior of actors, the integrity of procedures, and the willingness of institutions to follow transparent standards.

The literature therefore suggests that privatization has reconfigured Kuwaiti higher education governance in several ways. It introduced new providers, diversified institutional models, expanded the role of private investment, and increased exposure to global academic standards. At the same time, it reinforced the need for state oversight, accreditation, and regulatory coordination. For Islamic higher education, this governance transformation carries an additional layer. Institutions must demonstrate academic quality and administrative effectiveness while also maintaining Islamic legitimacy. This is why the transformation of governance in Kuwait cannot be understood only as a technical reform. It is also a negotiation over authority, ethics, identity, and public trust.

Sharia Principles in Curriculum, Governance, and Institutional Ethics

Sharia principles occupy a central place in Kuwaiti Islamic higher education, but their role should not be understood narrowly. They are not merely a set of legal references or

symbolic markers of institutional identity. Almutairi and Quttainah (2019) show that Sharia-oriented governance involves accountability, supervision, and ethical compliance. Albarrak and El-Halaby (2019) also indicate that Sharia governance requires structures capable of translating religious principles into organizational practice. In the context of Islamic higher education, this means that Sharia influences not only what is taught, but also how institutions are governed, how resources are managed, how decisions are justified, and how social responsibility is understood.

Curriculum is perhaps the most visible expression of Sharia's educational role. Alkandari and Alsuwailan (2019) argue that curriculum planning in Kuwait is shaped by religious expectations, social sensitivities, and political pressures. Their work helps us understand why curriculum reform is often delicate. It is not simply a matter of adding new courses or updating content. Curriculum is a public statement about knowledge, identity, authority, and moral formation. In Islamic higher education, curricular decisions ask what counts as legitimate knowledge, how modern disciplines should be related to Islamic values, and how graduates should be prepared to serve society. These questions are intellectually important, but they are also politically sensitive.

Al-Nakib (2012) shows that education in Kuwait is deeply connected to citizenship and civic identity. This is relevant because Islamic higher education does not educate students only as private believers. It also forms citizens who will participate in public life, professional institutions, and national development. Sharia principles, in this sense, may provide a moral vocabulary for linking individual piety with public responsibility. Yet this link is not automatic. It must be pedagogically constructed through curriculum, classroom practice, institutional culture, and assessment. A course may be religious in content but weak in ethical formation. Conversely, a modern professional course may support Islamic purposes if it cultivates justice, responsibility, public service, and intellectual honesty.

The concept of *maqasid al-shariah* offers a useful bridge between religious normativity and institutional governance. Warno et al. (2025) and Prasojo et al. (2025) frame *maqasid* as an ethical orientation concerned with welfare, justice, responsibility, and the protection of essential human interests. In higher education, this orientation can help move Islamic education beyond formal compliance. A university committed to *maqasid* should ask whether its programs protect intellect, promote ethical life, strengthen social welfare, and contribute to human dignity. This framework can support curriculum design, research ethics, student services, financial policy, and community engagement. It may sound idealistic, but without such aims, Islamic higher education risks becoming Islamic only in name.

Sharia governance also requires institutional mechanisms. Alajmi and Al-Shammari (2024) discuss Sharia supervisory structures as instruments of ethical oversight, while BenSaid and Quttainah (2024) show that the effectiveness of such structures depends on expertise, authority, and consistency. This insight matters for Islamic higher education because formal reference to Sharia is not enough. Institutions need credible processes for reviewing policies, guiding financial decisions, evaluating partnerships, and ensuring that ethical commitments are not sacrificed to administrative convenience. A Sharia board or advisory mechanism may support this function, but its effectiveness depends on integration into institutional decision-making rather than ceremonial presence.

Financial management is another important domain. Althaqeb et al. (2025) indicate that financial structure and sustainability in Kuwait must be read in relation to ethical and regulatory expectations. Ginena and Hamid (2015) and Bashir and Babiker (2023) emphasize that Islamic finance is concerned not only with avoiding interest-based transactions, but also with transparency, risk sharing, justice, and social benefit. Applied to Islamic higher education, this means that institutional finance should reflect ethical accountability. Tuition policies, scholarship allocation, investment decisions, procurement, and partnerships may all

carry moral implications. It would be too simplistic to assume that a university becomes Islamic simply because it teaches Islamic subjects. Its financial conduct also speaks.

