

ISLAMIC STUDIES-THE INSIDE AND OUTSIDE PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

From the very early days of Islām, Muslims have keenly maintained their focus on acquiring the knowledge of Qur'ān and Sunnah. The early scholars and the noble Imāms facilitated this study by compiling, teaching, and transmitting the exegesis of the noble Qur'ān and the prophetic traditions, explaining the principles that underlie the interpretation of the canonical texts (also called, 'Ilm al Usūl), and deriving the jurisprudential rulings (also called, 'Ilm Al-Fiqh). However, our noble predecessors did not restrict themselves to the study of these branches of knowledge alone. The study of the Qur'ān and Sunnah intrigued them to explore many other sciences, including mathematics (inspired by 'Ilm Al-Farāidh - a branch of Fiqh), Astronomy (for calculating the duration of months and movements of moon for Islamic calendar), Medicine (inspired by the clues present in the Qur'ān and Sunnah regarding the human body and treatment for illnesses), and so on. However, over the centuries, the more formal Islamic education confined its focus on the core Islamic sciences such as Qur'ān, Hadīth, Fiqh, Aqīdah, Arabic Language, and Usūl. This is what we currently observe, though with a slight variation, in the curriculum of most of the Islamic studies higher education courses taught in the Muslim-majority countries. It is interesting to note, on the other hand, that the teaching of Islām in Western countries is significantly different from this. For centuries, the Western study of Islām was conducted from an orientalist perspective which saw Islām and Muslims as an 'external' object of study and demonstrated an 'us' against 'them' mentality. Though the orientalist approach has evolved into a more open and balanced method of study, the study of Islām in the West is still more focused on the social interactions, historical perspectives, political thought, and current affairs in relation to Islām and Muslims. If consider Islām to be a building, the study of Islām in the West can be considered to be the study of Islām while looking at it from the 'outside'. While the study of Islām in the Muslim-majority countries is the study from the 'inside' focusing on how each brick is laid and what function does it serve with limited attention towards what's happening outside and how others are interacting with it. In this article, we have examined these two systems of Islamic education and presented a critical analysis of their underlying perspectives.

Keywords: *Islamic education, 'Ilm, Western perspective, Islām in West, Dars e Niẓāmi*

1. INTRODUCTION:

The first verse of the Qur'ān that the world came to know about commanded the humanity to 'read' in the name of their Creator and the one who taught by the pen. This formed the basis of our religion which instructs its followers to learn from their birth cradle till their graves. The pursuit for knowledge in Islām is not restricted to learning alone; rather it is the responsibility of the believers to first learn and then take the knowledge that they have learnt to those who do not know. The noble companions of our beloved messenger Muḥammad (PBUH) made this a mission for their lives

to learn and to teach. This quest of knowledge not only transformed their own lives but also those around them. The next generation that they prepared after them, the *ṭābiūn*, and those who followed them, the *tabaṭābiūn*, continued this mission and spread the knowledge of truth brought to them from the best of creations Muḥammad ﷺ and his noble companions. The way these great men and women preserved and transmitted the knowledge of Islām is unprecedented in any other religion and any other nation. Century after century, Muslims reaffirmed their commitment to knowledge. This led to the rise of numerous sciences and branches of knowledge that still illuminate the world we live in today. Though the early Muslims did not have any differentiations between the ‘worldly’ or ‘religious’ knowledge as such, this divide became more visible in the later centuries.

Islām, however, was not studied by Muslims alone. Many non-Muslims also studied Islām from many different aims, including missionary objectives (Kurzman, 2012) and finding any ‘faults’ in it. This continued to happen for more than a thousand years and resulted in the formation of another parallel method of study of Islām (Reeves, 2003). This method, being significantly different from how Muslims studied their religion, remained prevalent in the non-Islamic countries or the countries where Muslims were a minority. With the advancements in academics in the last century, the system of education evolved and became more neutral and well-balanced. This also impacted the study of Islām in the Muslim-minority countries which started to part ways from the traditional orientalist approach. However, we still see traces of this approach existing in the present day institutions in the West. A number of universities still appear to present Islām and Muslims as something ‘external’ and ‘outside’ as explained later on in this paper.

The present paper will explore these two systems of Islamic education and present a comparative analysis of their respective approaches and objectives. In order to accomplish this, we will first present various perspectives of this discipline and then explain the historical as well as present approaches towards it. The study is based on the thematic review and synthesis of literature.

