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Student Organisations as Epistemic Spaces for the Cultivation of Critical Awareness: A Study in the Philosophy of Science

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Abstract

This study aimed to understand both conceptually and empirically how student organisations functioned as epistemic spaces in fostering critical consciousness through the lens of the philosophy of science. The focus of the research encompassed three main dimensions: ontology, epistemology, and axiology. The study employed a descriptive qualitative approach, using data collection techniques such as in-depth interviews, activity observations, and documentation conducted at the IMM (Ikatan Mahasiswa Muhammadiyah) Commissariat of Muhammadiyah University of Surabaya. The findings revealed that, ontologically, the IMM Commissariat existed as a social entity that played an active role in the dynamics of campus and community life. Epistemologically, it served as a dialectical space for members to acquire and validate knowledge through cadre development, intellectual forums, and service activities. Axiologically, the IMM Commissariat implemented scientific and Islamic values in the form of concrete contributions through socially beneficial activities. This entire process cultivated members who not only thought critically but also possessed social awareness and moral integrity. Thus, the IMM Commissariat proved to be a relevant epistemic space in developing critical consciousness, both within the academic environment and in broader societal contexts.
Keywords: Critical Awareness, Epistemic Space, Philosophy of Science, Student Organization.

Introduction

Students are widely regarded as agents of change, playing a pivotal role in advancing social transformation within society. As an educated group with access to higher education, they are expected to identify social problems and propose rational solutions (Kosasih, 2016). Cahyono (2019) outlines four key roles that society anticipates students will fulfil: (1) drivers of change, (2) agents of social control, (3) successors of the nation, and (4) moral forces. These roles demand that students not only comprehend theoretical frameworks but also apply analytical and innovative thinking in addressing diverse societal challenges (Rahim et al., 2025). In this regard, students are expected to pioneer positive change, foster community life, and embed constructive values in development through their intellectual contributions (Martadinata, 2019).

To realise their role as pioneers of change capable of inspiring and mobilising communities, students must cultivate critical awareness, analytical competence, and effective communication skills (Suhanti et al., 2018). Such capacities require a supportive environment that nurtures intellectual and social development. Firman et al. (2022) emphasise that organisations serve to train, broaden knowledge, facilitate socialisation, and foster independence. Through organisational engagement, students refine leadership, communication, and critical analysis skills essential for navigating social change (Pratama et al., 2024). In accordance with Article 77, Paragraph 2 of Law Number 12 of 2012 on Higher Education, student organisations are

mandated to: (1) facilitate activities that develop students' talents, interests, and potential; (2) foster creativity, sensitivity, critical thinking, courage, leadership, and national identity; (3) address students' needs and welfare; and (4) instil social responsibility through community service initiatives.

Beyond these statutory functions, student organisations operate as epistemic spaces that play a strategic role in the production, validation, and dissemination of knowledge through sustained social interaction. Within this epistemic framework, such organisations provide a dialectical arena where students cultivate critical thinking through the exchange of ideas, argumentation, and reflection on social realities. The collective and interactive processes transform student organisations into intellectual laboratories—spaces for experimenting with ideas and testing values that generate new forms of public awareness (Asman, 2021). Empirical evidence demonstrates that participation in organisational dynamics strengthens students' critical thinking skills, which constitute the foundation for building critical awareness and fostering a transformative orientation towards society (Marlina, 2020).

Students actively engaged in organisations exhibit more advanced cognitive abilities, particularly in comprehensively interpreting social phenomena. Santoso (2019) notes that such students demonstrate effective communication, articulate opinions with clarity, and display greater courage in taking initiative and risks. These competencies are cultivated through sustained activities that promote critical analysis, including open discussions, leadership training, and social advocacy (Ardiana & Putra, 2019). When addressing social issues, active students do not respond impulsively; rather, they construct a comprehensive analytical framework by identifying root causes. Their solutions are grounded in a nuanced understanding of social structures, power relations, and value dynamics surrounding the issue at hand.