Institutional ethics extends beyond finance. Al Matar (2023), Kitamura and Alowaiyesh (2025), and Muqowim (2021) point toward the need for integrated approaches to Islamic education reform. Such integration requires that Sharia principles inform leadership culture, faculty responsibilities, academic honesty, research ethics, gender relations, student welfare, and community service. This does not mean that every institutional question can be solved by direct legal ruling. Many educational decisions require interpretation, consultation, contextual judgment, and balancing of competing interests. Here, Sharia functions not only as a set of rules but as an ethical method for thinking about institutional life.

There is also a question of social responsibility. Islamic higher education in Kuwait operates in a society where religion remains connected to public expectations. Therefore, universities are expected to contribute to moral formation, not only technical training. Safi (1986) helps us remember that Islamic education carries a broader civilizational purpose, while Alrashidi and Alrashidi (2026) show that contemporary education must also respond to diversity, inclusion, and intercultural challenges. This combination is not easy. Islamic institutions must preserve religious identity while preparing students to engage plural, global, and technologically mediated societies.

The central finding here is that Sharia principles in Kuwaiti Islamic higher education should be understood as normative, ethical, and operational. They shape curriculum, governance, finance, institutional ethics, and public legitimacy. Yet implementation remains uneven and contested. Political pressures, fragmented frameworks, limited supervisory capacity, and global institutional models can complicate the process. Still, the presence of these tensions does not reduce the importance of Sharia. It shows that Sharia-based governance in higher education must be developed more carefully, with stronger conceptual clarity, institutional mechanisms, and pedagogical translation.

Digital Transformation, Smart Education, and Sharia-Compatible Innovation

Digital transformation has become a major force in Kuwait's higher education reform. Alhasan (2024) and Alkandari (2024) show that Kuwait Vision 2035 has encouraged modernization through smart education, digital infrastructure, and technology-enhanced learning. This national agenda places universities under pressure to become more adaptive, efficient, and globally connected. Digital transformation is often presented as a technical improvement, but in Islamic higher education it raises deeper pedagogical and ethical questions. Technology changes not only the medium of instruction. It may also reshape the nature of learning, teacher-student relationships, knowledge authority, and moral formation.

Alkandari et al. (2024) indicate that digital systems are increasingly embedded in Kuwaiti educational institutions. Learning management systems, online platforms, digital assessment, and data-driven administration have become part of the modernization process. Al-Sharhan (2018) and Almutairi et al. (2022) suggest that digital education requires infrastructure, institutional readiness, and sustained policy support. This means that successful digital transformation cannot be achieved only by purchasing platforms or introducing online courses. It requires teacher training, curriculum redesign, technical support, student readiness, and clear governance. Without these elements, digital reform may remain superficial.

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of e-learning. Alkhaldi et al. (2024) show that online learning experiences in Kuwait revealed both possibilities and weaknesses. Digital platforms allowed education to continue during disruption, but they also exposed problems related to interaction, motivation, assessment, and pedagogical preparedness. This finding is important because Islamic higher education places value on relational learning, ethical modeling, and dialogical engagement. If digital learning reduces education to content

delivery, something important may be lost. A lecture can be uploaded, but adab, intellectual humility, spiritual discipline, and ethical conversation are harder to transmit through technology unless pedagogy is intentionally designed.

Pedagogical innovation has also expanded. Alkandari and Alabdulhadi (2023) discuss active learning approaches such as flipped classrooms, while Almisad et al. (2024) and El Tayara et al. (2026) point to growing interest in virtual reality and immersive learning environments. These tools may help students understand complex concepts, simulate professional contexts, and participate more actively in learning. In Islamic higher education, virtual tools could be used to support language learning, Islamic history, legal reasoning, comparative ethics, and even experiential forms of moral reflection. Yet one should be cautious. Not every innovation improves education. Some technologies increase stimulation but weaken contemplation. Some platforms expand access but intensify surveillance. Some digital tools personalize learning but reduce collective intellectual life.

