

Islamic studies: current status and future prospects

23 November 2007, Lion Court Conference Centre

1. The seminar aimed to consider the position and focus of Islamic studies as a subject within UK higher education (HE), noting recent debate stimulated by the publication of the Siddiqui report ('Islam at Universities in England: meeting the needs and investing in the future'). The purpose of the day was to gather feedback from experts in the field to identify potential areas in which HEFCE might be able to support the subject in partnership with others. HEFCE envisages this as the first step towards a programme of work designed to enhance the future development of Islamic studies as a strategically important subject in the UK.

2. This seminar was hosted by HEFCE and attended by invited delegates from higher education institutions (HEIs) with significant Islamic studies provision and from related organisations. The speakers were expert academics from a range of backgrounds. This was a preliminary and informal consultation to help us develop our thinking. A further seminar with an international focus will be held in spring 2008.

Introduction by Dr John Selby, HEFCE Director with responsibility for strategic subjects

3. In welcoming the delegates, John Selby, HEFCE Director with responsibility for strategic subjects, clarified the nature and focus of HEFCE's work. John explained that the stimulus for this work had come from the report by Dr Siddiqui, and that HEFCE is focusing on Islamic studies in relation to taught provision, research and future prospects for the subject. This work, he said, dovetails with that of Universities UK, GuildHE and others with an interest in supporting the student experience, interfaith dialogue and interfaith relations.

4. John told delegates that HEFCE has no desire or constitutional power to direct what should be taught, how it should be taught, or where it is taught. The sector, he stressed, has responsibility to protect academic freedom, and be responsive to demand.

Speakers' presentations

5. The speakers gave presentations on the following (the full texts are in Annex A):
 - a. 'Background to Islam at universities in England: meeting the needs and investing in the future', Dr Ataullah Siddiqui, Director, Markfield Institute of Higher Education.
 - b. 'Blending Islamic, Middle Eastern and Arabic Studies', Robert Gleave, Professor of Arabic Studies, University of Exeter and Executive Director of the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies.
 - c. 'Islamic studies: beyond texts', Dr Shuruq Naguib, Lecturer in Islamic studies, Department of Religious Studies, Lancaster University.
 - d. 'Islamic studies: what is it, who is it for, and how should it be done?', Hugh Goddard, Professor of Christian-Muslim Relations, Department of Theology and Religious Studies, University of Nottingham.
 - e. 'Islamic studies: problems and prospects', Iftikhar Malik, Professor of History, School of Historical and Cultural Studies, Bath Spa University.

Questions and answers to the speakers' panel (chair: John Selby, HEFCE)

6. John commented that many of the issues facing Islamic studies are common to other strategically important subjects. There were questions from the floor and discussion by the panel on:
 - a. The 'location' of Islamic studies – there was some discussion about how Islamic studies can sit within different departments (for example area studies, or theology) and so there is variation in what the courses cover. The discussion identified a need to establish links with related subjects, such as law, business and finance, and provide inter-disciplinary support to increase academic knowledge of the subject area.
 - b. The definition of the subject – discussions addressed the distinction between 'Muslim studies' and 'Islamic studies', and the viability of 'Islamic World studies' as an alternative title for the subject. Delegates concurred that Islamic studies is often, and rightly, regarded as a multi-disciplinary subject open to alternative approaches: textual and linguistic, fostering languages skills and literary exegesis; and a broader approach that may look at, among other subjects, law, sociology, and history.
 - c. Balancing the needs of Muslim students and the need to discuss matters of faith in an academic context.

Workshop discussions

7. Delegates divided into four workshop groups to discuss the specific issues that face Islamic studies as a discipline in HE, and the concrete steps HEFCE and the UK's funding bodies could take to address them.

Agenda

8. Delegates raised concerns that the designation of Islamic studies as a strategically important subject made an exception of the discipline and implied a response to the Government's agenda on terror and extremism. The delegation queried why HEFCE is not looking at all religious studies. HEFCE representatives explained the subject has been designated strategically important by the Government and will be treated in the same way as any other strategically important subject.