2. VARIOUS PERSPECTIVES ABOUT ISLAMIC STUDIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION:

How the discipline of Islamic studies is perceived, depends on the context the specific perspectives from which it is looked at (Nanji, 1997) and accordingly, the opinions about what needs to be included in the Islamic studies courses vary significantly (Dien, 2007; Waardenburg, 1997). By reviewing the relevant literature, one can clearly find two rival opinions and perspectives based on geographical and socio-cultural aspects. These two opinions are elaborated below.

Islamic system of *tarbiyah* and education traditionally encompasses the study of Islām as a religion, not merely as a social or a historical phenomenon, in addition to its various subdisciplines structured around the foundational texts, the Qur’ān and Sunnah (Khir, 2007). According to this view, Khir explains, ‘transmitted knowledge’ – also known as ‘Ulum An-Naqaliyah’ (that which is believed to be communicated by God and informed by His Messenger ﷺ) and its interpretation is believed by Muslim scholars as the real Islamic knowledge (referred to as ‘Ulūm al-Din). Khir (2007) also provides a list of key sciences that fall within the scope of ‘Islamic Studies’ as mentioned by a number of Islamic scholars, though with slight variations. This includes the sciences of Qur’ān (reading, interpretation, exegesis, reasons for revelation of its verses and so on), sciences of hadīth

(collection, authentication, compilation, translation and interpretation of prophetic traditions), Islamic Jurisprudence, creed and theology, Taşawuf, history, sciences related to Arabic language and logic.

Contrary to this approach toward Islamic studies, there is a different approach that is more commonly found in the Western universities. A prominent group of Western scholars believes that Islām has to be studied with the perspective of its evolution towards ‘modern Islām’ (Khir, 2007). They believe that by confining ‘Islamic Studies’ to textual studies alone would give incorrect expressions of uniformity about the discipline which, by its nature, is heterogeneous. These scholars recommend that the core of Islamic Studies, which should comprise of classical Islamic sciences, should be surrounded by the other areas such as anthropology, social sciences, and evolution towards ‘modern Islām’. In the implementation of this definition, it often happens that the core Islamic sciences get significantly neglected if present at all. Such a situation would be in sharp contrast to the common approach for Islamic studies in the Muslim-majority countries where the key focus is the traditional sciences and other supporting branches of knowledge or modern subjects often get neglected. In these two contrasting approaches, one of the two types of subjects, (‘core’ or the ‘surrounding’) grow too thick or too thin resulting in an imbalance, as represented in figure 1A and 1B.

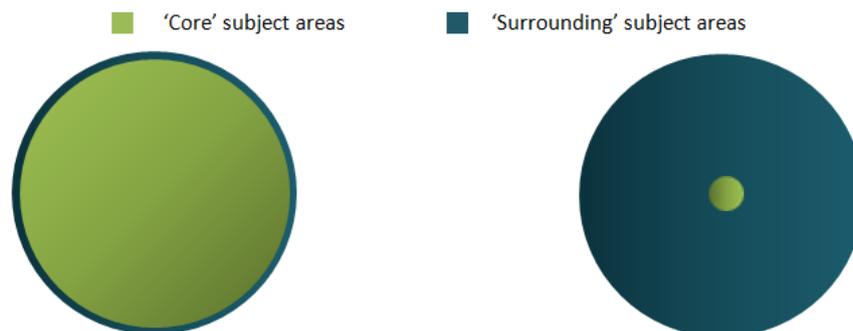


Figure 1A: Too much emphasis on ‘core’ and very limited attention to ‘surrounding subject areas

Figure 1B: Limited attentions to ‘core’ and too much emphasis on ‘surrounding’ subject areas

In the light of above, it can be argued that there is a need for a ‘balance’ in relation to the course objectives for the particular scenario or situation in which the course is to be taught (Ashaari et al., 2012). Course structures need to be tailored according to the ‘needs’ of specific learners, organizational policies and other relevant factors (Diamond, 2009).

3. Evolution of Islamic Studies in Educational Institutions:

In this section, we have furthered our comparison by presenting a historical overview from Muslim-majority and Muslim-minority lands.