The question, therefore, is not whether Islamic higher education should accept or reject technology. That would be too simplistic. The more serious question is how digital transformation can be made compatible with Islamic educational values. Alhasan (2024) and Alkandari (2024) frame digital transformation as part of national modernization, while Warno et al. (2025) and Prasojo et al. (2025) remind us through *maqasid*-based thinking that educational reform should serve human welfare, justice, and ethical development. When these perspectives are read together, digital education should be evaluated not only by efficiency, scalability, and technical performance, but also by its contribution to moral and intellectual formation.

Artificial intelligence adds a new layer to this discussion. Although the existing Kuwaiti literature is still emerging, the broader direction of smart education suggests that AI-based tools will increasingly affect teaching, assessment, academic advising, research, and institutional management. In Islamic higher education, AI may support personalized learning, language assistance, administrative efficiency, and access to Islamic textual resources. Yet it may also raise concerns about academic integrity, bias, dependency, privacy, and the weakening of teacher authority. These concerns are not external to Sharia-compatible innovation. They are part of it. A Sharia-informed digital framework must ask whether technology protects dignity, promotes trust, supports justice, and strengthens responsible knowledge practices.

Digital transformation also intersects with globalization. Al Qenai and Wright (2025) and Ibrahim and Barnawi (2022) suggest that English-language instruction, global academic norms, and transnational educational practices shape Gulf higher education. Digital platforms intensify this process by making global content easily available. This can enrich learning, but it may also introduce epistemic dependency if local Islamic intellectual traditions are not actively developed. Kuwait's Islamic higher education institutions therefore need digital content that is not merely imported, translated, or technically adapted, but intellectually grounded in Islamic educational purposes and Kuwaiti cultural realities.

The central argument of this subsection is that digital transformation in Kuwaiti Islamic higher education must be understood as ethical and pedagogical transformation, not merely technological upgrading. Smart education should not mean faster education only. It should mean wiser education, more accessible education, and more ethically responsible education. This requires investment in infrastructure, but also in teacher formation, curriculum design, Sharia-sensitive digital governance, student ethics, and institutional accountability. Without this deeper alignment, digital modernization may produce impressive platforms but weak educational meaning.

Political, Bureaucratic, and Cultural Constraints in Reform Implementation

Reform in Kuwaiti Islamic higher education does not take place in an empty institutional space. It is shaped by political pressures, bureaucratic procedures, cultural expectations, and informal social practices. Alhouti (2023) shows that centralized bureaucracy and political interference remain major challenges in educational reform. This finding is important because policy documents often present reform as if implementation follows automatically from strategic planning. In reality, reform depends on institutions, actors, incentives, authority, and trust. A policy may be well written but poorly enacted. A curriculum may be theoretically strong but politically vulnerable. A governance model may appear modern while operating through informal power relations.

One of the most discussed constraints is *Wasta*. AlAjmi et al. (2026) examine how *Wasta* affects governance and administrative decision-making. In general terms, *Wasta* refers to the use of personal connections or informal influence to gain advantage or shape institutional outcomes. In higher education, such practices may affect hiring, promotion, admissions, procurement, leadership appointments, or policy implementation. This does not mean that every institution is captured by *Wasta*, but the presence of such practices can weaken meritocracy and public trust. For Islamic higher education, the problem is even more serious because the institution claims moral and religious legitimacy. When informal privilege overrides fairness, Sharia-based ethics becomes difficult to sustain.

Centralization is another persistent challenge. Alsaleh (2019) argues that teacher policy and professional development in Kuwait are constrained by centralized structures. Alajmi (2022) similarly indicates that autonomy remains limited in important areas of educational governance. These constraints matter because universities need flexibility to adapt curricula, develop programs, train faculty, and respond to student needs. Centralized systems may protect national consistency, but they can also slow innovation. This creates a reform paradox. Institutions are asked to modernize, but they may lack the autonomy required for meaningful modernization.

Political sensitivities also shape curriculum development. Alkandari and Alsuwailan (2019) show that curriculum planning in Kuwait is affected by political and social pressures, especially when content touches religious identity, cultural values, or controversial public issues. Al-Nakib (2012) helps explain why education is often tied to debates over citizenship and national identity. In Islamic higher education, curriculum reform may therefore become a contested arena. Introducing new content, revising religious studies, incorporating global debates, or encouraging critical thinking may be interpreted differently by different actors. Some may see these changes as necessary modernization. Others may view them as a threat to tradition.

