

ISLAMIC STUDIES AT A MEGA-UNIVERSITY: OUR EXPERIENCES AT UNISA

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Abstract

UNISA is the oldest university in South Africa, boasting alumni who have contributed in diverse ways to this country and beyond. While it began as an institution offering its courses through correspondence, it has over the years kept abreast of the latest teaching technologies. Within this context, Islamic Studies was first offered more than twenty years ago. This article appraises motivations for its introduction, together with its course contents, student enrolments, staff component, teaching approach and avenues, funding, politics, academic practice, and future prospects. In the process, its unique features coupled with its successes, challenges, problems and failures are disclosed against the backdrop of debates raging globally about the ontological status of Islamic Studies. However, in an environment as rampantly consumerist as ours, the future viability and rationale for offering this discipline could well be decided by market forces, rather than by any pleas concerning its academic, strategic, religious, cultural or political value.

Introduction

This presentation contains an exposition of our experiences in teaching Islamic Studies at the University of South Africa (UNISA) since 1990. Before beginning our exposition, however, the status of UNISA on the South African tertiary scene will have to be briefly recounted, and the rationale behind the teaching of Islamic Studies scrutinised.

UNISA's status

UNISA's roots stretch back more than 130 years, which makes it the oldest university in South Africa. The University of the Cape of Good Hope, which was situated in Cape Town, changed its name to the University of South Africa in 1916. At that time, it was merely an examining body that offered examinations but no tuition, although it did have the mandate to confer degrees. Two years later, its headquarters moved from Cape Town to Pretoria, where it also incorporated a large number of university colleges which later became fully autonomous teaching universities. In 1946 a system of postal or correspondence tuition was established

thereby transforming the institution into a pioneer of tertiary distance education in the Western world. For about the next fifty years it steadily built up an international reputation as an affordable, credible, accessible and flexible distance education institution.¹

Among its most noteworthy graduates are former President Nelson Mandela, former Minister of Education Kader Asmal, former Minister of Transport Mac Maharaj, political activist and academic Dennis Goldberg and a host of South African economists and legal heavy weights.²

The following colleges comprise the academic and tuitional landscape of UNISA: Agriculture & Environmental Sciences, Economic & Management Sciences, Human Sciences, Law, Science, Engineering & Technology, and the School for Business Leadership.³ While the current year's final student enrolments will only be available after the finalisation of registration for the second semester, the final student enrolments for 2010 numbered over 290,000.⁴

In line with global trends, UNISA also acknowledges the use of digital and social media in the form of the Internet, video, imaging, podcasts, instant messaging, chat rooms, wikis, blogs and online discussion forums for research and teaching objectives.⁵

Approval for teaching Islamic Studies

In January 1988, members of the following academic departments met the Dean of the Faculty of Arts (as the academic structure designated them at that time) together with a representative of the Muslim community and a member of the university's administrative staff, to seek approval for the implementation of the Islamic Studies course: Semitics, History, Missiology, Science of Religion and Philosophy.

The academic composition of this committee provides the *raison d'être* for the peculiar course content of Islamic Studies which was scheduled to be presented by its host department, the Department of Semitics. The committee was convinced that there was no substantial overlap in its offerings with those of Science of Religion (which was a discipline later rechristened as Religious Studies) while it also appreciated the complementary relationship between the two fields. History and Philosophy were probably involved on the basis of historical and philosophical material tied to Islamic Studies. I will clarify my standpoint on the distinctive nature of these subjects under 'Course Content' and 'Teaching Approaches' later on in this article.⁶

Furthermore, the presence of a community member on this committee confirmed that some negotiations between the University and Muslims had transpired before the implementation of Islamic Studies.

In the covering letter to UNISA's Senate, the following additional, interesting details are raised:

- The syllabi were acceptable to the larger Muslim community, as can be judged from the attached letters.
- Based both on the experience at several foreign universities like Oxford and McGill and the great interest shown in Islamic Studies by a growing body of Muslim students, the subject committee was convinced of its viability.

- The primary aim of the course was the introduction of the student to Islamic history and culture, while Science of Religion would take care of its more religious dimension. The discipline could be introduced progressively at first-level from 1989, the second-level from 1990 and the third-level from 1991.⁷

I have not found any record of the letters referred to concerning the first point above. Actually, my findings are that the syllabi in question are reproductions of those used by the Department of Islamic Studies at the University of Durban-Westville at that time.