3.1 Evolution of Islamic studies in the Muslim-Majority lands:

Al-Khateeb (2012) explains about the early Islamic education as being informal institutions, often situated in mosques where people could gather around the scholars and benefit from their knowledge and wisdom, often taking notes and memorizing what the scholar used to say or the books that were read to them. The formality in the study of religion increased as the time passed. Under the Umayyad rule, (661-750 AD), the scope of the educational syllabus was enlarged, and the study of grammar, history, geography, and law was also included in it. Before their time, curriculum was solely based on the holy Qur'ān and the traditions of the Prophet ﷺ (R. Ahmad, Hifazatullah, & Rahman, 2012). Abbasids (750-1258) further formalized the religious education system through the concept of *Madāris* (R. Ahmad et al., 2012; Al-Khateeb, 2012). As Abbasid caliphate weakened over time, *Fatimids* (or *Fatimiyyah*) arose as a rival rule. They established Al-Azhar University in Cairo, not only to disseminate religious knowledge of their school of thought but also their particular political agenda (Devine & Summerfield, 2013). In parallel to this, *Seljūq* vizier Nizām ul Mulk established a chain of *Sunni* religious institutions. (Al-Khateeb, 2012; Anzar, 2003). Al-Azhar university later converted to Sunni Islām and to-date follows the same school of thought (Zeghal, 2009). Madrasas founded and managed by Nizām ul Mulk were called *Nizāmiyyahs* and are known to be founded in at least 11 cities (Anzar, 2003; Ilchman, Katz, & Queen, 1998) including Baghdād, Naysabūr, Merv, Herāt, Samarkand Isfahān and Balkh. Under the *Seljūq* rule, many more *Madāris* were founded, particularly by ladies from royal family who even sold their personal belongings including jewels and jewelry to augment the madrasa funds (Ilchman et al., 1998), known as 'waqf'. *Nizāmiyyah* *Madāris* enjoyed services of some of the most prominent scholars ever produced by Muslim world, such as Imām Al-Ghazālī (Ahmad et al., 2012; Al-Khateeb, 2013a). In these *Madāris*, teaching was not restricted to Muslim theological sciences but also secular sciences, such as logic, philosophy, astronomy, history, poetry, literature, and humanities (R. Ahmad et al., 2012). One of the reasons for this was an intention to produce government servants who would be appointed in various countries and the regions under the Islamic empire (Anzar, 2003). When the students used to master a particular subject and satisfy their teacher of their competence, he would issue them a certificate or diploma called *ijāzah*. Cheddadi (1994, p.1) explains about this system that "the body composed of scholars and the literati was open, non-centralized, non-hereditary, non-exclusive, with a fluid organization that implied no formal hierarchy, thus giving rise to a relatively broad education and teaching system that in many ways prefigured our modern systems". Under the Ottomans (1259-1922), the growth of *Madāris* continued and it became a tradition to have a *Madrasah* with every new mosque that used to be built (R. Ahmad et al., 2012). From the early days of Ottomans, the Islamic educational system is known to have three distinct levels of education: Beginners (called *Mubtedī*), Intermediate (called *Mutavassit*) and Advanced (called *Must'adil*). Formality of *Madāris* further increased from the start of this era and aspects such as teacher qualification, class sizes, *Madrasah* ranking etc. came into consideration (Ihsanoglu, 2004). Ibn Khaldūn (1332-1406), a renowned Muslim philosopher from the times of Ottomans, is known to have classified 'ilm into two distinct branches: '*Aqaliyyah* i.e. 'the philosophical and intellectual studies based on observation and deduction', and '*Naqalaiyyah* i.e. 'the traditional or transmitted knowledge based on revelation' (R. Ahmad et al., 2012). '*Ulūm al Naqalaiyyah* included traditional Islamic sciences such as *Tafsīr*, Hadīth, '*Usūl*, *Fiqh*, *Sarf*, *Bayan*, *Adab* etc. and '*Ulūm al 'Aqaliyyah* focused on branches of education such as logic, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, medicine, metaphysics etc. Both branches of educations were run in parallel and we accordingly see Muslim scholars of that time to be not only sound in their religious knowledge but also the pioneers of many branches of sciences and knowledge we know today.