9. It was agreed that this was a good opportunity for a minority subject to have its voice heard and start looking at issues such as the sustainability of provision.

Definition

10. The discussion noted that students can study Islamic studies under the aegis of courses that range from theology, area studies, sociology, linguistics and even fashion. This means that it is difficult for HEFCE, or any other agency that relies on data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency, to obtain a full picture of current Islamic studies provision.

11. Delegates discussed the different aspects of the subject and concluded that it could be split into three main areas:

- a. Language-based studies – this may mean the acquisition of languages needed to study Islamic texts, or the study of Islamic languages in their own right. (The high cost of ab initio language training was identified.)
- b. Social sciences – approaches to the study of Islam and Muslims in the modern world through the methodology and discourse of the social sciences, which may be embedded throughout a range of academic disciplines.
- c. Core 'Islamic studies' – the classical traditions and texts, and how they relate to current context.

12. The discussions agreed that Islamic studies spans a range of disciplines, and that this is a key feature of the subject.

Staffing

13. Delegates discussed the problem of the number of 'lone rangers' – isolated, and often solitary, members of staff on which institutions become dependent to teach Islamic studies courses. A lack of critical mass in some institutions means that these staff often have to choose between teaching or research. This can also mean that the views of one member of staff dominate an institution's provision of the subject. It was agreed that research into pedagogy and the possibility of using professionals from dar al-'ulums (Islamic centres of learning), may help solve this problem.

14. The discussion mooted the need for the provision of support to the HE sector possibly from a professional body that could enable improved marketing and collaboration between HEIs. It was suggested that this support might take the form of a network for Islamic studies academics across HEIs. Some delegates discussed sharing resources and best practice.

Recruitment and progression

15. The delegation acknowledged that the perception of Islamic studies within the HE world can be misleading and deter potential students. It was agreed that improved marketing, demand-raising activity, responding to employer and community demand and a diversified mode of delivery could mitigate this.

16. The discussion addressed the shortage of students coming up through the system as a possible cause of low staff numbers. Both shortages might be addressed, the delegates agreed, if a level and range of provision were offered consistently across the country and from school-age upwards.

17. The discussions highlighted the increased demand from employers for a broad understanding of Islamic studies – including Muslim law, Islamic languages and Muslim finance. Some delegates agreed joint degrees were a positive step in this area.

18. The student experience was discussed. There were a variety of views on the need for language skills, whether Islamic studies teachers should be Muslim or non-Muslim, and how best to reflect community needs and ensure quality.

Private providers

19. The discussions also highlighted the need to build better links and better quality assurance systems with private providers. Some delegates felt the Quality Assurance Agency should be more involved in this area.

Plenary session: emerging issues and how these can be taken forward: Dr Alison Scott-Baumann, Reader in Cultural Hermeneutics and EdD Course Leader, University of Gloucestershire

20. Alison summarized the workshop discussions (see Annex A).

Closing remarks and next steps: Dr John Selby, HEFCE

21. John drew the seminar to a close stating that HEFCE will be working to develop a draft programme of work for consultation at a seminar in April. A paper will go to the HEFCE Board in September to agree future work. John outlined his perception of the subject area from the discussion: it is a small area that is often dependent on individuals within institutions.

'Background to Islam at universities in England: meeting the needs and investing in the future', Dr Ataullah Siddiqui, Director, Markfield Institute of Higher Education

I am glad to be here and to be amongst a group of people who are connected with teaching and research in Islam.

I had the great pleasure of meeting some of you last year and earlier this year to discuss in detail some of the aspects of Islamic studies. This gave me some insight and I learned a great deal about the issues and challenges of teaching and research in this subject.

When I first took on the responsibility of writing a report for the then Department for Education and Skills, I sat down and wondered *how* and *where* to start this gigantic task? I looked at the time frame for this work: practically it was 87 days (three days a week for 29 weeks).

