

Islamic Studies during Changing Times: The Discipline at Unisa from 1990 to 2017

Yousuf Dadoo

Emeritus, University of South Africa

Abstract

The University of South Africa (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.

Islamic Studies was first offered at Unisa, 32 years ago. This article appraises the motivations for its introduction together with its course contents, student enrolments, teaching approach, funding, politics and academic practice, research focus areas 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.

Introduction

This presentation contains an exposition of our experiences teaching Islamic Studies at Unisa since 1990.

However, Unisa's status on the South African tertiary education land-scape will first need to be briefly contextualised, and the rationale behind the teaching of Islamic Studies at that institution, scrutinised.

(a) **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 the time, it was merely an examining body that offered examinations but no tuition, although it had the mandate to confer degrees. Two years later its headquarters moved from Cape Town to Pretoria, where it also incorporated many 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 the next fifty years or so, 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 heavyweights.²

The following colleges comprise the academic and tuition landscape of Unisa: Agriculture and Environmental Sciences; Economic and Management Sciences; Human Sciences; Law; Science, Engineering and Technology; Graduate Studies; and the Graduate School for Business Leadership.³ The university is estimated to have a total student population of about 400 000.⁴

1 "A brief history of Unisa", at <https://www.Unisa.ac.za/sites/corporate/default/Unisa-History-and-Memory-Project/Themes/All-themes/A-brief-history-of-Unisa> (Accessed 1 September 2021).

2 Unisa. Notable Alumni. At <https://www.google.com/search?biw=1366&bih=695&sxsrf=AOaemvLNQWwNj6MmK60RiMhnn12KJvV8Ag:1630504197557&q> (Accessed 1 September 2021).

3 Unisa. *Colleges*. At <https://www.Unisa.ac.za/sites/corporate/default/Colleges> (Accessed 1 September 2021).

4 Unisa. *Facts and Figures*. At <https://www.Unisa.ac.za/sites/corporate/default/About/Facts-&-figures> (Accessed 1 September 2021).

In line with global trends, Unisa also acknowledges the use of digital and social media in the form of the internet, video, image or podcast, instant messaging or chat rooms, wikis, blogs and online discussion forums for research and open distance learning objectives.⁵

1. Motivation for offering Islamic Studies

In January 1988, members of the following academic departments met the Dean of the Faculty of Arts (as the academic structure was known 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 and Science of Religion, and Philosophy.

The academic composition of this committee provides the *raison d'être* for the particular course content of Islamic Studies which was scheduled to be presented by its host, 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 roles between the two fields. History and Philosophy were probably involved on the basis of the 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.⁶

Furthermore, the presence of a community member on this committee confirmed that there had been some negotiations between the University and Muslims before the implementation of the Islamic Studies discipline. While documentary evidence is scant, the community members with whom the university negotiated were members of the Islamic Academy, some of whose leading figures had also been

5 Unisa. *Open Distance e-Learning (ODeL) is a different way of learning*. At [https://www.Unisa.ac.za/sites/corporate/default/Apply-for-admission/Honours-degrees-&-postgraduate-diplomas/ODL,-Unisa-and-postgraduate-studies/Open-Distance-Learning-\(ODL\)-is-a-different-way-of-learning](https://www.Unisa.ac.za/sites/corporate/default/Apply-for-admission/Honours-degrees-&-postgraduate-diplomas/ODL,-Unisa-and-postgraduate-studies/Open-Distance-Learning-(ODL)-is-a-different-way-of-learning) (Accessed 1 September 2021).

6 R. Meyer. "Proposed New Course in Islamic Studies", Senate Minutes of Unisa, 28 January 1988, p. 59 (see footnote 7).

members of The Muslim Youth Movement of South Africa (MYMSA), established in 1970 as a religious and cultural organisation. MYMSA first drew inspiration from thinkers like Fazlur Rahman Ansari (d. 1974) and revivalist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the Jamaat-e-Islami of Pakistan, all of whom underlined the importance of social probity. Members of the Islamic Academy were mainly industrialists and professionals. They had close ties to Dr Kalim Siddiqi, who among others led the support in the UK for the Iranian Revolution.

Verbal accounts given to me over the years also mention the establishment of the Islamic Studies discipline as a counter to the version offered at Rand Afrikaans University (RAU) under the headship of J.A. Naude which enjoyed the tacit blessings of the religious leadership (or, Jamiatul Ulama of Transvaal). I shall elaborate on the collaboration between some ‘ulamā’ and Naude after the digression about the identity and function of ‘ulamā’ in the synopsis below.

‘Ulamā’ refers more specifically to the scholars of the religious sciences considered here exclusively in the context of Sunni thought, where they are regarded as the guardians, transmitters and interpreters of religious knowledge, of Islamic doctrine and law; the term also embraces those who fulfil religious functions in the community that require a certain level of expertise in religious and judicial issues, such as judges and preachers, and the imams of mosques.⁷ Martino Diez explains their pervading authority as follows:

“The class of the ulama has gradually come into being over the centuries, by virtue of one fundamental principle, i.e. the conviction that the believer coming after the prophetic age has no independent access to the Scriptures. Rather, he must insert himself into a chain of witnesses and masters that allows him to go back to the time of origin. This belief shapes the relationship the ulama have with the texts, the common believers and their teachers.”⁸

7 Cl. Gilliot, “‘Ulamā’” *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* (ed. P.J. Bearman, *et. al.*), (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 10, p. 801 (quotation with adaptation).

8 Martino Diez, “Ulama, the heirs of the prophets”, 13 November 2018. At https://www.academia.edu/38606671/Ulama_the_heirs_of_the_prophets (Accessed 3 December 2021).

The repercussion of this authority for the South African scenario is as follows: since they have played an important role in providing spiritual guidance to Muslims generally, their interpretation of Qur'ānic texts and views on the socio-political life of society was seldom disputed by their followers, including those secular organisations that have a close affiliation, affinity and association to them.