Cultural expectations add another layer. Kuwaiti society, like many Gulf societies, values family, religion, social respectability, and national continuity. These values are not obstacles in themselves. In fact, they can provide a strong moral foundation for education. Yet tensions arise when modernization is perceived as cultural displacement or when global academic models are seen as insufficiently sensitive to Islamic norms. Alrashidi and Alrashidi (2026) show that educational institutions face challenges in managing cultural diversity and inclusion. This issue is increasingly relevant as higher education becomes more internationalized and socially diverse. Islamic higher education must therefore cultivate openness without weakening identity, and preserve identity without closing intellectual space.

Bureaucratic inertia also affects digital transformation. Al-Sharhan (2018) and Almutairi et al. (2022) suggest that digital education requires institutional readiness, infrastructure, and clear policy support. However, even when national visions promote smart education, implementation may be slowed by administrative fragmentation, insufficient

training, uneven resources, or resistance to change. Alkhaldi et al. (2024) show that e-learning during the pandemic revealed gaps in interaction and readiness. This suggests that digital reform cannot rely only on national aspiration. It must be grounded in daily institutional capacity.

The relationship between reform and religious authority can also be complicated. Alajmi and Al-Shammari (2024) and BenSaid and Quttainah (2024) show that Sharia supervisory mechanisms depend on authority, expertise, and institutional integration. In Islamic higher education, religious authority may guide ethical governance, but it may also become fragmented if there is no clear framework for interpretation and implementation. Different actors may invoke Sharia to support different institutional positions. One may support technological innovation in the name of public benefit. Another may resist it in the name of moral caution. Both may claim Islamic legitimacy. This is why Sharia governance requires deliberative mechanisms, not only general religious reference.

Political economy also matters. Sellami (2025) and Hillman (2022) suggest that neoliberal pressures and global competition shape educational reform in Gulf societies. Market-oriented policies may encourage efficiency, international ranking, private investment, and employability. These goals are not necessarily negative. Yet they can narrow the purpose of Islamic higher education if not balanced by moral and social aims. A university may become more competitive while becoming less reflective. It may become more efficient while becoming less attentive to ethical formation. This risk should not be exaggerated, but it should not be ignored either.

The constraints discussed here do not imply that reform is impossible. Rather, they show that reform must be understood realistically. Kuwait's Islamic higher education institutions operate within a dense field of formal and informal forces. State policy, Sharia principles, global standards, private investment, bureaucracy, political culture, and social expectations all shape implementation. The challenge is not simply to design better reform plans. It is to build institutions capable of carrying those plans with integrity, flexibility, and public accountability. In this sense, reform is both structural and moral.

Globalization, Neoliberal Pressures, and the Question of Islamic Educational Identity

Globalization has significantly influenced higher education in Kuwait, especially through international academic models, English-medium instruction, private institutions, accreditation systems, and benchmarking practices. Kelly (2011) shows that Western and American-style models have shaped the development of private higher education in Kuwait. Ross (2018) similarly demonstrates that these models must be adapted to local legal and cultural contexts. This adaptation is not a minor detail. It is central to the identity of Islamic higher education in Kuwait. A university may borrow curriculum structures, governance models, and quality standards from global systems, but it still needs to answer a local question. What kind of Islamic educational identity is being formed through these borrowed models?

Neoliberal pressures intensify this question. Sellami (2025) and Hillman (2022) help us understand how market-oriented reforms in Gulf higher education can emphasize employability, competition, international ranking, efficiency, and institutional branding. These priorities are now common across the world, and Kuwait is not outside this trend. Private universities often operate in environments where student recruitment, program attractiveness, graduate outcomes, and global recognition matter greatly. Such pressures may encourage innovation and responsiveness. Yet they may also shift attention away from the deeper purposes of Islamic higher education, including ethical formation, public service, spiritual development, and critical engagement with society.

Language policy is one visible site of globalization. Al Qenai and Wright (2025) and Ibrahim and Barnawi (2022) show that English-language instruction and transnational

academic norms influence higher education in the Gulf. English may expand access to global knowledge, improve employability, and support international collaboration. Still, it may also create distance from Arabic and from classical Islamic intellectual traditions if not carefully balanced. This is not an argument against English. It is an argument for epistemic balance. Islamic higher education in Kuwait needs graduates who can engage global scholarship while remaining intellectually connected to Arabic, Islamic sources, and local cultural meanings.