The development of critical awareness constitutes a key achievement that can be nurtured through active participation in student organisations (Yolanda et al., 2024). This awareness extends beyond the mere ability to recognise social issues; it also encompasses a reflective dimension concerning the structures that shape community life. Students who cultivate critical awareness are able to position themselves as subjects conscious of their social standing and responsive to the inequalities, injustices, and forms of domination present in their environment (Qodir, 2016). Within this context, student organisations function as dialectical spaces that not only bring together diverse ideas but also orient students towards practical engagement with social change. As Fikri et al. (2024) argue, critical awareness emerges from dialogical processes that enable individuals to transform reality through knowledge-based, transformative action. Accordingly, the role of student organisations as epistemic spaces is inseparable from their contribution to shaping subjects who think reflectively, act ethically, and remain committed to social emancipation.

This case study examines the Muhammadiyah Student Association (IMM) at Muhammadiyah University Surabaya. The choice of IMM is based on its character as an intellectual-oriented student organisation (Fatah & Rasai, 2021). From this phenomenon, the researcher was motivated to explore in depth how student organisations operate as epistemic spaces in cultivating critical awareness among their members.

Guided by a philosophy of science framework, the purpose of this study is to achieve both conceptual and empirical understanding of how epistemic spaces are constituted within student organisations as part of the process of building critical awareness. The analysis focuses on three interrelated components: ontology, epistemology, and axiology. These dimensions provide the foundation for critical thinking in engaging with the social realities encountered by student organisations (Unwakoly, 2022). The ontological dimension directs attention to the nature of reality as the object of knowledge in the organisational context. The epistemological dimension

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addresses how knowledge is acquired, developed, and validated within the organisation as a forum for discourse and collective experience. The axiological dimension, meanwhile, examines the values, ethics, and purposes underpinning the scientific and social activities undertaken by student organisations. Together, these three dimensions serve as critical analytical tools for interpreting the contribution of student organisations as epistemic spaces in fostering critical awareness.

Although previous studies have examined the role of students as agents of change and highlighted the importance of organisational engagement in fostering leadership and communication skills, limited attention has been given to how student organisations function as *epistemic spaces* that systematically cultivate critical awareness. Existing research tends to focus on the normative roles of students or the statutory functions of organisations, but there remains a lack of conceptual and empirical exploration into the dialectical processes through which knowledge, values, and critical reflection are produced within these organisations. This gap underscores the need for a study that situates student organisations within a philosophical framework to better understand their contribution to social transformation.

The novelty of this research lies in its integration of a philosophy of science framework—ontology, epistemology, and axiology—into the analysis of student organisations as epistemic spaces. Unlike prior studies that primarily emphasise leadership training or statutory functions, this study conceptualises student organisations as intellectual laboratories where critical awareness is cultivated through dialogical and reflective processes. By applying this philosophical lens to the case of IMM at Muhammadiyah University Surabaya, the research contributes a culturally grounded and theoretically enriched perspective that advances the discourse on student organisations and their role in social transformation.

Research Questions

This study seeks to address the following research questions:

1. How do student organisations operate as epistemic spaces in cultivating critical awareness among their members?
2. In what ways do the ontological, epistemological, and axiological dimensions shape the processes of knowledge production and value formation within student organisations?
3. How does the Muhammadiyah Student Association (IMM) exemplify the role of student organisations in fostering reflective, ethical, and transformative engagement with social realities?

Method

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative approach with descriptive methods to examine the role of student organisations as epistemic spaces in fostering critical awareness, viewed through a philosophical lens encompassing ontology, epistemology, and axiology. This design was chosen for its capacity to present social reality in a profound and holistic manner (Fadli, 2021).

Participants

The research focused on the Muhammadiyah Student Association (IMM) at Muhammadiyah University Surabaya. Informants were selected purposively based on their organisational roles and experience. Inclusion criteria required at least one year of active membership and direct involvement in organisational decision-making. The final sample comprised three key informants: the chairperson, secretary, and treasurer.