Interestingly, during the apartheid era, the Muslim Judicial Council in the Cape, and the Jamiatul Ulama, representing primarily the wealthier Muslim sections of the community with the largest following in the former provinces of Transvaal and Natal, did not take a firm political stand against apartheid. They maintained that if the government allowed Muslims the religious liberty to pray, build mosques and go on pilgrimage, they could not engage in *jihād* (struggle) against such an authority. To invoke *jihād* while co-operating with non-Muslims, as Muslim activists did, was not religiously acceptable on the grounds that Islam strongly rejects anarchy and advocates non-confrontation.⁹ But there was individual opposition by people who, though often despised by the institutions to which they belonged, remained faithful to what they saw as the true spirit of their religion. In this regard, the names of Molvi Cachalia, Imam Haron and Molvi Saloojee spring to mind.¹⁰

Barbara Metcalf presents an astute perception about the Deobandi orientation of religious leadership, to which the theological bodies of Transvaal and Natal largely belonged, in British India. She adds

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- 9 Sultan Khan, "South African Muslim Clergy and its Political Response to Colonialism and Apartheid", May 2019, pp. 90-91. At https://www.researchgate.net/publication/333248143_South_African_Muslim_Clergy_and_its_Political_Response_to_Colonialism_and_Apartheid (Accessed 3 December 2021). See also, Ebrahim Moosa, "Muslim Conservatism in South Africa", *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, December 1989, 69, pp. 73-81.
- 10 TRC Final Report, Vol. 4, ch. 3, subsection 5. At sabc.trc.saha.org.za/reports/volume4/chapter3/subsection5.htm (Accessed 30 November 2021); P. Meiring, "The Muslim voice in South Africa in the era of truth and reconciliation", *Stellenbosch Theological Journal*, December 2003, 44, 3-4, pp. 399-406; Anon, "Tribute to Molvi Saloojee". At http://www.historicalpapers.wits.ac.za/inventories/inv_pdf/AK2117/AK2117-J2-22-W61-003-jpeg.pdf (Accessed 4 December 2021).

that it “represents ... a certain interiorization of Islam, an emphasis on the reform of the believer as an individual [which entails] a kind of turning away from issues of the organisation of state and society, toward a concern with the moral qualities of individual Muslims”.¹¹

The cumulative effect of the ‘ulamā’s view of themselves as the sole repositories of authentic knowledge, and their reticence on socio-political issues, created within them an aversion to enlightenment from other sources. Consequently, the Majlisul Ulama of the Eastern Cape (who mainly represent a more rigid profile of the theological bodies in South Africa) published a booklet on Islamic Studies taught at universities and the interfaith movement, describing this tendency as a Western plot against Islam. They advise that Islam must be learnt from qualified Muslim scholars who combine within themselves genuine faith (*īmān*), knowledge (*‘ilm*) and God-consciousness (*taqwā*).¹²

Taking note of the above, the strategic relationship between the Jamiatul Ulama (Transvaal) and JA Naude, mentioned earlier, becomes intriguing. Naude admits that RAU’s ties with the apartheid government were created to recruit academic support for the latter’s policies. Against this backdrop, Naude’s Centre for Islamic Studies reached an agreement with the Darul Uloom Zakariyya in Lenasia which allowed students from that seminary to enrol for a first degree in Islamic theology.¹³ In the process, many ‘ulamā’ became comfortable drawing closer to the apartheid regime.

But returning to the matter of the motivation for introducing Islamic Studies at Unisa, 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.

11 Barbara Metcalfe. *Islamic Revival in British India: 1860-1900*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), p. 351.

12 <http://www.themajlis.co.za/books/IslamicStudiesBooklet1111.pdf> (Accessed 4 December 2021). This booklet is a reproduction of Ahmed Ghorab’s *Subverting Islam: The Role of Orientalist Centres*, published in Malaysia by the Open Press in 1996.

13 J.A. Naude, “Faculty of Arts”, *Anvil*, Johannesburg: Rand Afrikaans University, 31, 2, 2004, pp. 45-50.

- 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 1991.¹⁴

I have not found any record of the “attached letters” alluded to under the first point above. Actually, my findings are that the syllabi in question at that time were reproductions of those used by the Department of Islamic Studies at the University of Durban-Westville.¹⁵ 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.¹⁶

But all this documentation conceals 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 BTh. degree in Christianity.¹⁷ Consequently, the Department of Semitics had suffered a heavy financial blow.

The national and global political scenario at that time also merits

14 H.J. Dreyer. “Islamic Studies – New Course”, *Senate Minutes of Unisa*, 29 March 1988, p. 59.

15 In turn, the University of Durban-Westville’s syllabi were imported by Salman Nadvi, a former Pakistani national and first head of Islamic Studies, from the University of Karachi according to a remark made by Suleiman Dangor on 7 September 2021 at the “Institutional Legacies and Possibilities Panel” of webinar conference on *Studying Islam and Muslims: Trajectories and Futures of South African Scholarship* convened at Unisa. Major policy decisions surrounding Islamic Studies were taken before my arrival in 1989. The staff were only required to prepare study material and finalise administrative issues relating to its launch the following year.

16 *Council Minutes of Unisa*. “Implementation of Islamic Studies as a three-year major subject for the BA degree”, 27 April 1988, p. 150.

17 *Unisa Calendar*. Pretoria: Unisa, 1983, pp. 117-119.

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 of strategic of partnerships with like-minded anti-Communists throughout the world drew it into close embrace with the then governments of South Africa and Saudi Arabia, among others. Saudi Arabia was also able to financially support the most radical anti-Communist Muslim extremists to counter Soviet forces in Asia under the pretext of fighting atheism.¹⁸ The South African government, emboldened by those initiatives, covertly strengthened ties with Saudi Arabia and probably identified Islam as a bastion against Communism.¹⁹

In this context, Islamic Studies would serve political interests.

