

Islamic studies: the way forward in the UK

17 April 2008

Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre

Conference proceedings

1. The seminar aimed to facilitate a detailed discussion between HEFCE and members from the Islamic studies community about the future advancement of the subject. Representatives from HEFCE presented HEFCE's approach to Islamic studies as a strategically important subject and took questions from the floor. There followed a series of workshops to explore some of the issues facing its future development and proposals for a programme of work.

Welcome and introduction to the day

2. Dr John Selby, HEFCE Director for Education and Participation, gave a brief outline of the day and introduced the keynote speaker.

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3. Professor David Eastwood, HEFCE Chief Executive, gave some background to HEFCE's work. He outlined what we have found out so far and some of the approaches that HEFCE is proposing. The full presentation is available at www.hefce.ac.uk/aboutus/sis/islamic/conf/

Questions and answers to Dr Selby and Professor Eastwood

4. The first question was about HEFCE's strategically important and vulnerable subjects policy and how this related to funding for Islamic studies.

- The panel explained that HEFCE has looked at other strategically important subjects and is approaching Islamic studies in a similar way. Panel members made it clear that, according to this approach, HEFCE will not dictate curriculum but will consult the sector to understand the nature of the subject and support it going forward.

5. Delegates asked how the Islamic studies work fits with HEFCE's widening participation policy.

- The panel explained that widening participation is a key strategic aim for HEFCE and that HEFCE is exploring access to Islamic studies for students from a wide range of backgrounds and routes. It noted that HEFCE has limited data on who is studying Islamic studies but that the Council hopes to address this through a sector-wide survey.

6. One delegate raised the importance of innovation and contemporary material in order to progress the subject in a modern context.

- The panel agreed with this and took the view that the academic community needs to provide the impetus.

7. The panel was asked how HEFCE's work on Islamic studies was influenced by the Government's agenda on terrorism.

- The panel replied that the designation of Islamic studies as a strategic subject by the Government is part of a wide-ranging programme of work derived partly from a concern with terrorism but with a wider focus on community cohesion more generally. The panel members stated that HEFCE does recognise the wider context but is focusing on the academic challenges for the subject identified by the Islamic studies community.

8. Delegates questioned the impact of HEFCE's equivalent or lower qualification (ELQ) policy on Islamic studies. (In September 2007 the Department for Innovation Universities and Skills instructed HEFCE to phase out funding that we currently provide to higher education institutions (HEIs) and further education colleges to teach students who are studying for a qualification that is equivalent to, or lower than a qualification that they have already achieved.)

- Panel members said that HEFCE recognises the potential impact of the ELQ policy on Islamic studies. The panel explained that similar strategically important and vulnerable subjects are protected under the ELQ policy and that HEFCE will be monitoring the impact of the policy on the sector as a whole.

Workshops

'Building partnerships between private and public providers' with David Cairns, Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) and David Way, Church of England

9. Key points were:

- a. Partnerships take care, commitment and time but are strengthened by a careful approach to collaboration with both sides exercising due diligence. Small providers can gain strength from collaborating; this can be done across faiths. However, partnerships of this nature are complex, in that they need to reconcile UK higher education (HE) tradition with the needs of faith study.
- b. HEIs asked how they make contact with providers of imam training, and who would fund that training.
- c. There is an opportunity for shared teaching of disciplines common to all faiths and none (for example, counselling, pastoral care).

'Improving the accessibility of Islamic Studies' with Nadira Mirza, Bradford University and Hifsa Haroon-Iqbal, Staffordshire University

10. Key points were:

- a. Different cities have different racial mixes.
- b. Concern about the failure of the statistics to pick up on single Islamic studies modules included in a wide range of courses such as art, politics, history; this could mean

that this type of provision would not be eligible to benefit from extra support because it is not recognised.

- c. The distinction between academic and confessional Islamic studies, and whether the two can be reconciled; how should the sector deal with the difficult issue of encouraging students to hold up their faith for critical examination?
- d. There are examples of work at Bradford and Staffordshire of universities carrying out outreach work with local Muslim communities.
- e. The Islamic studies community needs to understand more about who wants to do Islamic studies at undergraduate or postgraduate level.

'Linking academic Islam with faith-based training' with Shuruq Naguib, University of Lancaster

11. Key points were:

- a. The value to HE, faith-based colleges, and society. There are great benefits to, in particular, teachers, police, lawyers, healthcare and education professionals to gain knowledge and understanding of the Islamic community.
- b. There are many graduates (about 400 from one institution) at faith-based colleges with superior language skills, Arabic writing skills, and knowledge of scriptural and other religious texts.
- c. There are opportunities for research collaboration and to engage with the Muslim community. This will help to enrich HE courses on Islamic studies with the experiential learning of modern Muslims in Britain, and help their students engage with current debates on Islam.
- d. There is student demand for accreditation of learning to support their further education or employment.