Islamic education in Indian subcontinent, on the other hand, mainly focused on '*Ulūm an Naqaliyyah*' before the time of Mughals. Mainly organized by the Şufi saints (Qasmi, 2005), its curriculum concentrated on grammar, poetry, literature, logic, math, other disciplines of Islamic studies and general knowledge (Anzar, 2003). Under Mughal, Madrasahs grew considerably (R. Ahmad et al., 2012). The Mughal emperor 'Alamgīr (1618-1707) is known to be a great patron of Islamic knowledge and famous for his work *Fātāwā 'Alamgīriah* (Al-Khateeb, 2013b). The Mughals also brought with them numerous '*Ulūm al-'Aqaliyyah*' which were readily adopted by Madāris in India (Qadri, 2002). Some researchers mention the inclusion of physical well-being and exercises in the curricula (Qadri, 2002) which hints the diversity in the Islamic education curricula of that time. While the Mughal rule went into its decline after 1700 A.D., there were no signs of any drop in activities of religious institutions. Dars-e-Nizāmi, a curriculum proposed by Mullah Nizām Ud Din, is one of the well-known experiments of that time (Qadri, 2002). The original Dars I Nizāmi involved more books on *Mantiq* (Moosa, 2015) than any other subject and is known to have included the most difficult books available on subjects at that time in order to develop reading and comprehension of students to a high standard (Qadri, 2002). It is also mentioned that this curriculum only involved one book on hadīth i.e. *Mishkāt* and included little discussion on *Adab* or *Fiqh* (Qadri, 2002).

Existing curriculum in many Madāris, known as 'Dars e Nizāmi' or 'Nizāmiyyah', is based on the curriculum proposed by Mullah Nizām Ud Din, (Qadri, 2002) however, various amendments or modifications have been made in due course (Farooq, 2013; Qasmi, 2005) e.g. inclusion of six books on hadīth by Shāh Waliullah (R. Ahmad et al., 2012) and so on. Effectiveness of this system in shaping Muslim thought has been acknowledged by external observers such as William Hunter who found that Muslims were not only superior in political understanding but also in their knowledge and thought (Rafique, 2015). In some cases (e.g. Pakistan), final *sanad* (certificate) of the Madāris is officially recognized as equivalent to masters degree in Islamic Studies and Arabic. In order to manage curriculum contents, textbooks, evaluation methods and other aspects, the governing bodies have been established known as '*Wifāq ul Madāris*'. However, not all the Madāris operate under *Wifāqs*.

3.2 Evolution of Islamic studies in the Muslim-Minority lands:

Historically Islām was taught in the West as something that did not belong to the locals, and something that could be considered 'different' or 'outside' (Saeed, 2014). These studies were mainly structured around the "orientalist" approach (Kurzman, 2012) which seeks to study Islām from the perspective of its complex "civilization" presenting it as something fixed, finished and unchanging (Saeed, 2014). Orientalism and Orientalists' approaches of that time had a significant impact on 'Islamic Studies' in that time (Waardenburg, 1997) and have some remains from that time still in the system (as evident from the description provided by Kurzman, 2012). Though the life of prophet and Islamic texts were being studied in Europe for more than a thousand years, often resulting in 'myth-making' (Reeves, 2003), the roots of more formal and institutionalized oriental study can be traced back to the study of Arabic in the West in the 16th century. This study of language later evolved into other related studies focussing on linguistics, geographical locations (e.g. Middle-East, Persia, China, and so on), cultures, and history, by the 19th century (Waardenburg, 1997, Kurzman, 2012). This approach towards study and teaching of Islām was commonly found in Europe and colonized

countries in the nineteenth and the twentieth century (Ahmad et al., 2012; Saeed, 2014). According to Hasbullah (2005), one of the critics of orientalist approach, many scholars and academics (Muslim and non-Muslim alike) believe that the approach adopted by the orientalists has created a type of literature which can be classified as 'intellectual pollution' in Islamic thought owing to ingenuine and biased attitude towards the discipline of Islamic studies and the commonly found incompetence to understand the Islamic texts in the light of the very Islamic sources and classical Islamic scholarship. Many of the works in the 19th and 20th century were compiled to gain lucrative posts within the colonial rule by proving an understanding of the local cultures. The scholarship of Islām and Islamic studies suffered a significant loss as a result. Other genre of works was written from missionary aims and willfully forged and hid information, where it suited their objectives. With the exception of a few, many of the orientalists in that era wrote with a biased attitude towards Islām and did not study it for purpose of genuine research (Varisco, 2009). Criticism for this bias and its inappropriateness is evident through a significant body of literature (Hasbullah, 2005; Khagga & Hussain, 2015; Said, 2006; Varisco, 2009). It is to be noted, however, that not all the orientalist belonged to this 'we are superior' school of thought and there were many who were sincere and honest to the academic discipline (Hasbullah, 2005; Salama, 2011).