Currently, Unisa 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 at the University of Cape Town). Such absorption has had ramifications for its teaching approach, which will be clarified later.

2. Course Contents to 2017

Preliminary Remarks

The remarks below are relevant to the end of 2017, the year of my retirement, though they may also be applied to 2018 and 2019. Islamic Studies at Unisa has been undergoing a major rearticulation since 2020, with a stronger focus placed on Islam in Africa as well as a more

18 This argument does not nullify the fact that many Afghan mujahidun fought against the Soviets to rid the country of foreign occupation. Nonetheless, it is irrelevant to the present scrutiny.

19 Mahmood Mamdani. *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim*. (Pretoria: Unisa, 2004), pp. 92-95, 105 and 126. It needs to be stressed that this perspective of the South African government ignored the role of Muslims in confronting American hegemony, as was the case with the Iranian revolution.

anthropological rather than textual approach to Islam. This move has been driven extrinsically by Unisa's focus on Africanisation and decoloniality, and intrinsically by a need to revamp the curriculum to speak to the rich dimensions of Islam in Africa as well as to take into account the often-justified decolonial critique of knowledge production in the academy. It is against this caveat that the following remarks should be seen.

The South African tertiary degree structure has four categories: an undergraduate, three-year degree followed by a more intensive one-year honours²⁰ degree in the student's chosen field of specialisation, which in turn is followed by a masters' and a doctoral degree.

An abridged version of the approved syllabi for undergraduate studies in the year 2019 was as follows:

(i) **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.

(ii) **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.

(iii) **Third-year**

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

The Holy Qur'ān: leading concepts and translation of selected chapters; an introduction to Islamic Law and thinkers; and either a combination of Islamic history in the 20th century with Islam in Africa, or Muslim literature from 1800 until the present day and Islam in the modern period.²¹

20 Although the honours degree is normally completed in one year, some students may extend its duration at Unisa. See, [Unisa.ac.za/sites/corporate/default/Register-to-study-through-Unisa/Undergraduate-&-honours-qualifications/](https://www.unisa.ac.za/sites/corporate/default/Register-to-study-through-Unisa/Undergraduate-&-honours-qualifications/) ... (Accessed 1 December 2021).

21 Dreyer, "Islamic Studies – New Course", 29 March 1988, p. 61.

(iv) 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

(v) Masters and Doctoral Degrees

A full dissertation/thesis on an approved topic

(vi) 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 held a distinct Eurocentric bias, particularly during the apartheid era, and as a result, both the syllabi and teaching approaches betrayed this prejudice.²² This problem later led to calls for greater attention to indigenous knowledge systems. But with regard to the situation at Unisa at that time, it was clear that there would be no cross-disciplinary interface to justify the History department's presence on that committee.

Secondly, the spotlight on foundational sources (namely, the *Qur'ān* and *Ḥadīth*) is distinct and becomes glaringly evident once our postgraduate offerings are examined. It is true that foundational sources can only be adequately comprehended with a sound knowledge of Arabic, which is the language in which they are enshrined. Still, the prescription of this language as a compulsory ancillary, merits the following discussion:

Soon after our third-level offering was presented, we received numerous complaints from potential as well as 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

22 This criticism relates to the Department of History, not to Islamic Studies.

of the syllabi in 2000 in compliance with the university's requirements for all offerings resulted in our removing Arabic as an ancillary. Nonetheless, at postgraduate level we reserved the right to activate this requirement if a student's academic pathway demands it. In this way we struck a compromise between either enforcing the study of the Arabic language as a prerequisite for Islamic Studies, or eliminating it altogether.²³

Thirdly, the course content had to satisfy the academic needs of both students who had had some prior exposure to Islam, and those who had none. This point was especially confirmed by the first-year syllabus. On the strength of our understanding of the local situation, we tried to strike a balance between these two categories of students in a way that academically enriched both. To this end we conducted surveys among students which ultimately reflected their general satisfaction with our approach. At the same time the surveys also revealed a greater need for either introducing or strengthening our offerings relating to Islamic finance, banking and politics. Students' responses were clearly triggered by the global interest in these fields for a variety of reasons. Unfortunately, due to staff shortages and the lack of qualified academic personnel in those areas of study at the time, we were unable to comply with these proposals.

Fourthly, the constant streamlining of disciplines at the university had both positive and adverse effects: among the former could be 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-

23 For more information on this debate vis-à-vis academic institutions in non-Arab countries, refer to Imtiaz Ahmad. "Teaching Islamic Studies in the Non-Arab World: With or Without Arabic?", *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 21, 2, 2001, pp. 273-285.

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. In line with the university's rationalisation objectives, the latter was replaced by a paper offered by Religious Studies.²⁴

Fifthly, one of our shortcomings has been the insufficient material prepared on Islam in Africa. Although there are adequate resources, the problem of an already significantly reduced teaching staff having to multitask in a distance-learning education format 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".²⁵ Izzi Dien concurs, adding that the possible reason for the enigma lay in the past; with teaching Islamic Studies within departments that dealt broadly with geographical locations like Oriental Studies, Middle Eastern Studies, Near Eastern Studies,²⁶ Asian Studies (or, as in our department's case, Semitics), or in the Departments of Theology or Religious Studies.²⁷

For their part, Auda *et al.* succinctly declare that there is a general lack of understanding what Islamic Studies does or should entail.²⁸ A decade after this criticism was levelled, it has yet to be resolved.²⁹

24 Unisa, *Unisa Calendar* (Pretoria: Unisa [Part 2]), pp. 93-94.

25 A. Matin-Asgari. "Islamic Studies and the Spirit of Max Weber: A Critique of Cultural Essentialism", *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies*, 13, 3, Fall 2003, p. 296.

26 M. Izzi Dien. "Islamic Studies or the study of Islam? from Parker to Rammell", *Journal of Beliefs and Values*, 28, 3, December 2007, p. 247.

27 Bustami M.S. Khir. "Islamic Studies within Islam: definition, approaches and challenges of modernity" *Journal of Beliefs and Values*, 28, 3, December 2007, p. 257.