The Council of UNISA ratified the Senate decision with one alteration and one proviso; namely, that the successive implementation of courses was to commence in 1990 and that the Executive Committee of Senate was to determine its financial viability annually.⁸

But there was another crucial reason for implementing Islamic Studies, namely the waning popularity of Classical Hebrew after 1983 when it lost its status as a compulsory subject for a B.Th. degree in Christianity.⁹ Consequently, the Department of Semitics suffered a heavy financial blow.

The political scenario at that time, both national and global, also merits consideration. It was the age in which the South African government vociferously trumpeted its anti-Communist cause in an attempt to thwart the legitimate claims of its disenfranchised majority that had developed strategic alliances with the Communist bloc. At the same time, the American government's building strategic partnerships with like-minded anti-Communists throughout the world drew it into a close embrace with the governments of South Africa and Saudi Arabia, among others. The South African government was emboldened by these initiatives, strengthened ties with Saudi Arabia, and probably identified Islam as a bastion against Communism.¹⁰ In this context, Islamic Studies would serve political interests.

Currently, this is the only university in the country offering Islamic Studies as an independent discipline. Elsewhere this discipline has either been absorbed by the Department of Religious Studies (as has been the experience at the University of KwaZulu-Natal and the University of Johannesburg) or it has been taught in that department from the outset (as has been the experience at the University of Cape Town). Such absorption has had ramifications for its teaching approach which will be clarified later.

We now concentrate on the discipline *per se* by evaluating its course contents, student enrolments, staff component, teaching approach, teaching avenues, funding, politics, academic practice and future prospects.

Islamic Studies

Preliminary remarks

The South African tertiary degree structure has four categories: an undergraduate, three-year degree followed by a more intensive two-year honours degree in the student's field of intended specialisation, followed by a Masters degree, and a doctoral degree.

Course Content

An abridged version of the approved syllabi for undergraduate studies appears as follows:

First-year

Islamic history from pre-Islamic times until the fall of the ‘Abbāsid Caliphate; an introduction to the foundational sources and *Tafsīr*; and an introduction to Islamic belief and practice.

Second-year

Islamic history from the fall of the ‘Abbāsid Caliphate until the end of the Ottoman Empire; Islam in South Asia; an advanced study of *Ḥadīth* and *Tafsīr*; a survey of Muslim literature until 1800.

Third-year

[This course had to be taken concurrently with or after a study of elementary Arabic]

The *Holy Qur’ān*: fundamental concepts and translation of selected chapters; an introduction to Islamic Law and thinkers; either Islamic history in the 20th century together with Islam in Africa, or Muslim literature from 1800 until the present day and Islam in the modern period.¹¹

Honours degree

Advanced *Qur’ānic* sciences; advanced *Ḥadīth* sciences; advanced *Sharī‘ah* studies; contemporary Muslim society; Muslim thought (sub-divided into philosophy and mysticism); and a short research paper on an approved topic.

Masters and Doctoral degrees

A full dissertation/thesis on an approved topic.

Review of course content

Firstly, the undergraduate syllabi reveal a strong focus on historical material which with hindsight justified the presence of the Department of History on the steering committee for this discipline. Nevertheless, one issue needs to be stressed categorically: The teaching of history as a discipline from school to tertiary levels revealed a Eurocentric bias particularly during the era of apartheid, as a result of which both the syllabi and approaches smacked of this prejudice. This problem has not been satisfactorily resolved even up to now which has led to calls for greater attention to be paid to indigenous knowledge systems. But returning to the situation pertaining to UNISA specifically, there was going to be no cross-disciplinary interface that justified its presence on that committee.

Secondly, the spotlight on foundational sources is distinct and becomes glaring once our postgraduate offerings are examined. Foundational sources can only be

adequately comprehended with a sound knowledge of Arabic, which in turn is a topic meriting the following discussion:

Soon after our third-level offering was presented, we received numerous complaints from potential and registered students to the effect that the stipulation of first-level Arabic as a compulsory ancillary subject would discourage especially those students who did not have a flair for language studies from registering for third-level Islamic Studies. Consequently, our reformulation of the syllabi in 2000 in compliance with the university's requirements for all offerings resulted in deleting Arabic as an ancillary for this purpose. Nonetheless, at postgraduate level we have reserved the right to activate this requirement if any student's academic pathway demands it. In this way, we have tried to compromise between enforcing and eliminating the requirement of Arabic for Islamic Studies in unrestricted fashion.¹²