In the recent decades, many students in the West have started to express their interest in Islamic studies, especially after the unfortunate incidents of 9/11 (Kurzman, 2012). The demand for Islamic studies, as a discipline in higher education, has rapidly grown as a result (Morris, Shepard, Trebilco, & Tidswell, 2013). In order to meet this demand, programs aiming to explain Islām and Muslims societies are increasing being offered in a number of higher education institutions in the West. It is noted by the researchers, however, that these programs mainly concentrate on the social, political, cultural and historical aspects associated with Islām rather than the core Islamic sciences (Morris et al, 2013). It is accordingly believed that the structure of these programs and assumptions that underlie such study were inadequately paid attention to (Morris et al., 2013). In most of the universities, the study of Islām is still not focussed on 'Islām as a religion' but a study of its offshoots, interactions, and contexts (Saeed, 2014).

3.3 Comparison:

It is explained in this section that the Islamic education in the Muslim lands started from the study of the Qur'ān and the Sunnah and gradually expanded in terms of its contents to include supplementary 'core' sciences and also increased their level of formality. Little change has happened to this approach in recent centuries. On contrary, the study of Islām in the West was formal from the very start and was conducted for certain vested interests, rather than to learn the religion per se. After the evolution of academic practices, the study became more neutral. The study of Islām in the West shift its goals (rather than expanding). The study now mainly focuses on interaction of Islām with societies, its civilization, and other relevant aspects. The focus is not on the canonical texts as it used to be before. It is to be noted, though, that this explanation is in terms of formal courses being offered in the universities and not the general research work. The general research work is quite diverse and still encompasses the canonical texts.

4. THE PRESENT SITUATION AND AN OVERVIEW OF THE COURSE OFFERINGS

The following is an overview of the present situation of course offerings in Muslim-majority and Muslim-minority lands.

4.1. Overview of course offerings in the Muslim-majority countries

The core conceptual basis for Islamic studies in the Muslim-majority lands is vastly the same in terms of areas of knowledge, delivery mechanisms, and curriculum frameworks, though slight differences exist. We see the traditional *Ijāzah* systems, traditional seminaries, as well as the modern higher education institutions with little difference with regards to the conceptual foundations for Islamic studies as a discipline. A most common system of traditional Islamic studies courses, though more prominent among the South Asian *Madāris* (and other *Madāris* around the globe which are inspired by them), is traditionally known as Dars-e-Nizāmi. Description about the Dars e Nizāmi course is covered in section 3.1. In addition to the Dars e Nizāmi, there are also university-based Islamic education courses. Following the recommendation from the first world conference on Muslim education in 1977 (Ashraf, 1977), many Islamic universities have been formed in Muslim countries which aim to present Islām in an academic manner and integrate Islamic learning with other education in other disciplines.

4.2. Overview of course offerings in the Muslim-minority countries:

The review of courses dealing with Islamic studies in the West reveals that the tilt of such courses is towards area studies of the 'orient' (mainly focussing on Asia and middle-east) rather than the basis of the religion (Auda et al., 2008). In recent times, however, some universities have started to engage scholars with 'traditional' Islamic knowledge in the development and delivery of Islamic studies programs.

In the data collection process for this paper, websites of 40 Australia-based public universities have been surveyed in order to find out the availability of Islamic studies or closely related courses in the Western universities. This scope has been defined considering the pragmatic aspects and already existing information about other countries. The findings from the data collected for this study are presented in combination with the previous studies in other countries to present a broader picture.

The following figure summarizes the available options for religious studies courses at the universities included in the study (by 'coursework' only – excluding any research-based masters and doctorate degrees).