I began to explore the general definition of Islamic studies; its provisions, past reports, and the challenges departments such as Middle Eastern studies and theology and those who teach Islamic studies face. I have also looked at how Islamic studies has been delivered outside the universities, and what kinds of relations exist. I was also looking for good practices and relations in general between universities and communities.

Whatever I have said in my report, I have based my case on what I have heard during several conversations with the very people in departments and centres who have some connection with the teaching of Islam in universities.

It was obvious from the start that, with limited resources, a systematic survey was never going to be possible; and in this research the finer details are less well attended to than one would have wished.

I am delighted that the report has been received well, with some genuine criticism, but also with some misunderstanding, such as:

'Islamic Studies has become too associated with Middle Eastern Studies, and needs to break away, establish itself as a distinct discipline and become focused on the situation of Muslims in Britain and Europe.' Further more he writes that '...the academic study of Islam at university should be more like Christian theological training in a seventeenth-century seminary, where education was a tool for the "moral and doctrinal" improvement of young students.' [BRISMES Newsletter, Vol.22, No.3, p3 &4]

This is how a commentator viewed my report. This is not what I said, nor did I want to convey that message.

What my report is suggesting is that the Middle Eastern studies departments, or, for that matter, those of Theology or Oriental Studies, have provided and are providing a very valuable service. However, the report would like to see an 'add on' factor – to add the teaching of languages, to prepare scholars who would be equipped to engage with the wider Islamic world, whose language of expression of Islam is not simply informed by the Arab Middle Eastern perspective.

Let me also say in passing that there is a need to explore what distinction, if any, exists in the teaching of Islam in the departments of theology, vis-à-vis Middle Eastern studies.

My report has also been accused of wanting to turn these departments into Muslim seminaries. Far from it. My report was expressing concerns and wishes raised by the students on campus. Any appointment of a person 'trained via the traditional Islamic route' must meet the criteria of a university – open to new ideas, able to look at things objectively, etc. I value very much the open vibrant intellectual space, which is extremely healthy and should not be relinquished at any cost. If a Rabbi can be true to his vocation and still be able to teach Judaism with academic integrity in a university, and a Christian priest with a dog collar can be trusted to teach Christian theology with academic rigour, why is it that when a group of students wants to see a traditional Islamic scholar invited to teach Islam with academic veracity it is seen as a *madrasisation* of the university?

The focus of this seminar as I understand it is to explore the possible areas of co-operation and partnership with others and see what new directions will emerge for the future of Islamic studies.

I believe there is a need to survey *how* and at *what level* Islamic studies are provided by various institutions outside the universities and outside the HEFCE range. Some of these Islamic studies courses are provided by independent organisations and are not validated by any university. But there are others whose courses and modules *are* validated by universities, and this should be the area of interest for a future survey. This will ascertain future growth areas of Islamic studies, areas of co-operation or non-cooperation outside the universities, and any research that may be required.

In a recent speech, the Prime Minister mentioned the possibility of Britain becoming the centre of Islamic studies in Europe. I believe that is possible. There is enormous potential to develop Islamic studies in that direction. However, well structured, well thought out programmes are needed, and to turn this vision into a success story, dialogue is required. Dialogue between departments and, between universities, but also involving stakeholders outside these areas is necessary.

'Blending Islamic, Middle Eastern and Arabic Studies', Robert Gleave, Professor of Arabic Studies, University of Exeter and Executive Director of the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies

The report by Ataulloh Siddiqui into Islam in English universities contains a number of suggestions about how the provision might be improved and enhanced. One of these is that Islamic studies 'needs to look beyond language and classical texts' (p.62). However, there is also a call for the establishment of 'intensive language courses' (p.62). This is, at first blush, contradictory. I have argued that relevant language acquisition should be part of any programme of Islamic studies at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Whilst recognising that not all students of Islamic studies will be natural linguists, a knowledge of one of the languages spoken by the Muslim community world-wide is not simply a research tool. Learning a language, even at a basic level, is an important introduction to a culture. Of the languages that a student of Islamic studies might learn, Arabic is one of the natural choices, since this is still considered the sacred language of the Muslim tradition, even

though many Muslims do not speak or read it. Traditional Muslim intellectuals will almost always learn Arabic as their first 'second language' in order to enable them to access the great texts of the Muslim tradition. Within the UK, the various departments of Arabic and Middle Eastern Studies are the natural providers of both Arabic language provision, and also tuition in Persian and Turkish. Language instruction is not the whole of Islamic studies, but it should be a central part. The Siddiqui report gives out rather mixed messages on this topic.