Internationalization also affects curriculum. Al-Asfour (2019) and Shammari (2022) indicate that private higher education has diversified institutional offerings and introduced new academic models. This diversification can be valuable, especially when it creates more opportunities for students and encourages pedagogical improvement. However, curriculum internationalization may also produce duality. Modern professional disciplines may be taught through imported frameworks, while Islamic values are placed in separate religious courses. If this happens, Islamic higher education may become structurally divided between technical knowledge and moral knowledge. The more serious task is integration. Islamic values should not be isolated from economics, management, law, technology, education, or public policy.

The question of identity is therefore not merely symbolic. It is institutional and epistemological. Al Matar (2023), Kitamura and Alowaiyesh (2025), and Muqowim (2021) suggest that Islamic education reform needs integrated frameworks that connect religious principles with contemporary institutional realities. This integration requires more than adding Islamic terminology to global models. It requires asking how knowledge is organized, how students are formed, how teachers understand their mission, how research serves society, and how governance reflects ethical accountability. A university can have Islamic branding while functioning according to purely market-based logic. That possibility is precisely why identity must be examined critically.

Globalization also brings opportunities. It exposes Kuwaiti Islamic higher education to comparative learning, academic networks, research collaboration, quality assurance standards, and technological innovation. Alhasan (2024) and Alkandari (2024) show that Kuwait's modernization agenda is tied to digital and institutional development, which can help universities improve access and relevance. The challenge is not globalization itself. The challenge is uncritical globalization. Islamic higher education should engage the world, but it should not lose the ability to evaluate global models through its own ethical and intellectual resources.

The discussion suggests that Islamic educational identity in Kuwait is being negotiated within the pressures of global academic culture and local religious legitimacy. This negotiation may produce productive hybridity when institutions creatively integrate international standards with Islamic values. It may also produce fragmentation when modernization becomes disconnected from ethical purpose. The task ahead is to develop educational models that are globally conversant, professionally credible, digitally competent, and authentically rooted in Islamic moral reasoning. That balance is difficult. But difficulty, in this case, is not a reason to avoid the task. It is the very reason the task matters.

Toward an Integrated Policy-Sharia Framework for Kuwaiti Islamic Higher Education

The preceding discussion shows that Kuwaiti Islamic higher education is shaped by several forces that cannot be understood separately. State policy establishes the legal and regulatory environment. Sharia principles provide ethical and normative orientation. Privatization introduces institutional diversification and market pressures. Globalization brings international academic models and language shifts. Digital transformation changes pedagogy, governance, and access. Political and bureaucratic realities affect implementation. Al-Asfour (2019), Kelly (2011), and Al-Atiqi and Alharbi (2009) help explain the policy and governance dimensions, while Almutairi and Quttainah (2019), Albarrak and El-Halaby (2019), and Alajmi and Al-Shammari (2024) clarify the importance of Sharia-oriented

governance. When these literatures are read together, an integrated framework becomes necessary.

This article proposes an integrated Policy-Sharia Framework for understanding and guiding the transformation of Islamic higher education in Kuwait. The first dimension is regulatory alignment. State policy should support institutional autonomy while maintaining public accountability. Alajmi (2022) and Alhouti (2023) show that excessive centralization can weaken reform implementation, while Shammari (2022) indicates that private higher education requires strong regulatory oversight. The point, then, is not to choose between autonomy and regulation. The more realistic goal is balanced governance. Universities need room to innovate, but innovation must remain accountable to academic standards, public interest, and national educational priorities.

The second dimension is Sharia-based governance. Sharia principles should be embedded in curriculum, finance, ethics, leadership, student formation, and institutional decision-making. Warno et al. (2025) and Prasojo et al. (2025) show that maqasid al-shariah can provide an ethical basis for evaluating educational purposes. Ginena and Hamid (2015) and Bashir and Babiker (2023) further remind us that Islamic governance requires transparency, justice, and social responsibility. In higher education, this means that Sharia should not be reduced to compliance language. It should guide how institutions define success, treat students, allocate resources, design programs, and serve society.