Thirdly, our course content has to satisfy the academic needs of both students who have some prior exposure to Islam and those who are novices. This issue is especially confirmed by the first-year syllabus. On the strength of our understanding of the local situation, we have tried to strike a balance between these two categories of students in a way that helps both of them to feel academically enriched. We have also conducted surveys among students for this objective, which have reflected their general satisfaction with our approach. At the same time, they have also revealed a greater need for either introducing or strengthening our offerings relating to Islamic finance, banking and politics. These responses are clearly triggered by global interest in these fields, for varied reasons. We are unfortunately short-staffed and unqualified at present to comply with these proposals.

Fourthly, the constant streamlining of disciplines at the university has had both positive and adverse effects: examples of the former could include the eradication of literary surveys from two undergraduate courses; the introduction of a second-year module on Islamic socio-cultural life, ethics and education together with another module on Islamic politics and economics; and, finally, the introduction of a research methodology paper at honours level. Adverse effects are best illustrated by the elimination of recently offered third-year modules on modern Islamic history, gender issues and interfaith studies; the honours level paper on Muslim thought as well as the short research paper. For objectives of rationalisation, the latter have been replaced by a paper offered by Science of Religion.¹³

Fifthly, one of our shortcomings has been the insufficient material prepared on Islam in Africa. Although there are adequate resources, the problem of multi-tasking in a distance education format for the skeleton teaching staff has exacerbated this dilemma.

In some respects, the course outlines explained above reflect the precise contours of the debate surrounding Islamic Studies. Matin-Asgari regards it as "a field whose conceptual underpinnings rarely are subjected to rigorous scrutiny".¹⁴ Izzi Dien concurs with this criticism, adding that the possible reason for the enigma lies in the past, with the teaching of Islamic Studies that took place within departments that dealt broadly with geographical locations like Oriental Studies, Middle Eastern Studies, Near Eastern Studies,¹⁵ Asian Studies (or – as in our case – Semitics), or in departments of theology or religious studies.¹⁶

Izzi Dien identifies two approaches towards the definition of Islamic Studies, applicable to Western and secular tertiary institutions; one of them narrows the definition while the second advocates a broader label. He elaborates:

The first group maintains that the study of the classical religio-intellectual discipline and tradition should remain at the core of Islamic Studies; to broaden its scope might mean that the quality would suffer. Added to that, Islamic Studies is distinct from both humanities and social sciences and would be diluted if faith-based education about Islam and cross-disciplinary study of Islam were based on those two disciplines. There should be a clear distinction between anthropology and other social sciences and Islamic Studies just as the distinction is made in relation to other disciplines such as Christian Studies.

The other broader definition of Islamic Studies is based on the presupposition that Islam needs to be studied within the context of the 'puzzling evolution of modern Islam'. Also there is a need to understand what the texts mean to the way people experience and live their lives. Confining the field to textual studies alone would risk giving the wrong impression of a unified set of practices, thus masking a more complex reality. Islam should be taught both as a textual tradition and as a social reality. Islamic Studies should have a defined core of key areas and texts; essentially, this should consist of the core Islamic sciences.¹⁷ However, surrounding this core, other areas should be included, such as anthropology and social sciences.¹⁸

He then proposes that the latter approach, combining the traditional and the broader approaches could be termed the Study of Islam whereas the former approach could be designated as Islamic Studies.¹⁹

But the ramifications of the latter approach are prohibitive in today's financial meltdown: more staff would need to be employed to handle the vast range of courses that could only be taught in a separate school.

Even more impractical are the following characteristics of Islamic Studies at a fully-fledged Islamic university or institution for advanced knowledge: a comprehensive educational framework in which a true Muslim's life, activities and thoughts should be structured to reflect all kinds of personal ethics, social relations, technical skills, and all varieties of true knowledge essential for an individual.²⁰

It hardly needs stressing that this approach is unattainable at a secular institution like UNISA, where Islamic Studies courses merely comprise a component of the larger undergraduate degree. These noble objectives cannot be met even at postgraduate level at a distance teaching university like ours.

Our course outlines indicate a proclivity for the second option explained by Izzi Dien above, which entails the presentation of core modules on foundational sources, while making provision for social praxis. At the same time, the presentation of a broader range of courses would depend on the procurement of financial resources and competent lecturing staff.