The second recommendation of the Siddiqui report which opens up an important debate is the idea that students of Islamic studies should be 'given the opportunity to study under competent scholars of Islam who have been trained via traditional Islamic routes' (p.63). It is not clear whether such scholars should form part of the English HE system or be brought in from outside on an occasional basis. It is also not clear whether the teaching they would provide would be part of an undergraduate degree in Islamic studies, or credit-bearing courses in Islamic studies taken as options. Furthermore, since realistically only a Muslim can be trained by the traditional Islamic route, English universities would be operating a positive discrimination system when hiring academic staff if they were to give preference to such scholars. I doubt this would be legal, never mind desirable.

The questions raised by this recommendation of the report are, as I see it, the following:

1. Does the low number of traditionally-trained Muslim scholars teaching Islamic studies within UK HE lead to a reduction in the quality of the provision?
2. Does this low number also lead to a reduction in the 'relevance' and 'currency' of the Islamic studies curriculum in the UK?
3. Does this low number mean that Muslim students are less willing to take courses in Islamic studies, and hence are more likely to be drawn into less formal (and potentially more radical) forms of Islamic education?

If one was to answer in the affirmative to question 1, one is committed to the idea that the presence of traditionally trained Muslim scholars within the UK cadre of Islamic studies is, in itself, a positive thing. Irrespective of the quality of their teaching, so the argument goes, the profile of those teaching Islamic studies needs to include traditionally-trained Muslim scholars – without it, the profile is skewed, leading to the subject irrelevant. In response, I would argue that this position could too easily expose Islamic studies to an unnecessary risk of lower or different academic standards.

If one was to answer in the affirmative to question 2, then one is committed to the idea that Islamic studies curricula should, at least in part, be governed by the strictly utilitarian question of relevance. Gearing a subject towards relevance is problematic for a number of reasons. First, the independence of research will be compromised as academics work towards fulfilling the strategic goals devised by an outside agency. Second, the quality of research will fall, as it is clear to all of us who work in education, researchers (both students and staff) generally produce the highest quality research when they have selected and developed a set of research questions themselves, rather than having had them imposed upon them. Third, the strength of a subject such as Islamic studies is its diversity and depth. If certain areas of Islamic studies are deemed 'relevant' and therefore encouraged (through direct intervention, or through advantageous funding arrangements, or through a funding squeeze on 'irrelevant' areas of study), the subject as a whole could become a hollow reed.

This will make it less able to adjust to external events. What is irrelevant today may be relevant tomorrow. How will we make informed judgements on tomorrow's relevant issues (which we have no means of predicting) if we have directed funding towards short-term, supposedly relevant deliverables.