Data Collection

Data were collected over a three-month period (March–May 2025). Observations were conducted during weekly organisational meetings and training sessions, with a total duration of approximately 36 hours. Documentation included 12 organisational reports, meeting minutes, and activity records. In-depth interviews were carried out with the three informants, each lasting between 60–90 minutes. Instruments consisted of semi-structured interview guides, observation field notes, and document review checklists.

Validity

To ensure credibility and trustworthiness, multiple validation techniques were employed:

1. Triangulation across data sources (interviews, observations, documents).
2. Member checking, where preliminary findings were shared with informants for verification.
3. Peer debriefing with academic colleagues to minimise researcher bias.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using Miles and Huberman's interactive model, comprising three stages:

1. Data reduction – coding and categorising transcripts, notes, and documents.
2. Data display – organising findings into matrices and thematic charts.
3. Conclusion drawing/verification – interpreting patterns and confirming consistency across sources.

This study employs a qualitative approach with descriptive methods to examine the role of student organisations as epistemic spaces in fostering critical awareness, viewed through a philosophical lens encompassing ontology, epistemology, and axiology. This approach was selected for its capacity to present social reality in a profound and holistic manner (Fadli, 2021). The subject of this research is the Muhammadiyah Student Association (IMM) at Muhammadiyah University Surabaya. Data were collected through observation, documentation, and in-depth interviews with the organisation's chairperson, secretary, and treasurer. The data were analysed using an interactive analytical technique comprising three stages: (1) data reduction, (2) data presentation, and (3) conclusion drawing.

Results

One of the autonomous organisations operating under the auspices of Muhammadiyah is the Muhammadiyah Student Association (IMM), which plays a strategic role in cadre development within higher education. At Muhammadiyah University Surabaya, there are eleven commissariats, each representing a faculty. All these commissariats are coordinated by the branch coordinator (*koorkom*), who serves as the highest authority at the university level.

The number and names of IMM commissariats at Muhammadiyah University Surabaya are presented in Table 1 below:

Table 1. IMM Commissariats at Muhammadiyah University Surabaya

No.	Name	Number of Members	Faculty
1.	Komisariat Blue Savant	103	Keguruan dan Ilmu Pendidikan
2.	Komisariat Achilles	60	Ilmu Kesehatan
3.	Komisariat Allende	56	Psikologi
4.	Komisariat FIAD	27	Agama Islam
5.	Komisariat Avicenna	46	Kedokteran

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6.	Komisariat Kaizen	83	Teknik
7.	Komisariat Al-Qossam	95	Agama Islam
8.	Komisariat Ayuverda	15	Kedokteran Gigi
9.	Komisariat Al-Faruq	46	Agama Islam
10.	Komisariat Shin'nichi	56	Ekonomi dan Bisnis
11.	Komisariat Yustisia	40	Hukum

Each commissariat bears responsibility for developing the scientific and intellectual capacities of its members. This development is grounded in the three core competencies of the Muhammadiyah Student Association (IMM), namely religiosity, intellectuality, and humanity. These three aspects serve as the foundation for shaping IMM cadres who not only possess spiritual depth but also intellectual competence and heightened social sensitivity.

The implementation of these responsibilities is realised through a variety of commissariat work programmes, which are systematically designed and oriented towards benefits for both members and the wider community. Such programmes include leadership training, discussion forums or brainstorming sessions, and capacity-building activities in the fields of Islamic studies, advocacy, and social engagement. In addition, there are programmes that directly address community life, such as social service activities during the celebration of Eid al-Adha and teaching initiatives for coastal and marginalised children.