Student Enrolments

In addition to available, official statistics about student enrolment and the gender of those enrolling, I will also give our rough estimates about their age categories, religious affiliations and vocations.

The Department of Statistics at UNISA could only provide statistics from 1996 onwards. Student numbers for the earlier years (1989-1995) unfortunately could not be retrieved from the old records.

Student statistics can be divided into three periods, namely 1996-2000, 2001-2006 and 2007-2010. Below is the information related to students registered for Islamic Studies from 1996 to the present.

Table A: Provisional course registration for Islamic Studies 1996-2000²¹

Course	Gender	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
Course 1	Female	68	62	72	57	0
	Male	19	18	25	19	0
	<i>Total</i>	87	80	97	76	0
Course 2	Female	44	51	43	65	58
	Male	15	8	12	22	7
	<i>Total</i>	59	59	55	87	65
Course 3	Female	25	28	27	35	16
	Male	17	9	2	6	9
	<i>Total</i>	42	37	29	41	25

During this period the student intake for the first-level ranged between 76 and 97, whereas its counterpart for the second and third-levels ranged between 55 and 87, and 25 and 42 respectively. This discipline was taught as a year course. In relation to the first-level, the numbers at second-level dropped almost by a third, and by almost another third at the third-level.

Table B: Provisional course registration for Islamic Studies 2001-2006²²

Course	Gender	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
Course 1	Female	145	129	136	107	108	147
	Male	40	45	49	49	55	70
	<i>Total</i>	185	174	185	156	163	217
Course 2	Female	72	110	65	56	80	84
	Male	36	25	22	25	24	45
	<i>Total</i>	108	135	87	81	104	129
Course 3	Female	18	53	63	57	60	65
	Male	18	20	26	15	17	12
	<i>Total</i>	36	73	89	72	77	77

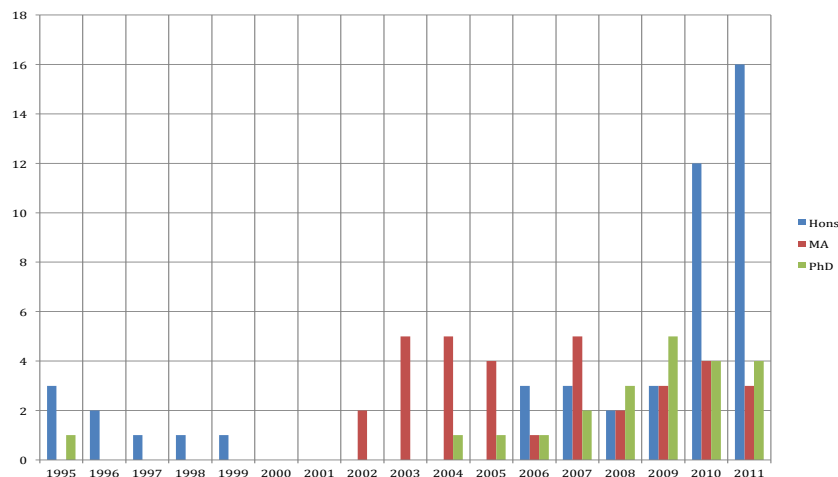
During this period, there were changes to the curriculum content and semesterisation was introduced. This had a positive impact on student numbers. The trend relating to decreasing enrolments from the first to third-levels was evident once more.

Table C: Provisional course registration for Islamic Studies 2007-2011²³

Course	Gender	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Course 1	Female	118	102	97		
	Male	52	44	23		
	<i>Total</i>	<i>170</i>	<i>146</i>	<i>120</i>	<i>167</i>	<i>199</i>
Course 2	Female	91	89	103		
	Male	27	18	19		
	<i>Total</i>	<i>118</i>	<i>107</i>	<i>122</i>	<i>82</i>	<i>133</i>
Course 3	Female	35	40	34		
	Male	17	13	12		
	<i>Total</i>	<i>52</i>	<i>53</i>	<i>46</i>	<i>52</i>	<i>55</i>

Unfortunately, gender-based statistics have not been available for the past two years.

Graph 1: Provisional registrations for Honours, Masters and doctoral degrees in Islamic Studies plotted against the academic year.