28 J. Auda, *et al.* "International Approaches to Islamic Studies in higher education", pp. 65-67. At <http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/97548>, 2008. (Accessed 4 September 2021).

29 Abdullah Sahin. "Critical Issues in Islamic Education Studies: Rethinking Islamic and Western Liberal Secular Values of Education", 25 October 2018. At <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/9/11/335> (Accessed 4 September 2021).

Izzi Dien identifies two extant approaches towards the definition of Islamic Studies that are applicable to Western and secular tertiary institutions; one narrows the definition while the second advocates for 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.³⁰ However, surrounding this core, other areas should be included, such as anthropology and social sciences”.³¹

He then proposes that the latter approach, combining both the traditional and the broader approaches, could be termed the “Study of Islam”, whereas the former approach could be designated as “Islamic Studies”.³²

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.

30 These are listed by Khir as follows: Qur’ānic sciences, Ḥadīth sciences, jurisprudence, creed and theology, sufism, history, sciences of Arabic language, and logic and philosophy (Ibid, p. 261).

31 Izzi Dien, “Islamic Studies or the study of Islam?”, p. 245.

32 Ibid, p. 247.

Even more impractical to implement 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 ethic, social relations, technical skills and all varieties of true knowledge essential for an individual”.³³

It barely needs emphasizing that this approach is unattainable at a secular institution such as Unisa, where Islamic Studies courses merely comprise a component of the broader undergraduate degree. These objectives cannot be met even at postgraduate level at a distance teaching university like ours.

The Unisa Islamic Studies course outlines indicate proclivity to Izzi Dien’s second option as detailed 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.

2. Student Enrolments

We now go on to discuss student enrolments, providing available official statistics, including their genders and our rough estimates about their age categories, religious affiliations and vocations, where possible.

The Department of Statistics at Unisa provided 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 four periods, namely: 1996-2000, 2001-2006, 2007-2011 and 2015-2017. Below is the information of students registered for Islamic Studies during the various periods.

33 Muhammadul Bakir Hj. Yaakub. “A field observation on the philosophy of teaching Islamic and Arabic studies”, *US-China Education Review*, 6, 3, March 2009, p. 42.

(i) Undergraduate Enrolments

Table A: Provisional course registration for Islamic Studies 1996-2000³⁴

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

During this period the student intake for the first-level ranged between 80 and 97, whereas for the second- and third-levels it ranged between 55 and 87, and 25 and 42 respectively.

This discipline was taught as a one-year course. In relation to the first-level, the numbers at second-level dropped by 33% at most, and in relation to the second-level, the figures for the third-level declined by a further 55% .

Table B: Provisional course registration for Islamic Studies 2001-2006³⁵

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

34 Unisa. Department of Statics and Strategic Analysis. Student statistics (Task Ref. No. 9 March 2010). The descriptive caption of "Provisional" was extracted directly from this Unisa Student System.

35 Ibid.

The trend relating to decreasing enrolments from the first- to third-levels was once again evident.

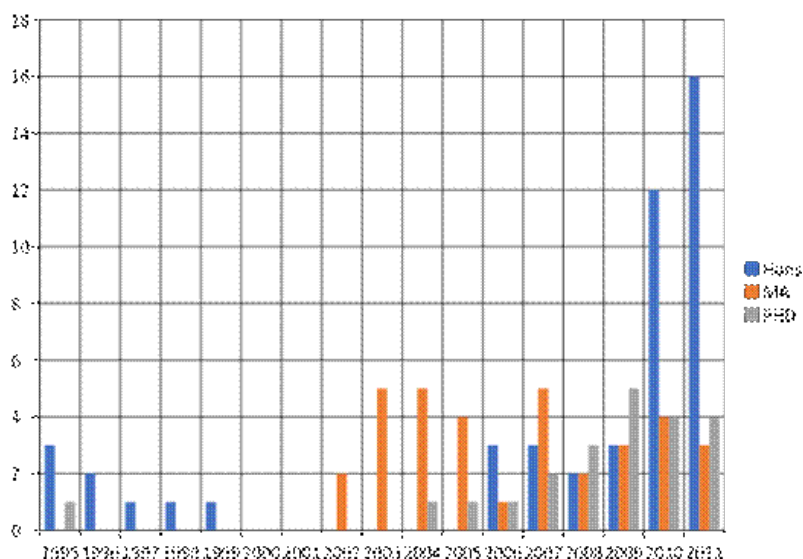
Table C: Provisional course registration for Islamic Studies 2007-2011³⁶

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

Unfortunately, there are no available gender-based statistics post-2009.

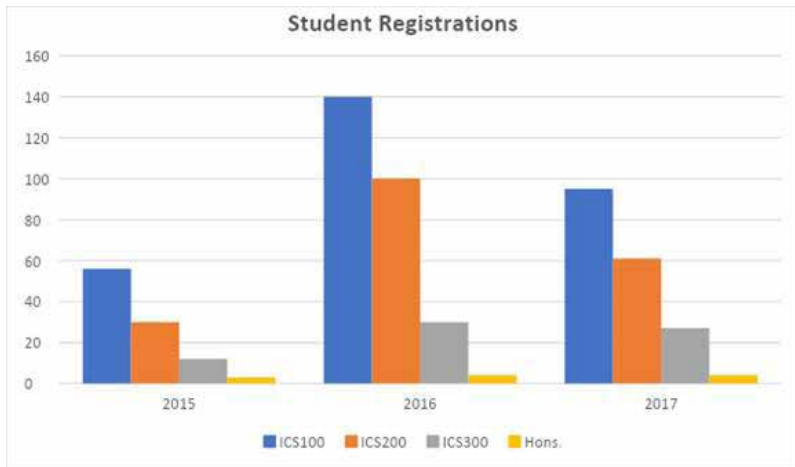
(ii) Postgraduate Enrolments

Graph 1: Provisional registrations for Honours, Master's and Doctoral Degrees in Islamic Studies plotted against the academic year.