The Eid al-Adha activities represent a concrete form of social service undertaken by each commissariat, involving the distribution of sacrificial animals such as cattle and goats. These activities are not carried out in Surabaya but are instead spread across various regions of East Java that are socio-economically vulnerable. In 2025, each commissariat conducted sacrificial programmes in several areas of East Java as a tangible contribution of IMM to society. The distribution of Eid al-Adha social service activities in 2025 by IMM commissariats at Muhammadiyah University Surabaya is presented in the following table:

Table 2. Distribution of Eid al-Adha Social Service Activities by IMM Commissariats, Muhammadiyah University Surabaya (2025)

No.	Name	Implementation	Place
1.	Komisariat Blue Savant	4 hari	Desa Kedung Sumber, Kabupaten Gresik
2.	Komisariat Achilles	4 hari	Desa Sukorame, Kabupaten Lamongan
3.	Komisariat Allende	4 hari	Desa Wonossalam, Kabupaten Jombang
4.	Komisariat FIAD	5 hari	Desa Bata Timur, Kabupaten Bangkalan
5.	Komisariat Avicenna	3 hari	Desa Harjokuncaran, Kabupaten Malang
6.	Komisariat Kaizen	4 hari	Desa Cungkup, Kabupaten Lamongan
7.	Komisariat Al-Qossam	5 hari	Desa Kandangan, Kabupaten Lumajang
8.	Komisariat Ayuverda	3 hari	Desa Jipurapah, Kabupaten Jombang
9.	Komisariat Al-Faruq	4 hari	Desa Pataan, Kabupaten Lamongan
10.	Komisariat Shin'nichi	4 hari	Desa Manting, Kabupaten Mojokerto
11.	Komisariat Yustisia	4 hari	Desa Ngepung, Kabupaten Nganjuk

In addition, the Muhammadiyah Student Association (IMM) at Muhammadiyah University Surabaya also implements community service programmes through teaching and learning activities. These activities are conducted regularly every week in the coastal area of Kenjeran and around the Jembatan Merah Plaza (JMP) in Surabaya. The programme aims to provide informal educational access for children who face limitations in accessing formal education, thereby assisting them in improving basic literacy and character development. This initiative also reflects the understanding that social activities are not confined to material assistance but encompass sustained mentoring efforts oriented towards empowerment. Such an approach is consistent with Hasan (2020), who emphasises the importance of participatory methods in social activities to create sustainable impact and empower communities in a holistic manner.



Figure 1. Teaching and Learning Activity

Interview data reinforce these findings. The Chairperson of IMM at Muhammadiyah University Surabaya stated:

"Our commissariats are not only focused on internal cadre development but also on serving the wider community. Every programme we design must have a direct impact on society."

Similarly, the Secretary explained:

"Through weekly teaching activities, we aim to empower children in coastal areas by improving their literacy and confidence. This is our way of ensuring that IMM's presence is meaningful for those who are often overlooked."

These excerpts highlight the strong orientation of IMM programmes towards community service and empowerment, as evidenced by both structured organisational activities and direct engagement with vulnerable communities.

Based on interviews with the Chairperson of the Muhammadiyah Student Association (IMM) at Muhammadiyah University Surabaya, it can be concluded that all organisational programmes are strongly oriented towards community service. This orientation is consistent with one of the six affirmations of IMM, which states: *"It is affirmed that the deeds of IMM are for the sake of Allah and are always devoted to the interests of society."* This principle serves as the philosophical and ideological foundation for every cadre activity, ensuring that acts of service are not merely formalities but carry ethical and spiritual significance. In practice, each programme is designed within a framework of social analysis, emphasising the need to understand community conditions in depth. Consequently, social analysis becomes crucial in

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providing a comprehensive picture of social structures, power dynamics, cultural contexts, and the historical background of local communities (Kristeva, 2022). Furthermore, from the perspective of the philosophy of science, the existence of student organisations such as IMM can be examined through three principal dimensions: ontology, epistemology, and axiology.