Review of student enrolments

Firstly, as per the data provided in the tables above, the majority of our undergraduate students are females. A possible reason for this lies in the Muslim community's sloppy attitude to education as it is imparted at elementary religious schools (*madrasas*). While the traditional rote method employed within them is not conducive to stimulating the pupils' intellects,²⁴ females conventionally suffer the added disadvantage of being deregistered from such schools upon attaining puberty. The rationale for this measure is that they will be unable to pursue on-going, coherent *Qur'ānic* studies in the face of regular menstruation. This flippant excuse is further underlined if their teachers happen to be males. Apart from the Islamic Peace Varsity of South Africa, there is a lack of academically stimulating venues for acquiring knowledge. In the light of this backlog, some females interpret university studies in Islam as a viable and compensatory alternative.

Returning to the completion of our student profiles, our simple analysis indicates that the ages of most of our students range between 25 and 40 years. Their professions vary from career housewives to medical and legal practitioners, teachers, diplomats and students of religion. We estimate that about 95% of them are Muslims, while the balance comprises adherents of Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism, African Traditional Religion and agnosticism. Most of our undergraduate students are either South Africans or Mauritians with a smattering representation from our neighbouring countries, the UK, the USA, and Canada.

Secondly, the majority of our students at Masters and doctoral levels are recent male migrants to South Africa from the Middle East and Africa. They enjoy proficiency in Arabic, in which they present their dissertations and theses, and have a firm grounding in traditional Islamic sciences. The research fields of Masters and doctoral students are given in descending order of popularity as follows: *Qur'ānic* studies, Islam in society, jurisprudence, history, *Hadīth* sciences, and philosophy/thought and mysticism.

Staff Component

Details appear in the following table:

<i>Name</i>	<i>Qualifications and institutions where obtained</i>
Yousuf Dadoo	Ḥifẓ al-Qur'ān, M.A. (Univ. of Durban-Westville), Ph.D. (UNISA)
Iqbal Jhazbhay	M.A. (Salford), Ph.D. (Univ. of Witwatersrand)
Ismail Jaffer	M.A. (Aleemiya Institute, Karachi), Ph.D. (UNISA)
Farida Mahomed	M.A. (UNISA)

The last-mentioned member resigned in 1994 to pursue a political career while Jhazbhay has been seconded to the diplomatic service during the last quarter of 2011. All staff members are of Sunnī Muslim background.

To varying degrees we have all participated in national and international conferences that have been convened in different parts of the world and have related to Islamic Studies. Likewise, all of us have published articles in accredited journals on relevant themes.

Teaching Approach

Khair provides a fine general preamble to this topic:

The non-recognition of the field of Islamic Studies as a discipline on its own has its impact on the methods of its study. Islamists generally apply an array of theories and approaches drawn from theological studies, religious studies, social sciences and humanities. In this way, the study of Islam is normally dominated by twofold phenomena. Firstly, the approaches used in the studies are borrowed from other disciplines. Secondly, viewpoints are strictly limited to Western scholarly frames and terms of reference. No proper serious

consideration has been given to examining the paradigms and methodologies provided within Islam itself.²⁵

J. Waardenburg concluded that this anomaly has resulted from the lack of a general definition of Islamic Studies per se.²⁶

The ramifications of this assessment for our teaching are related now.

To cater for the needs of students from diverse prior knowledge backgrounds, particularly at first-level, the phenomenological approach is largely used for teaching about sacred sources, beliefs and practices. This is certainly a very sensible approach to teaching this subject, and was fully supported by Wilfred Cantwell Smith, founder of the Institute of Islamic Studies at McGill University. He elaborated that the study of religion should focus on the religious experiences of insiders as a unique phenomenon.²⁷ Naturally, the study of Islam surpasses the simple descriptive approach and involves itself in normatively laying down the truth that it embodies in contrast to other belief systems and faiths. Ultimately, this demands of us to boldly present Islam's argumentation without disparaging other religions.

At a practical level, this approach is feasible for students who firstly need to grasp the common Muslim understanding of faith and praxis instead of confusing them with large amounts of theoretical jargon leading nowhere.