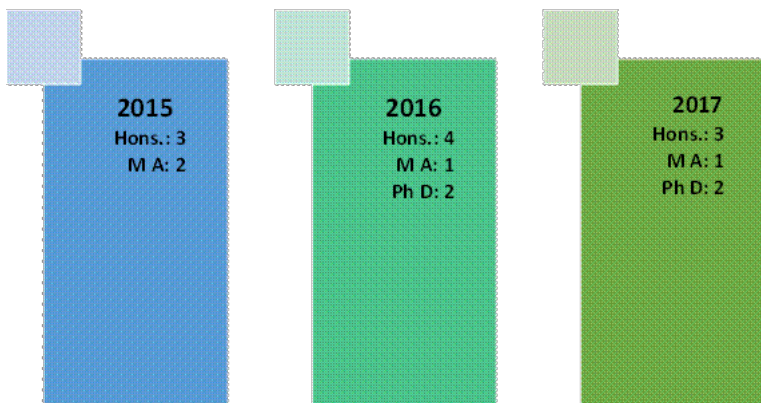
³⁶ Ibid.

Below are graphs containing basic details of student registrations between 2015 and 2017.



Some explanations are necessary regarding the above graph. Firstly, haphazard administrative systems from 2011 onwards have resulted in the 2015 details being relevant to the second semester only, while the 2017 statistics refer to the first semester. Secondly, no details about students' ages and genders were recorded.

Postgraduate Registrations



(iii) Review of Student Enrolments

Firstly, as per data provided in the tables above, most of our undergraduate students were females. A possible reason lies in the Muslim community's apathetic attitude towards the elementary religious school education meted out at madrasahs or, as they are presently called, *maktabs*.³⁷ The religious instruction at these schools focused on Qur'ānic recitation and translation of selected passages from the Qur'ān and Ḥadīth; beliefs; rituals; Islamic history; and manners and virtues.³⁸ While the traditional rote method employed in them was not conducive to stimulating the pupils' intellects,³⁹ females conventionally suffered the added disadvantage of being deregistered from such schools upon attaining puberty. The rationale for this was that they would be unable to pursue ongoing, coherent Qur'ānic studies due to menstruation. This flippant excuse was further underlined if their teachers happened to be males.

Based upon the implication of the Qur'ānic verse "None shall touch it except the purified" (Qur'ān 56:79), jurists have provided different rulings about the permissibility of women teaching and studying the Qur'ān during their menstruation

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- 37 The quality of this subject's teaching at private Muslim schools is not empirically verifiable at this point. For the hitherto unresolved conundrum relating to the concept of Islamic education at these schools, refer to Muhammed Haron's "Muslim Schools: Their Formation, Development and Impact on Southern African Communities", 2014, at https://www.academia.edu/11665893/Muslim_Schools_Their_Formation_Development_and_Impact_on_Southern_African_communities. The same observation applies to the earlier study of A. Sheik. "Muslim Private Schools in South Africa: Present and Future" (MA Dissertation, Durban: University of Durban-Westville, 1994).
- 38 This is still the general situation. See Jamiatul Ulama South Africa's syllabus at <https://madrasahteacher.wordpress.com/2020/04/17/south-african-tas-heel-series-syllabus-pdf-versions/> (Accessed 5 December 2021). For an excellent review of this problem globally, consult S.F. Shah, *et. al.*, "Quality and Features of Education in the Muslim World" at <https://files.eric.ed.gov>
- 39 M. Haron and Y. Mohamed. "The Theory and Practice of Islamic Education", *Perspectives on Islamic Education*, 20 (Johannesburg: Muslim World League, 1989).

cycles. Al-Ṭabarī (d. 923),⁴⁰ Al-Wāḥidī (d. 1076)⁴¹ and Ibn ‘Aṭīyyah (d. 1075)⁴² elaborate upon this topic as follows: Many scholars suggest that this verse refers to the metaphysical realm in which the Qur’an remains in safe custody. Within this framework, the purified beings are angels. This is the view of Ibn ‘Abbās and ‘Ikramah. Others, like Al-Ṭabarī, also include the prophets in this category.⁴³ Supporters of this view also maintain that this verse was revealed in Makkah, where juridical rulings were absent.

The majority of exegetes assert that this verse prohibits handling of the Qur’ān by ritually impure individuals.⁴⁴ According to the jurists Mālik (d. 795) and Shāfi‘ī (d. 820), such individuals may neither touch nor carry the manuscript. But another report attributed to Mālik states that Qur’ānic recitation is permissible during necessities. Jurist Abū Ḥanīfah (d. 767) allows individuals in a state of minor ritual impurity to touch a copy of the Qur’ān or recite it from memory. This is of special interest to teachers and children. Teachers afflicted with ritual impurity may recite the Qur’ān by breaking up its recitation into syllables.⁴⁵ This is the school of law that was adhered to by the Jamiatul Ulama of Transvaal and Natal.

Recently, Khālīd Al-Ḥanafī, assistant secretary general for the Council of Fatwas and Research in Europe, declared that Qur’ānic recitation by a woman during menstruation is allowed.

40 Al-Ṭabarī. *Jāmi‘ Al-Bayān min Ta’wīl Āy Al-Qur’ān*. (Cairo: Dār Al-Hijr, 2008), 22, p. 366.

41 Al-Wāḥidī. *Al-Taḥsīl Al-Basīṭ*. (Riyadh: Imam Muhammad bin Sa’ud University, 2008), 21, p. 261.

42 Ibn ‘Aṭīyyah. *Al-Muḥarrar Al-Wajīz fī Taḥsīl Kitāb Allāh Al-‘Azīz*. (Beirut: Dār Al-Kutub Al-‘Ilmiyyah, 2001), 5, p. 252.