Finally, question 3 implies that Islamic studies should incorporate into its aims and objectives the attracting of Muslim students above other religious and ethnic groups. In response to this, one could ask the pressing reason for this objective's incorporation. On this point, the thinking appears to be that part of the reason why Muslim young people are increasingly attracted to more radical versions of Islam is because they have not been exposed to the 'true' Islam. If they were exposed to this 'true' version of Islam, radicalism would be reduced. Islamic studies, then, can be part of a government policy initiative to de-radicalise Muslim young people – and only traditionally-trained Muslim scholars can do this. First, I personally am not convinced that the incorporation of traditionally-trained Muslim scholars into the teaching of Islamic studies in UK HE, even if it was deemed desirable, will make the slightest difference to the processes of radicalisation amongst Muslim young people in Britain. Second, the exploration of faith which some Muslim students will undoubtedly face when entering a course on Islamic studies requires pastoral support and sensitivity from the teaching staff. However, it is not the task of university lecturers to encourage a particular ('approved') version of Muslim theology. Such a proposition demeans the academic integrity of the students as well as the staff. On such reasoning, philosophy departments should put on courses in sexual ethics in which sexual abstinence is promoted in order to reduce pregnancy amongst the student group; and politics departments should spearhead the campaign against voter apathy. I would argue that the only policy objectives HE should advance are those relevant to HE. I am not against 'knowledge transfer' or 'accountability', but to decide to encourage a subject area to grow in certain ways (and not others) is not only meddling, it is also dangerous. It will ultimately, in my view, lead to less coherence and a reduction in teaching and research quality in Islamic studies.

The Muslim tradition does, I believe, hold within it intellectual structures which can aid Muslims retain, develop and enhance their religious beliefs in a postmodern (and specifically post-9/11) environment. However, it is not the role of academic specialists in Islamic studies to encourage or discourage particular Muslim interpretive strategies. Such a demand is both too onerous and too trivial at the same time. Too onerous because an academic subject cannot realistically be expected to have such an effect; too trivial, because it reduces a discipline to dependence on the objectives of policy makers.

**Islamic studies: beyond texts', Dr Shuruq Naguib, Lecturer in Islamic studies,
Department of Religious Studies, Lancaster University.**

Since the Rammell report in 2006 on 'The teaching of Islam and Campus extremism', Islamic studies as a field in the UK has been going through a process of self-reflection. When in response to the Rammell report, a group of Islamic studies scholars met in Edinburgh in December 2006, the message I believed was relevant then was that Islamic studies must go beyond its orientalist bias for classical texts as constituting the core of the discipline. This message I think is still relevant today – and further confirmed by my teaching experiences of

Islam within religious studies. The focus on classical texts has more or less created a gap in our knowledge of the relation between 'textual' and 'living' Islam.

To exemplify this gap, which becomes particularly obvious when teaching Islam to religious studies students, I will refer to the study of ritual in Islam, a long-standing research interest of mine. In our first year core course (Religious Studies 100), when we come to the section on ritual in the Islamic tradition, the students and the Islamicist teaching them, have to rely on primary and secondary sources which are focused on juristic discussions of Islamic ritual prescriptions. As a result, students come out with no real grasp of how Muslims actually practice Islamic rituals. Moreover, they cannot relate this in a pedagogically sound way to their general study of ritual practice in other religious traditions. The textual focus within Islamic studies, while of great importance, can be reductive; in the end, ritual is a performative aspect of religion. It is an idiosyncrasy of modern Islamic studies to pretend that classical texts and debates on ritual prescriptions are sufficient to understand Muslim ritual practice today. On the other hand, ethnographical and sociological research on Muslim religious practice generally focuses on the specifics of local contexts; and often ignores linkages with the larger scheme of Islamic thought. Hence, it is generally considered by Islamicists to lie outside the scope of Islamic studies proper.

Islamic studies within religious studies

The context of religious studies, with its varied approaches to the study of religion, could open up possibilities for moving beyond 'textualism' in the provision of knowledge on Islam in UK HE. However, there are several challenges which Islamic studies faces within religious studies.

Religious studies is a small if not marginalised field within the arts and the social sciences; Islamic studies within a religious studies context is a margin within the margin. Moreover, Islamic studies is further marginalised in religious studies because of its limited contribution to the theory of religion. In this context, the Islamicist is often the lone-ranger and the provision of Islamic studies is reduced to basics. Students interested in Islam are offered a narrow range of options compared with those doing Christian studies for example. Moreover, the Islamicist in religious studies is under pressure to abandon the study/teaching of the Islamic tradition to focus on contemporary issues, when in fact for a sound understanding of Islam today a balance between those two dimensions is necessary.