The vexing question remains: given the lack of uniformity of responses to any religious issue, whose perspective/s should be accepted? For basic expositions to undergraduate students, consensual views among religious scholars that have been adopted by rank and file Muslims are highlighted.²⁸

At this stage, comment about the phenomenological approach mentioned above merits additional clarification. Support for this approach is based on our understanding concerning the broad consensus among Muslims globally regarding the fundamentals of Islam, be it in relation to principles of belief, or practice. In the light of guaranteed Divine support for the overwhelming majority, as enunciated by Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.) along the lines of Allah's Hand being with the generality, we maintain that the basic beliefs and interpretation of Islamic conduct cherished and/or upheld by most Muslims accord with scriptural dictates.²⁹

But this does not totally preclude alternative views; be they justified or not. At best, they introduce alternative perspectives so that students are readily informed of contentious issues. This case is particularly significant when more mundane features like historical forces require scrutiny.³⁰

At this juncture, it would be prudent to assess the approach supported by Religious Studies. The approach to Islamic Studies here is often based on a Western academic view of Islam centred on various scientific methodologies like Orientalism, contemporary social sciences or anthropology.³¹ It is an academic field of multi-disciplinary, secular study of religious beliefs, behaviours and institutions.

It studies religious conduct and belief in a detached manner from any particular religious viewpoint by drawing upon anthropology, sociology, psychology and history of religion.

A strong proponent of the history of religions approach, Abdulkader Tayob from the University of Cape Town, claims that 'it tries to locate itself within the wider

academic study of social phenomena [via – YD] the study of the dynamics of a system and its evolving nature'.³² Our rejoinder to this contention is that it reduces religion to a social phenomenon, thereby either negating its metaphysical component or explaining it in terms of social theory. In most cases, the underlying assumptions are either sceptical, deterministic or relativistic. The first two of these presuppositions lead to the conclusion that all religions are mythical or false, while the last one assumes that all religions are equally valid.³³

It grants supreme, exclusive authority to the methodology of scepticism by promoting empiricism, thereby trivializing religious knowledge and experience. One of its main outcomes is that all phenomena are worthy of exploration, interpretation and exploitation. But human beings and their behaviour cannot be studied according to the same rules and principles that may be employed in interpreting natural phenomena. Humans are far more complex, embracing the human spirit, sentiments and behaviour patterns observable in different cultures, religions and traditions. Islam is not simply a collection of beliefs, but a way of life, embracing all facets of human life. Besides, it accepts two kinds of truth: that which relates to questions beyond the fathom of human intellect like will, destiny, life and death, and the truth that is related to the empirical facts of life; hence, by critically examining basic knowledge about Islamic faith and history purely from a materialist angle, Muslim students invariably become embroiled in serious ideological problems.³⁴

With specific reference to our sister discipline in our academic department, Religious Studies, we quote the following information:

Religious Studies offers the opportunity for a comparative study of the religions ('systems of ultimate meaning') developed by humankind in the course of its history.

...

It does not proceed from and does not propagate any religious assumptions or practices. Religion is approached as part and parcel of the overall cultural, social, economic, political and other processes of human life.

The modules provide an integrated package comprising both 'vertical' and 'horizontal' strands. The 'vertical' modules refer to the unique histories and characteristic features of the following religions: African religion, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and new and alternative religious movements. However, other religions are also referred to where applicable. The 'horizontal' modules provide comparative studies, cutting across the various individual religions and families of religions, such as concepts of divinity, public life, mysticism, gender, and religious thought.³⁵

While we have considered their approach reputable, it does leave gaps in the understanding of core beliefs and practices on account of the wider spectrum of subject matter it is expected to cover in the limited semester period.

By way of concluding discussion on our approach, we assert that it is an academic approach that neither belittles the metaphysical nor venerates the material

component. As such we are not slaves to any humanly formulated theories of religion.³⁶

On the other hand, we have attracted sufficient criticism from traditional religious leaders who remain content in prescribing their theological approach. In some instances that criticism has exceeded the bounds of common courtesy with accusations of heresy levelled against us. In a country like ours where a simplistic understanding of Islam is promoted by this group of highly influential people, misgivings about our approach to teaching this subject are inevitable. We are aware of occasions where some prospective students have been dissuaded from embarking on their studies with us. At other times some students have even deregistered owing to pressure being exerted on them by such individuals or their close associates.

Teaching Avenues

The emphasis at UNISA has always been making quality education accessible to all its students, in a format in which the potential negative impact of physical distance between students and lecturers is removed as much as possible.

Having started out as a correspondence university, it has evolved into an institution employing all possible means of maintaining contact with students. Finding itself in a country with (what is euphemistically termed) an emerging economy, UNISA uses multimedia in appropriate circumstances while still using traditional correspondence to reach students living in an impoverished environment, devoid of elements of basic infrastructure (like sanitation and electricity supply).