43 Al-Ṭabarī, *op. cit.*, p. 366.

44 This term refers to people who need to take ablution or a full body bath to cleanse themselves either from the minor or the major form of impurity. I do not wish to amplify this discussion any further.

45 *Al-Mawsū‘ah Al-Fiqhiyyah Al-Kuwaitiyyah*. (Kuwait: Wazārah Al-Awqāf, 1983), 18, p. 321.

Al-Ḥanafī found corroborating arguments from other jurists.⁴⁶

Returning to student enrolments, we noted that apart from institutions like the Islamic Peace College of South Africa⁴⁷ and the Madina Institute South Africa,⁴⁸ there was a dearth of local academically stimulating institutions for acquiring knowledge. In the light of this, some females interpreted university studies in Islam as a viable compensatory alternative.

However, in the past few years this trend has changed somewhat with the offering of an advanced online course for women by the Jamiatul Ulama in Johannesburg.⁴⁹ The ‘ulamā’ have also turned to broadcasting in different streaming media.

Furthermore, with the blurring of the distinction between residential and distance education universities, which was amplified by the coronavirus pandemic and the Fourth Industrial Revolution, Unisa now faces additional competitors, both locally and globally.

Further to the subject of student profiles, our simple analysis indicates that the ages of our student population ranged between 25 and 40 years. Their professions ranged from career housewives to medical and legal practitioners, teachers, diplomats and students of religion. About 95% of students were Muslims, while the balance comprised adherents of Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism, African Traditional Religion or agnosticism.

Most undergraduate students were either South African or Mauritian, with the rest comprising students from Botswana, Zimbabwe, Namibia, the UK, the USA, and Canada.

46 See, <https://mubasher.aljazeera.net/news/miscellaneous/2020/5/11/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D9%8A%D8%B6%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%8A%D9%85%D9%86%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B1%D8%A3%D8%A9%D9%85%D9%86%D8%AA%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%88%D8%A9%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D8%B1%D8%A2%D9%86> (Accessed 5 December 2021).

47 <https://www.ipso-edu.org/> (Accessed 3 September 2021).

48 <https://madinahinstitute.ac.za/> (Accessed 3 September 2021)

49 <http://jamiahonline.co.za/course/aalimah-course/> A more general offering is presented at <http://jamiyah.co.za/courses/certificate-in-islamic-studies-and-arabic-online/> (Accessed 3 September 2021).

The majority of our students at master's and doctoral levels were male migrants to South Africa from the Middle East and Africa. They were proficient in Arabic, in which they presented their dissertations and theses, and showed a good foundation in the traditional Islamic sciences. The masters' and doctoral students' research fields are listed here descending order of popularity: Qur'ānic studies, Islam in society, jurisprudence, Islamic history, Ḥadīth sciences, philosophy/thought and mysticism.

To varying degrees, all academic staff participated in national and international conferences related to Islamic Studies. Likewise, all academic staff members published articles in accredited journals on relevant themes.

4. Teaching Approach

Khīr 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”.⁵⁰

J. Waardenburg concluded that this anomaly has resulted from the lack of a general definition of Islamic Studies per se.⁵¹

The ramifications of this assessment for our teaching approach are as follows.

To cater for the needs of students from diverse prior knowledge backgrounds, particularly at first-level, we mainly used the phenomenological approach to teaching about sacred sources, beliefs and practices. This was certainly the sensible approach to teaching this

50 Khīr, “Islamic Studies within Islam”, p. 257.

51 Ibid, p. 260.

subject and was fully supported by the late Wilfred Cantwell Smith, founder of the Institute of Islamic Studies at McGill University. Cantwell Smith believed that the study of religion should focus on the religious experiences of insiders as a unique phenomenon.⁵² Naturally, the study of Islam surpasses the simple descriptive approach and involves itself in normatively being clear about 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 was feasible for students who firstly needed to grasp the common Muslim understanding of faith and praxis instead of confusing them with aimless theoretical jargon.

The vexing question remained: taking into account the different responses by leaders to any religious issue, whose perspective/s should we adopt? For elementary expositions to undergraduate students, consensual views among religious scholars that have been adopted by ordinary Muslims were highlighted.⁵³

Comment about the phenomenological approach mentioned above merits additional clarification. What further supported our decision to adopt this approach was our understanding of the broad consensus among Muslims globally regarding the fundamentals of Islam, whether in relation to principles of belief, or practice. Through an analogy about Allah's Hand resting with the group of virtuous people, Prophet Muhammad enunciated that Divine support rested with this overwhelming majority in matters relating to their understanding of basic beliefs and Islamic conduct, which were espoused in foundational sources.⁵⁴

52 Mujiburrahman. "The Phenomenological Approach in Islamic Studies: An Overview of a Western Attempt to Understand Islam" *Muslim World*, 91, 3/4, Fall 2001, pp. 4-5. Also see the corroborative view of Louis Massignon in Khir, "Islamic Studies within Islam", p. 258.

53 For a debate about the use of uninformed and learned insiders' views, see Mujiburrahman, "The Phenomenological Approach in Islamic Studies", pp. 7, 10, 12-14.

54 Al-Tirmidhī. *Al-Sunan*. Book 31: "Kitāb al-Fitan", Ḥadīth Nos. 2166-2167 in Āl al-Shaikh, Ṣ ibn 'A. al-'A (ed.). *Musū'at Al-Ḥadīth Al-Sharīf*, Jeddah: Dār al-Salām, 3rd edition, 2000, p. 1869.

However, this did not mean that alternative views were totally precluded from the course. At best, alternative perspectives were introduced so that students were timeously informed of contentious issues in the field. This was particularly significant when more mundane features like economic, social, political and cultural circumstances, required scrutiny.⁵⁵

The Religious Studies approach to Islamic Studies, on the other hand, is often based on a Western academic view of Islam centred on various scientific methodologies like Orientalism, contemporary social sciences or anthropology.⁵⁶ It is an academic field of cross-disciplinary secular study of religious beliefs, behaviours and institutions. It studies religious conduct and belief detached from any particular religious viewpoint by drawing upon anthropology, sociology, psychology and history of religion.