Discussion

Furthermore, from the perspective of the philosophy of science, the existence of student organisations such as IMM can be examined through three principal dimensions: ontology, epistemology, and axiology

Ontological Review

Ontology is a branch of the philosophy of science that examines the nature of existence and the reality of entities in a profound, critical, and concrete manner (Nurasa et al., 2022). In this context, the IMM commissariat at Muhammadiyah University Surabaya is not merely understood as a student association, but as a social entity with a tangible existence within the dynamics of campus life and society (Basith & Anwarudin, 2018). Its presence represents an epistemic space actively engaged in shaping and transforming the critical awareness of its members through processes of social interaction, the organisation of ideas, and involvement in social action.

As a forum for cadre formation, IMM is required to produce cadres who possess intellectual quality, moral capacity, and adequate social roles (Syam & Amri, 2017). Furthermore, its existence plays a strategic role in monitoring policies that fail to side with society and in promoting social transformation that is just, humanistic, and inclusive. Thus, ontologically, the IMM commissariat exists not only as a student organisation but also as an agent of change contributing to the formation of a more civilised and equitable social order.

Commitment to this role is reflected in the various community service programmes undertaken by the commissariat, which demonstrate a clear orientation towards supporting marginalised and vulnerable groups. This aligns with the thought of Antonio Gramsci, who argued that intellectuals are not defined by the act of thinking—potentially possessed by all—but by the social functions they perform within society. In Gramsci's view, everyone is an intellectual, yet not all act as intellectuals in the social context. Therefore, a true intellectual is one who actively positions themselves within civil society and fulfils their transformative function (Siswati, 2018).

Epistemological Review

Epistemology is a branch of the philosophy of science concerned with knowledge, including its sources and foundations. Etymologically, the term derives from the Greek *episteme*, meaning knowledge, and *logos*, meaning word, principle, or thought (Fadhlurrahman, 2024). In this context, the IMM commissariat at Muhammadiyah University Surabaya regards epistemology as a crucial foundation for formulating ways of thinking, acquiring, and validating knowledge through a structured process of cadre formation.

As an epistemic space, the IMM commissariat plays a significant role in cultivating the critical awareness of its members through various intellectual activities. One form of intellectual reinforcement is demonstrated through *dakwah* activities, which not only serve as a medium for spiritual development but also train students to become preachers (*da'i*) with broad insight and social competence (Suriyati et al., 2024). The initial stage of cadre formation is carried out through *Darul Arqom Dasar* (DAD), an ideological and intellectual laboratory lasting three to seven days. Within this programme, core materials such as Islamic studies, Muhammadiyah studies, and IMM studies are delivered, alongside supplementary materials tailored to local commissariat needs, including student movements, social analysis, digital literacy, philosophy,

leadership, and organisational management (Sukmawati & Rafni, 2020). In practice, each programme is designed within a framework of social analysis, emphasising the need to understand community conditions in depth. Consequently, social analysis becomes crucial in providing a comprehensive picture of social structures, power dynamics, cultural contexts, and the historical background of local communities (Kristeva, 2022).

These materials are not merely complementary to the cadre formation process but serve as essential instruments in shaping intellectual character. In line with the findings of Yusna et al. (2023), enhancing scientific and leadership capacities among students is vital for driving social change and strengthening public awareness. The process of knowledge formation within IMM does not end with DAD but continues through regular study forums, such as thematic discussions addressing current issues, philosophical studies examining the ideas of major thinkers, and scientific studies based on community needs. All these activities reflect an epistemological approach that is empirical and contextual, where social experience and reasoning become the primary instruments in constructing and developing knowledge.

Moreover, IMM integrates Islamic values into its epistemological processes, with the Qur'an and Sunnah serving as the principal sources for shaping frameworks of thought and action. This is reflected in the *ayat-ayat perkaderan* (cadre verses), which underpin the cadre development process and emphasise the importance of becoming individuals who are graceful in morality and excellent in intellectual capacity. This also affirms that the learning process within IMM is not merely theoretical but also practical, encouraging cadres to implement knowledge in the form of tangible actions that benefit society (Aisy et al., 2024).