All our study material is prepared in print form for mailing to students. Concurrently, it is uploaded onto the UNISA website for their benefit.

Several avenues are used for contacting students ranging from telephone to faxing, emails, SMSs, videoconferencing, apart from social networking platforms like Facebook. In addition, there is an interactive channel linked to the UNISA homepage called "My UNISA" to link students both to their colleagues and their lecturers.

Within South Africa, UNISA has regional offices and study centres in a few cities that we periodically visit for brief periods to consult our students. But no amount of networking via cyberspace can compensate for fruitful, interpersonal exchanges. This is a problem that defies satisfactory resolution.

Funding

Our findings about this category, together with the subsequent category, are somewhat different to those in other Western countries like Britain.³⁷ For that reason, they merit a brief review.

Internally, the main revenue source is the state which provides subsidies to the university based on the registration of students and their throughputs. Subsidies escalate in proportion to their levels of study; therefore, the revenue generated by a doctoral graduate is considerably higher than that generated by an undergraduate student. This reality has made us focus more strongly on having a healthy contingent of Masters and doctoral students in recent times.

Another funding avenue is the publication of fully-fledged oeuvres, or articles and chapters in accredited academic journals by academics.

Externally, a local Muslim body granted limited annual funding for research projects up to around 1996. Some benefactors from wealthy Muslim countries in the pre-9/11 period exhibited great keenness for promoting our work, as they realized the immense global reach UNISA enjoys. Disappointingly, their deeds never matched their verbal accolades in recent times.

In the process, we realize through hindsight that we have maintained some measure of academic stature and self-respect by not succumbing to the behests of any patron.

Politics and Academic Practice

Fortunately, our government has maintained great composure when dealing with issues pertaining to Islamic Studies despite the presence of some academic mavericks. For as long as we have abided by the norms of the country's constitution and bill of rights, we have continued to discharge our duties without fear, harassment or intimidation.

A noteworthy point here is our perceived preferential treatment for academics teaching components of Islam in Religious Studies departments by the secular state. Such a reaction is to be expected in the light of the academic stances and teaching approaches adopted by them (which have been explained above).

Future Prospects

Two issues will be addressed here.

Firstly, to maintain and consolidate impetus for the teaching of Islamic Studies, visionary strategies are essential which broadly respond to student needs. Of primary concern here is the fact that we have already entered the massive competition spurred on by digital technology to recruit students globally. The quality of our presentations will have to match, if not surpass, that of our rivals elsewhere.

Secondly, the new political dispensation has ushered in a new era of potentially cordial, constructive interaction among the country's citizens for grappling with problems and challenges of common concern. This situation implies the possible contribution of Islamic Studies to various disciplines like politics, healthcare, trade, law and education. At the global level, the post-9/11 period poses new challenges that we have to tackle rationally.

Conclusion

When we review our course contents and teaching methods in general terms, we discover that these topics resonate with the ongoing debate about the parameters and perspectives needing adoption for the teaching of Islamic Studies at tertiary institutions in other countries. These challenges are amplified by the different levels of prior knowledge possessed by students upon first registration on the one hand, and state engineered initiatives for rationalising all university courses on the other.

Student enrolments have fluctuated from year to year. When the UNISA Council approved the implementation of Islamic Studies in 1988 it stipulated 150

as a reasonable figure for financial viability.³⁸ More than anything else, the economic dynamics of UNISA and the country have changed so radically as to render that figure irrelevant. Most of our students at undergraduate levels have been females while the situation has been reversed at postgraduate levels. Possible reasons for this phenomenon and a broader speculative profile of students have also been presented.

Our funding sources have been entirely South African, with the state deserving the bulk of the plaudits in this respect. The advantages and disadvantages with this state of affairs have been assessed.

The discipline has survived two decades, even without its name ever having been mentioned in the cluster of different disciplines with which it has been administratively accommodated. There has been no political interference in our presentation from any state organ, accusing us of harbouring or supporting extremism. For the future, we will have to remain constantly vigilant about all issues relating to Islamic Studies outlined in this article.

In conclusion, just as some aspects of the past relating to the approval of the teaching of Islamic Studies at UNISA remain shrouded in mystery, likewise appear its future prospects. Eventually, its fate could be decided by market forces rather than concerns about its academic, strategic, religious, cultural or political value.

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