A strong proponent of the “history of religions” approach, Professor Abdulkader Tayob from the University of Cape Town, claims that “it tries to locate itself within the wider academic study of social phenomena ... the study of the dynamics of a system and its evolving nature”.⁵⁷ 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.⁵⁸

It grants supreme, exclusive authority to the methodology of scepticism by promoting empiricism, thereby trivialising religious knowledge and experience. One of its main outcomes is that all

55 Y. Dadoo. “South African Islam and Muslims through the eyes of local scholarship” (inaugural lecture), Pretoria: Unisa, 2000, p. 6.

56 Izzi Dien, “Islamic Studies or the study of Islam?”, p. 247.

57 A. Tayob. “The Academic Study of Islam at the University”, in Y. Mohamed et. al. (eds.), *Perspectives on Islamic Education*, (Johannesburg: Muslim World League, 1989), p. 72.

58 Khir, “Islamic Studies within Islam”, p. 262 (with adaptations).

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, encompassing all facets of human life. Besides, it accepts two kinds of truths: that which relates to questions beyond the fathom of human intellect, such as 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, this method invariably embroils Muslim students in serious ideological problems.⁵⁹

With specific reference to our sister discipline in our academic department, that is, Religious Studies, we quote the following information from their brochure:

“Religious Studies offers the opportunity for a comparative study of the religions 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”.⁶⁰

59 Izzi Dien, “Islamic Studies or the study of Islam?”, pp. 247-253.

60 Unisa. Department of Religious Studies. “Modules in *Religious Studies* presented by the Department of Religious Studies and Arabic at the University of South Africa”, 30 August 2010. www.Unisa.ac.za/contents/faculties/humanities/rst/docs/RS.pdf (Accessed 13 July 2011).

While we found their approach reputable, it leaves 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.

Concluding discussion on our approach, we maintain that it is an academic approach that neither belittles the metaphysical nor venerates the material component. As such we were not slaves to any human formulated theories of religion.⁶¹

In their own extensive report, J. Auda and others conclude as follows:

“It is not, therefore, possible to bring Islamic Studies down to a single paradigm ... Islamic Studies disciplines have been influenced to varying degrees by academic approaches arising from Orientalism and from social science approaches, which can be in contention with one another”.

Some scholars prefer text-based approaches, while others use the social science approach to study Islam and Muslim societies.

A consistent factor in both approaches is the ambition to provide students with the tools necessary to equip them with an understanding of Islam appropriate for both traditional and contemporary contexts.⁶²

On the other hand, we attracted considerable criticism from some traditional religious leaders who were intent on prescribing their theological approach. In some instances that criticism exceeded the bounds of common courtesy, with accusations of heresy levelled at the Department of Islamic Studies and individual staff members. In a country like South Africa, where a simplistic understanding of Islam is promoted by some members of this group of highly influential people, misgivings about our approach to teaching this subject were inevitable. We were aware of occasions where some prospective students had been dissuaded from embarking on their studies with us. Some students even deregistered due to pressure from religious leaders.

61 Y. Dadoo, “South African Islam and Muslims through the eyes of local scholarship” *Inaugural Lecture*, 11 Nov. 1999, p. 6.

62 Auda, “International Approaches to Islamic Studies”, p. 66.

5. Teaching Avenues

The emphasis at Unisa has consistently been to make quality education accessible to all its students, where the physical distance factor between students and lecturers is maximally eradicated.

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 impoverished areas devoid of basic infrastructure such as electricity supply.

All our study material was prepared in print form for mailing to students. At the same time, it was uploaded on the Unisa website for students to gain easy access.

Students were contacted via several means,, ranging from telephone to faxing, emails, SMSes and videoconferencing, except for social networking platforms like Facebook. In addition, an interactive channel called My Unisa was linked to the Unisa homepage, connecting students to both their colleagues and their lecturers.

Within South Africa, Unisa has regional offices and study centres in a few cities that we periodically visited in the 1990s for brief periods to consult with our students. But no amount of networking via cyberspace can compensate for fruitful, interpersonal exchanges. This is a problem that defies satisfactory resolution.

6. Funding

Our findings about this category and category 7, below, were somewhat different to those experienced in other Western countries like Britain, for instance.⁶³ For that reason, they merit a brief review.

Internally, the main revenue source was the State, which provided

63 Y. Suleiman, Y. and A. Shihadeh. "Islam on Campus: teaching Islamic Studies at Higher Education Institutions in the UK. Report of a conference held at the University of Edinburgh on 4 December 2006", *Journal of Beliefs and Values*, Vol. 28, No. 3, December 2007, pp. 309-329.

subsidies to the university based on the number of registration of students and their throughputs. Subsidies escalated in proportion to levels of study; therefore, the revenue generated by a doctoral graduate was considerably higher than that generated by an undergraduate student. This reality made us focus more strongly on having a healthy contingent of master's and doctoral students. Another funding avenue was the publication of fully-fledged oeuvres, or articles and chapters by academics in accredited academic journals. Externally, a local Muslim body granted limited annual funding for research projects up to around 1996.

Some benefactors from wealthy Muslim countries exhibited great keenness for promoting our work pre-9/11. They had realised the immense global reach Unisa enjoys. Disappointingly, as expected, there were no positive developments in this regard post-9/11, when Western governments took a rather dim view of anything remotely linked to Islam and Muslims. This stance discouraged many foreign Muslim donors from supporting Islamic Studies at Unisa.

In the process, and in hindsight, we realised that we had maintained some measure of self-respect and academic stature by not succumbing to the pressure from some patrons who felt they could dictate their own agendas to us.