Religious studies does not yet reflect the changing trends in recruitment and classroom demography which we see in Middle Eastern studies and centres for the study of Islam where the number of Muslim students has been steadily growing (a trend confirmed by Atau'llah Siddiqui's report). The religious studies classroom is less diverse and largely reflects western cultural formations and understandings that are suspicious of religion and deeply entrenched in an enlightenment binary which defines religion in opposition to reason and secularity. This shows that there are different constituencies for Islamic studies within UK universities (the religious studies context has not been taken into account in Siddiqui's report which particularly highlights the growing Muslim constituency of students who are sympathetic to Islam).

The variety of contexts where Islamic studies is delivered in UK HE and the different constituencies which benefit from it require that the subject expands beyond its tight linkage to language-based courses and its focus on texts. Although most Islamicists would insist that classical Arabic texts are fundamental for the understanding of Islam, I believe that this approach could turn the subject into an enclave of specialists. In order to address the emerging and wide-ranging interests in Islamic studies in the UK, there is a need to expand beyond this narrow definition and to support all types of provision of Islamic studies, not only those which are language based.

'Islamic studies: what is it, who is it for, and how should it be done?', Hugh Goddard, Professor of Christian-Muslim Relations, Department of Theology and Religious Studies, University of Nottingham

What is it?

- It is, in my view, both the study of texts (Qur'an, Hadith and the classical texts of law, theology, mysticism etc), involving the study of languages (especially Arabic) and history, in other words the learned tradition of Islam (traditionally the domain of the Arts and Humanities Research Council); **and** the study of communities, that is the living practitioners of the faith, the 20 per cent of the world's people who are Muslim, approached through the disciplines such as of sociology, political science, and social anthropology (traditionally the domain of the Economic and Social Research Council).
- With respect to the geographical horizons of the subject, is the central focus the Middle East – the Arab World, Iran and Turkey – the formative location for the classical Islamic tradition, or also the wider Islamic world (including parts of Central Asia, South Asia, South-East Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa)? (Cf. the Organization of the Islamic conference, made up of the 57 Muslim-majority nations of the world, whose current president is the Prime Minister of Malaysia, Abdullah Badawi, or the English-language service of al-Jazeera, with its four centres or Kuala Lumpur, Doha, London, and Washington DC). Does Islamic studies, in other words, link with 'Middle Eastern Studies' or with what might be called 'Islamic World Studies'?
- There is a special issue with reference to Pakistan, the ultimate place of origin of around 40 per cent of the UK's Muslim community, which is traditionally seen as part of South Asia in the UK Area Studies category, but this is problematic given (a) the overwhelming predominance of the study of India in South Asian Area Studies and (b) Pakistan's close links with the Middle East as well as with South Asia.

Who is it for?

- It should be for everyone who wishes to study it (not, for example, the 'confessional' mode which is dominant in theology in Germany, where it is necessary formally to be a member of a particular religious community in order to study it at university (cf. the protestant and catholic faculties of theology found in many German universities)).

- It needs to be open to all – ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ – so that it is not just for Muslims, and it should certainly not take the form of ‘professional training’ for imams, which is better done under the control of the community, even if in partnership with a local college or university (cf. the in-service ministerial training which is now undertaken by Oxford Brookes University on behalf of different Christian communities, or the Rabbinical training which takes place in Jews’ College or Leo Baeck College).
- There is sometimes a problem of breadth versus depth – how to balance the need to offer specialist degree courses in the subject with the need, especially in the light of the current world situation, to offer the opportunity to study Islam to as wide a range of students as possible as an optional/elective module (for example, in a Department of Theology and Religious Studies).
- In this context there is also the problem of the vulnerability of Islamic studies in individual institutions, where the departure of a single Islamic studies lecturer (for example, Professor Gleave from Bristol) can result in the complete loss of Islamic studies from an institution. One possible solution to this, which would also help Islamic studies lecturers balance the demands of teaching and research, would be to establish *pairs* of lecturers in Islamic studies, to provide students with diversity of teaching from lecturers one of whom might be Muslim and one not, and also to facilitate research leave.