'Networks, Focus and Discipline Issues within Islamic Studies' with Mike Kelly, LLAS and Gary Bunt, PRS

12. Key points were:

- a. There is a variety of network models:
 - i. Formal – centres, and associations, research, subject-based, professional (potential for special interest groups).
 - ii. Personal or informal and local.
 - iii. Community, third sector, faith-based.
 - iv. International (often more established than UK-wide networks).

- b. Potential areas for investment include:
 - i. Professional training of further education and HE teachers (potentially as an accredited module).
 - ii. Curriculum innovation and development of resources, materials and databases.
 - iii. Network development and further events at either national or regional level or both.
 - iv. Regional and collaborative pilots - HE and community engagement projects (recognising the importance of progression, articulation and employability)
- c. There are some issues to consider: it is important that investment avoids bias, recognises diversity in the academic field, and involves student and community consultation.

HEFCE's proposed programme of work

13. Dr John Selby talked through the work HEFCE has been doing on possible models to support Islamic studies in the future. He explained that the afternoon workshops were designed to discuss these models further. In particular, they raised the following questions:

- a. Which of these options are a priority, in terms of time and importance?
- b. Are there funding or resource issues we should consider in relation to any of these options?
- c. Are there things we should consider before implementing (for example, resources already available, particular centres of expertise)?
- d. Are there other areas we should look at?
- e. Are there other options we should consider?

The full presentation is available at www.hefce.ac.uk/aboutus/sis/islamic/conf/

Workshops to discuss HEFCE's proposed programme of work

14. There were five workshop groups which discussed the various proposals presented in the discussion paper.

15. Most groups raised concerns about HEFCE's lack of data on the full range and extent of provision, not only within the publicly funded HE sector, but also beyond. It was felt that more work needs to be done to understand what universities are currently offering, what related work they are doing, and the number of students involved. A report by HEFCE on the data available is published at www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2008/08_09/

16. It was suggested that HEFCE needs to gather information beyond the scope of the proposed sector-wide survey, to learn more about provision at private institutions, the kind of projects linking public and private provision, and how the two sectors could benefit from each other. Delegates detailed possible ways to achieve this, including bridging courses, progression routes similar to Christian faith leadership training, and student exchange programmes. It was suggested that HEFCE or the Higher Education Academy (HEA) may want to consider hosting a series of meetings to explore these issues further.

17. It was agreed that HEFCE's initiative needs to have clear objectives and be able to measure the success of any interventions. Some of the impact could be measured in the same way as other subjects, through UCAS data. It was agreed that the impact on Muslim communities could also be a useful indicator.

18. The groups suggested a need to create an Islamic studies 'community', to foster and develop current links across the subject within universities and across the sector. Delegates agreed that the subject would also benefit from looking beyond the UK and Europe into countries across the world. This community would encompass all aspects of Islamic studies as an academic subject and also build links into Muslim communities.

19. Many delegates were in favour of an overarching national body feeding into and from regional networks and supported by an online network. They indicated that this might be a membership body, some sort of confederation or a collaborative body. Such a body, they felt, could provide networking, support institutions to develop programmes, provide mapping of provision and host conferences and discussion forums. Various existing organisations were suggested as models: Lifelong Learning Networks, the HEA, Routes into Languages and the British Society for Middle Eastern studies. Delegates thought that this sort of approach would help market the subject and could provide opportunities to share resources and best practice.

20. Delegates also suggested that there are other frameworks in place from which HEFCE can learn, such as Jewish studies, Christian theology training and various international models. The view was expressed that a series of initiatives might benefit the programme, ranging from some short-term interventions to initiating discussions to facilitate longer-term frameworks similar to the progression routes for Christian faith leaders.

21. While research has not been the main focus of HEFCE's work so far, some suggested that more could be done in this area. This, it was mooted, might involve looking at a grant scheme similar to schemes offered by research fellowships and the research councils.

22. It was agreed that in developing any initiatives, HEFCE needs to consider the role of the QAA in setting quality standards, and the Joint Information System Committee in sharing online resources (for more information see www.projects.ex.ac.uk/digiIslam/).

Closing remarks and next steps

23. Dr Selby summed up the day and thanked delegates for the open and frank discussions that took place.

24. In the closing remarks, it was reiterated that HEFCE is aware that the Islamic studies 'community' is not yet established and that academics and students within Islamic studies often have to deal with balancing faith and academia, in common with other religious studies subjects.

It was also acknowledged that HEFCE resources are limited but that the aim is to use funding in the best way possible and that seed-corn money such as this can sometimes create an impetus for greater discussion and development.

25. The importance of local, regional and national communication was raised as valuable for Islamic studies academics. It was also noted that many of the workshops had discussed various options for going forward and also the need to learn from current projects both in the UK and abroad.

26. Dr Selby closed the conference with the message that HEFCE will continue to consult on the short-term programme while also looking at longer-term options. HEFCE, he stated, will also continue to develop the programme in co-ordination with other government developments and debates.

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