The third dimension is pedagogical modernization. Digital and global models should be adapted to Islamic educational values. Alhasan (2024), Alkandari (2024), and Alkandari et al. (2024) show that Kuwait's modernization agenda encourages smart education and digital innovation. Yet Alkhaldi et al. (2024) reminds us that e-learning also reveals challenges of interaction and readiness. A Sharia-compatible digital pedagogy should therefore combine technical competence with ethical formation. It should protect academic integrity, encourage reflective learning, support meaningful teacher-student engagement, and use technology as a means of human development rather than a substitute for it.

The fourth dimension is participatory reform. Policymakers, religious scholars, university leaders, faculty members, students, employers, and quality assurance bodies should be involved in reform processes. Alkandari and Alsuwailan (2019) show that curriculum planning is vulnerable to political and social pressures, while AlAjmi et al. (2026) highlights the risks of informal influence and Wasta. Participatory reform can reduce these risks by making decision-making more transparent and inclusive. It can also help ensure that curriculum and governance reforms are not imposed from above without institutional ownership. Reform becomes stronger when those who implement it also help shape it.

The fifth dimension is integrated quality assurance. Al-Atiqi and Alharbi (2009) and Shammari (2022) show that quality assurance is central to Kuwait's higher education reform. For Islamic higher education, however, quality should not be measured only by technical indicators such as accreditation status, faculty credentials, employment rates, or institutional ranking. These indicators matter, but they are not enough. Islamic higher education also needs to evaluate religious integrity, ethical governance, social contribution, curriculum coherence, and student moral formation. This does not mean abandoning international standards. It means expanding them through an Islamic educational lens.

The framework proposed here is not meant to solve every tension. That would be unrealistic. Rather, it provides a way to understand and manage the tensions more coherently. It recognizes that Kuwaiti Islamic higher education is not simply moving from tradition to modernity, from state control to privatization, or from religious education to global education. It is moving through a hybrid process in which several logics interact. Some reinforce one another. Others conflict. The task of policy and institutional leadership is to create conditions in which this hybridity becomes productive rather than fragmented.

Ultimately, the transformation of Islamic higher education in Kuwait requires a model that is intellectually serious, institutionally practical, and ethically grounded. Rashimbetov et al. (2025) and Alsaleh (2023) point toward the need for future-oriented educational reform, while Kitamura and Alowaiyesh (2025) and Al Matar (2023) suggest that Islamic education needs integrated conceptual approaches. Building on these insights, the Policy-Sharia Framework argues that reform should not treat state policy, Sharia, digital transformation, and globalization as separate domains. They must be brought into conversation. Only then can Kuwaiti Islamic higher education respond to modern demands without losing its moral center, and preserve Islamic identity without becoming institutionally stagnant.

Conclusion

This article has argued that Islamic higher education in Kuwait is being transformed through a hybrid interaction between state policy, Sharia principles, privatization, digital modernization, and global higher education models. The Kuwaiti case shows that Islamic higher education cannot be understood simply as a continuation of traditional religious learning, but it also cannot be reduced to a secular project of modernization. It is located in a more complex space, where state regulation, Islamic normativity, institutional governance, market-oriented reform, technological innovation, and national identity continuously shape one another. In this sense, Kuwait offers an important example of how Islamic higher education in the contemporary Gulf is being reconfigured through negotiation rather than replacement. Tradition does not disappear, but it is reinterpreted within modern institutional forms. Modernization does not arrive as a neutral process, because it must pass through religious, cultural, and political filters.

The discussion has shown that state policy plays a central role in directing the transformation of higher education in Kuwait. Privatization since the early 2000s has expanded institutional diversity, introduced new governance models, and increased the influence of international academic standards. Yet the state has continued to maintain regulatory authority through licensing, accreditation, quality assurance, and public oversight. This produces a distinctive governance arrangement in which institutional autonomy is encouraged but not fully detached from state supervision. At the same time, Sharia principles remain deeply relevant. They shape curriculum design, institutional ethics, financial management, leadership responsibility, and the moral purpose of education. Sharia, therefore, is not only a symbolic identity marker. It functions as a normative and operational framework that influences how Islamic higher education defines legitimacy, accountability, and social responsibility.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors affirm that no conflicts of interest have been disclosed. We also certify that the submitted manuscript is original and is not simultaneously being reviewed or considered for publication elsewhere.

Ethical Considerations

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