How should it be done?

- Universities are not seminaries (or, in the UK context, normally ‘confessional’ in their religious allegiance), so Islamic studies needs to be done in such a way that it is open to all, regardless of religious allegiance. It is also desirable that as many individual subject disciplines as possible include reference to Islam in their teaching and research, for example Islamic law in law schools, the politics of the Islamic world in schools of politics and international relations, the study of Islamic societies in schools of sociology and so on. This would mean that there might be some overlap between the concerns of area studies and individual disciplinary studies (for example, between Middle Eastern studies and theology and religious studies), and that careful consideration would need to be given to the question of how to link up Islamic studies specialists in different departments, perhaps through some kind of interdisciplinary institute.
- The current situation does see something of a mismatch between the main centres of the Muslim community in the UK (London, Birmingham, Greater Manchester and West Yorkshire) and some of the main centres of Islamic and/or Middle Eastern studies in the UK (for example, Exeter, Durham, and Edinburgh), and this might need to be addressed in some way.
- Valuable lessons might be able to be drawn from European and international discussion of these issues, as similar questions are being raised with reference to Islamic studies in many other contexts, for example the recent re-structuring of the teaching of the subject in the university of Utrecht, and the expansion of the subject in

an Australian context by the provision by the Government of \$(Aus) 8 million (c, £3,500,000) to a consortium of the universities of Melbourne (50 per cent), western Sydney (25 per cent) and Griffith University, Brisbane (25 per cent) to develop teaching and research in Islamic studies on a national level.

Conclusion

- The aim of making the UK the leading centre of Islamic studies outside the Islamic world is an admirable but also a very demanding one. It will need a lot of investment, as well as careful thought in the planning stage.

'Islamic studies: problems and prospects', Iftikhar Malik, Professor of History, School of Historical and Cultural Studies, Bath Spa University

Like any other vibrant discipline Islamic studies and likewise the South Asian studies have long been waiting for a significant review aimed at wholesomeness besides a needed vitality. Certainly, the driving forces for this position are not anchored on any narrowly defined security-based consideration, nor do they stem from any specific ideological baggage.

Islamic studies, in a traditional mould as is the practice across the board, is still largely shy of delving into political, economic, sociological (inclusive of gender, demographic, class), arts (folk and popular), literature (secular and vernacular in this case) and media-base realms. In other words, diversification is overdue if we want to attract more students to train them in several more significant areas besides changing the prevalent views of this otherwise rich and multi-thematic area.

-Issues related to Islam are routinely being pigeonholed in the Middle Eastern studies while areas such as southern, central and east Asia and Africa become excluded. Most of the world's Muslims are non-Arabs and this Arab-centric regionalisation is both ahistoric and pernicious. This Arab-centricity, despite its innocuousness, often allows justification for severe critiques by influential polemicists where non-Arab Muslims either become marginal communities or totally disappear from some so-called 'core' realm.

The bias towards so-called Muslim majority regions or states is not allowing comparative studies of Muslim minority groups who, in most cases, make a major share of world Muslim population groups.

The 'Middle Easternisation of Islamic studies' is ironically contrasted with the exclusion of Islam from several other regions. For instance, the prevalent form of South Asian studies remains largely Indo-centric and is a faithful heir to Indic studies. Across older universities, India-related seminars and research supervision (mostly excluding Muslim communities, and Muslim states) have not been allowing any holistic perspectives. Islam, Indian Muslims, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan and even for that matter other nations and their plural communities remain absent from South Asian studies, which is a title fished out of political correctness. We are already facing a dire shortage of academics trained in south Asian and south east Asian Islam and area specialists who, with a proper grasp of these diverse cultures and languages, could ensure proper post-graduate research and instruction. For instance, the almost absence of know-how of Persian and Urdu has seriously road-blocked

promotion of Islam in south Asia. As a consequence, for many south Asian scholars, Islam is either too political, complex or even peripheral and is characterised with challenges and difficulties that could be better left to Arabists – the way Persianate gets confined to Iran. Without sounding negative, the research on Islam-related subjects within South Asian and South East Asian studies is both miniscule and suffers from serious drawbacks.