Axiological Review

Axiology is a branch of the philosophy of science that studies the values contained within knowledge, including how such knowledge is utilised and applied in human life. Etymologically, the term derives from the Greek *axios*, meaning "value", and *logos*, meaning "science" or "principle" (Rosnawati et al., 2021). Axiology plays a crucial role in assessing the utility and purpose of acquired knowledge, as well as how it can contribute positively to society.

In the context of the IMM commissariat at Muhammadiyah University Surabaya, axiology serves as an essential foundation for directing cadre formation and member development. IMM does not merely focus on the theoretical mastery of knowledge but also emphasises its practical application in everyday life as a form of community service (Emilia, 2022). This aligns with Octaviana and Ramadhani (2021), who argue that knowledge must possess tangible utility and provide benefits that can be felt by society at large to improve quality of life.

One concrete implementation of axiological values within IMM is through community service activities organised by the commissariat. These activities reflect IMM's efforts to apply the knowledge possessed by its cadres to address societal problems, particularly those faced by vulnerable groups. In this way, IMM functions as an agent of social change that prioritises not only intellectual aspects but also moral and ethical dimensions in every action. Moreover, IMM instils Islamic values in all its activities, encapsulated in the principle that *"knowledge is praxis and praxis is knowledge."* This principle underscores the importance of applying knowledge in tangible forms that benefit society, while ensuring that every deed is grounded in sound knowledge (Asrulla et al., 2024). This orientation is consistent with one of the six affirmations of IMM, which states: 'It is affirmed that the deeds of IMM are for the sake of Allah and are always devoted to the interests of society.' This principle serves as the philosophical and ideological foundation for every cadre activity, ensuring that acts of service are not merely formalities but carry ethical and spiritual significance.

The IMM commissariat at Muhammadiyah University Surabaya strives to develop cadres who are not only intellectually capable but also possess high moral integrity and the ability to

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contribute positively to society at large. Overall, the axiological approach within IMM emphasises the practical value of knowledge, ensuring that it does not remain at the theoretical level but is implemented through concrete actions that provide societal benefit (Amirullah, 2016). Consequently, the commissariat serves as an epistemic space that not only cultivates critical awareness but also encourages its cadres to become agents of change contributing to the construction of a more just and civilised social order.

Conclusion

Based on the findings and discussion, it can be concluded that the Muhammadiyah Student Association (IMM) Commissariat at Muhammadiyah University Surabaya fulfils a strategic function as an epistemic space capable of fostering critical awareness among students. This function is not merely theoretical but also practical, shaping students' social engagement both within the campus environment and in their service to society.

Ontologically, the IMM commissariat is not simply understood as a student organisational structure, but as a social entity that lives and evolves alongside societal dynamics. IMM emerges as an active subject in confronting complex and dynamic social realities, assuming a role in responding to the problems that arise in its surroundings. Its existence embodies a collective consciousness aimed at building a just and civilised society through intellectual, moral, and spiritual pathways.

Epistemologically, IMM serves as a dialectical and dialogical space that facilitates the active formation and dissemination of knowledge. Cadre formation, scientific forums, philosophical discussions, and community service practices constitute essential instruments for cultivating critical, reflective, and solution-oriented thinking among its members.

Axiologically, IMM underscores the importance of the practical value of knowledge. The principle *"knowledge is praxis and praxis is knowledge"* functions as a moral guide for every cadre in carrying out social activities. Islamic, humanitarian, and scientific values form the ethical foundation for decision-making and programme implementation. IMM thus not only develops intellectually capable students but also instils social concern, solidarity with vulnerable groups, and high moral integrity.

In sum, the IMM commissariat at Muhammadiyah University Surabaya has fulfilled its vital role as an epistemic space that not only produces campus intellectuals but also shapes socially conscious individuals prepared to contribute meaningfully to society. The critical awareness cultivated within this space does not remain at the level of discourse but is realised through social actions grounded in values, knowledge, and sustainable service.

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