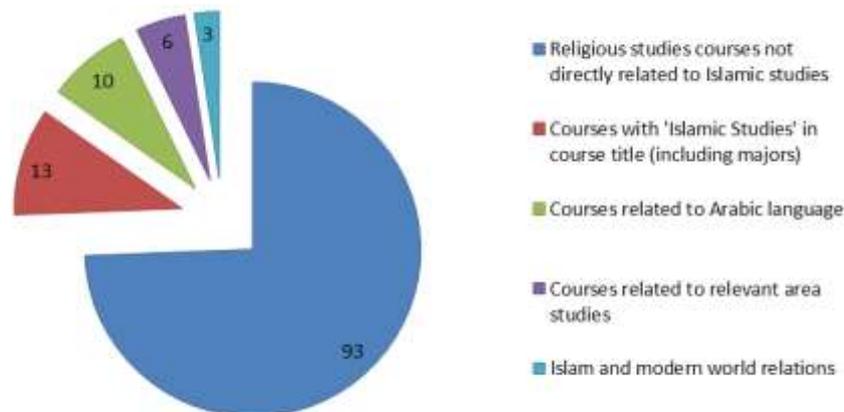


Figure 2: Overview of relevant courses

We see that the courses which deal with Islām in terms of its geographical origins and existence, language and interactions outnumber the courses which focus on 'Islamic Studies' as core area of study (13 of 30 contain 'Islamic Studies' in their titled). Within the thirteen Islamic studies relate courses, seven courses were found to be at bachelors or masters level while more than half did not belong to these two levels. Graduate certificates and graduate diploma are usually stepping stones toward higher degrees and do not offer adequate depth and breadth at their own as required to gain expertise in a given discipline. They can, however, be used as effective add-on's to the existing formal or informal qualifications in Islamic studies or other disciplines. A detailed analysis of courses and the curriculum they follow, reveals that all the courses, barring bachelor's and master program offered at one university, do not adequately cover the 'core' or the essential fields of study that are covered in most traditional seminaries in Islamic countries. Review of units suggest that the main focus of most courses is to look at Islām from an outsider perspective in terms of its interactions, cultures, history, social issues, and other aspects. This, as explained earlier, closely aligns with the scenario expressed in figure 1A. Similar findings were proposed by Siddiqui (2007) who identified about the courses in British universities that they "were generally viewed as 'Muslim studies' or the study of Muslim communities rather than Islām" (p.58). Kurzman (2012) highlighted a similar trend regarding American universities.

As the courses offered in the mainstream universities do not requirements of Muslim community to prepare the local Imāms (Albayrak, 2012), they either send their future Imāms and scholars to Muslim countries for attaining traditional education (Albayrak, 2012) or create non-accredited traditional course offering institutions, which follow the Dars e Nizāmi curriculum. The presence of such institutes (usually referred to as '*Dar ul 'Ulūm*' and '*Madāris*') is quite common in many Western countries (Geaves, 2012).

4.3. Comparison:

It is explained in this section that the course offerings in the Muslim-majority countries heavily focus on the core sciences and give a limited emphasis to the study of Islām with regards to its interaction with the West, media studies, anthropological aspects, and other supporting fields of knowledge. This is closely aligned to the educational model expressed in figure 1A. The opposite system, what can be considered a practical example for the scenario expressed in figure 1B, is found in West. If

Islām is considered a building, one of these perspectives look at it from the inside with no attention to the outside world, whereas the other is more concerned about the outside and external interaction with limited focus to what is inside. What can be considered a more balanced approach would be a good understanding of what is inside and how the building is constructed and established, as well as what is outside and what the external world needs to know about this building to interact with it in a more useful manner.

5. CONCLUSION:

This paper highlights the dichotomy in objectives of Islamic studies courses in the Muslim-majority and Muslim –minority countries and how these various approaches have historical roots in the social, political, cultural, and geographical aspects of the past and the present. In the West, the discipline of Islamic studies in higher education has transformed from being an orientalist study initially to a more open and academically unbiased study of Islām as a practical reality in the West. The literature indicates that the main focus of the courses is still the study of Muslim lands, history, and civilizations. This also includes most of those courses which are offered under the title of ‘Islamic studies’. Recent developments in some universities, however, present a different set of units and structure with a significant percentage of traditional Islamic science represented in the courses. In addition to the main stream universities, Islamic studies is also offered in the West under traditional, though non-accredited seminaries which focus mainly on traditional science, in the same manner as their counterparts in Muslim-majority lands. The number of such seminaries is estimated to be small as the research highlights that most of the Imāms in Western countries obtain their religious qualifications from overseas, which provide them the understanding of Islamic from an ‘internal’ perspective. There are a number of potential research areas that still need to be explored in international contexts to ascertain the effectiveness of these different educational approaches and their broader implications for various societies and its communities. It needs to be assessed that how aligned are the Islamic studies courses (in Muslim-majority as well as Muslim-minority countries) with the specific needs of local population. With the continued research and development, new teaching techniques are emerging and effectiveness of educational interventions are increasing manifolds. Future research can potentially focus on coming up with a suitable framework for Islamic studies programs based on good practices and learnings from various Islamic studies programs offered around the globe in terms of course objectives, teaching techniques, assessment methodologies, course design, student experience, and other relevant aspects. Our research can serve as jumping stone for more detailed and more specific studies on the topic.

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