Of course, there is more interest in political Islam and Muslims in the west but then it only reflects some of the serious pedagogical and related imbalances within the two inter-related areas of Islamic and South Asian studies. The prevalent mode of ethnic studies and expertise on Muslims anchored on similar graphs and tables of achievers and underachievers are not helping us understand the historical, inter-gender, inter-class, inter-generational and ideological clusters where media, mobility, politics, economy and religiosity all are playing their own role but would not appear in these predictable tables.

The gradual orientation of younger Muslim and non-Muslim Britons towards studying Islam and Muslim communities is quite positive but other than the above parameters, exclusive patterns of student socialisation seriously limit their choices and pathways.

The formation of Islamic centres and such other places in a private sector – away from mosques – is a positive development but ironically the patterns and objectives remain unclear. Most of them are personality-centred and equally clannish though may not lack in funds yet suffer from serious identity problems which do not allow them even a peripheral role in promoting scholarship in the above areas. Thus, while there is a greater need for academia to pursue a fresher and more holistic approach, it is equally imperative for these centres and foundations to pursue a more innovative, forward-looking and less self-limiting approach so that they could adopt a complementary and even a parallel embodiment.

Plenary session: emerging issues and how these can be taken forward

Dr Alison Scott-Baumann, Reader in Cultural Hermeneutics and EdD Course Leader, University of Gloucestershire

The key principle established as a result of this seminar is the interdisciplinary nature of Islamic studies. If we are to move forward successfully together, we must acknowledge that Islamic studies is in fact a complex group of subjects including languages, classical textual exegesis and contextual studies such as history, politics and philosophy. We may not be united with one voice, but we should at least be able to move ahead in harmony.

It is impossible to compress the rich and varied debates of the seminar into a brief summary, yet it is clear that HEFCE has facilitated the beginning of a new process. The Siddiqui report has created a paradigm shift in a) reflecting many Muslim student and academic views and b) recommending an interdisciplinary approach. It is up to us, with HEFCE's help, to implement that. Moreover, the networking opportunities made possible by HEFCE on 23 November 2007 have been immensely valuable. The following issues were raised in at least two workshops.

Teaching

- Build capacity within academic courses; to embed Muslim projects in mainstream curriculum planning.
- Support academic futures for Muslim academics – incorporating their unique contribution to Islamic studies into existing courses, creating momentum instead of reliance on a few individuals.
- Create opportunities for developing modular courses in Islam – integrating small courses that can easily be accessed by, for example a student of law, medicine or social work to enhance their professional practice in a multicultural world.
- Provide better academic support for Muslims and non-Muslims – HEFCE networking to reduce the ‘lone ranger’ effect, isolated on important social cohesion projects.

Learning

- Improve progression – exploration of the student life cycle has already shown that Muslim school children need encouragement, role models and the possibility of inclusion without suspicion into HE.
- Build bridges with alternative educational groups such as madrassahs, through accreditation of prior learning, top up modules and foundation courses. This will facilitate full participation in British society of young adults who study for many years in madrassahs and whose qualifications are not recognised when they wish to support British culture and train to be a teacher, for example.
- Create capacity for postgraduate training – in teaching, social work.
- Resolve validation and quality assurance issues in innovative UK work with private community colleges.

Research

There was a sense in several groups that ‘branding’ is an issue: prestigious major research centres may dominate the field, and research initiatives should create a better balance depending on areas of expertise. The following research priorities arose from group contributions for both primary and applied research:

- Study any of the issues discussed above in Teaching and Learning.
- Explore who is teaching which aspects of Islamic studies in Britain?
- Develop comprehensive analysis of the pedagogy of Islamic studies.
- Bring together classical and modern exegesis to explore Islamic law, for example.
- This research can facilitate engagement of the academic community.

The HEFCE strategic development fund was mentioned as a possible source of support.