7. Politics and Academic Practice

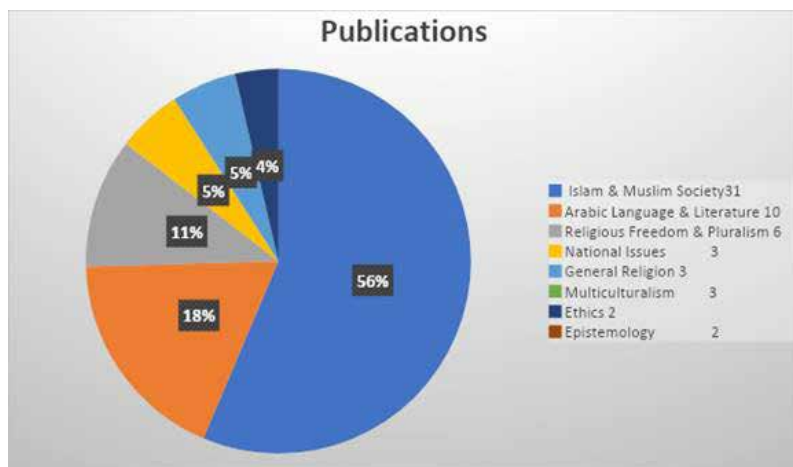
Fortunately, our government kept great composure when dealing with issues pertaining to Islamic Studies, despite the presence of some academic free spirits in our midst. For as long as we abided by the norms of the country's constitution and bill of rights, we continued to discharge our duties without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

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

8. Research Focus

As a preamble, it must be highlighted that although Unisa has the finest library in the country, it cannot be optimally utilised due to heavy administrative burdens placed on academics. Another point to consider is that we were constantly required to produce full study material regularly which must be regarded as research outputs.

Despite these drawbacks, I made research outputs⁶⁴ that are encapsulated in the diagram below:



A few germane issues merit elaboration: Firstly, these are my academic publications of all kinds. They thus include three articles that were translated into German. Secondly, some of them cross discipline boundaries. I have only enumerated them within a single category. Thirdly, I have excluded from this list a draft of my forthcoming book on Arabic Rhetoric that is presently being reviewed.

Over the years I successfully supervised 21 Doctorates and 27 Master's dissertations.

Importantly, I have made more contributions to forums outside narrow academia post-retirement as I strongly advocate exchanging

⁶⁴ I do not have records of erstwhile colleagues' outputs. I have ignored to mention about ten study guides that I prepared since they do not qualify for subsidy even though their preparation required research.

views with a broader readership. In this regard, I have edited and translated two Arabic works on religious endowments for AwqafSA, as well as authored a draft on Arabic rhetoric.

9. Future Prospects

Five issues will be addressed here.

Firstly, to maintain and consolidate impetus for the teaching of Islamic Studies, visionary strategies that broadly respond to student needs are essential. Of primary concern here is the fact that we have already entered the massive competition era spurred on by the digital revolution 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 about grappling with problems and challenges of common concern. This is an opportunity for Islamic Studies to offer a contribution to various disciplines such as politics, healthcare, trade, law and education. On the global front, the post 9/11 phase poses new challenges that we need to tackle rationally.

Thirdly, right up to the time of my retirement, I observed that the overall academic standards of students were on a downward spiral. This was compounded by administrative pressure to improve pass rates willy-nilly, which seemed to translate into a recipe for an academic sausage factory. This must be addressed.

Fourthly, there must be innovative ways of exploring career paths for our graduates.⁶⁵ In the current depressed global economic climate, this statement might sound like a platitude, but we need to explore options.

Fifthly, our student numbers were fairly constant over most of this period. Compared to our counterparts at other local universities,

65 This impression is also confirmed by scholars elsewhere. See, Hussaini, S.S. Waheedulla, "Islamic Studies: Challenges and Prospects" at Henry Martyn Institute, Hyderabad, 2019, at https://www.academia.edu/38968059/Islamic_Studies_Challenges_and_Prospects_2019 (Accessed 4 September 2021).

they appeared reasonable. But the compelling question is: will the university's upper echelons concur with this assessment while some of the more popular modules at Unisa attract thousands of students? In this connection, it is worth recalling that crude utilitarianism is already posing a rigor mortis for our discipline. As mentioned earlier, the ingenious inclusion of offerings of law, commerce and healthcare, etc. into the curriculum might rescue the discipline. Apropos this deliberation, questions may arise as to whether the discipline is equipped to satisfy these new demands, or even whether it is prepared to make adaptations to future programmes in order to fit a shifting marketplace.⁶⁶ Such anxieties proceed beyond Islamic Studies, as the following remark made by the Organization for Economic Development and Co-operation (OECD) indicates: namely, that higher education is under pressure to change because its contribution to economic success is vital.⁶⁷

On the other hand, even if the pendulum has begun to swing towards more cross-disciplinary modules, which might yet be our saving grace, implementing those measures will be a long process. The danger is that Islamic Studies might be severely diluted in new dispensations where intellectual and mystical traditions within religions may be ignored.

The following general remarks of Terry Eagleton, a luminary among modern social scientists and literary scholars, encapsulates this dilemma for disciplines in the humanities. In an article captioned "The death of universities", written in 2010, he writes:

"[Ideally] The humanities should constitute the core of any university worth the name.

The modern humanities and industrial capitalism were more or less twinned at birth. [Consequently] What we have noticed in our own time is the death of universities as centres of critique.

⁶⁶ Auda, "International Approaches to Islamic Studies", p. 66.

⁶⁷ Organization for Economic Development and Co-Operation (OECD). "Changing Patterns of Governance in Higher Education" (Chapter 3). *Education Policy Analysis*. At <https://www.oecd.org/education/skills-beyond-school/35747684.pdf>, 2003, p. 60.

The role of academia has been to service the status quo, not challenge it in the name of justice, tradition, imagination, human welfare, the free play of the mind or alternative visions of the future.

[When all's said and done] Governments are intent on shrinking the humanities, not expanding them."⁶⁸

Eagleton's remarks appear to be as valid today as they were a decade ago. It is against this backdrop that the present principal and vice-chancellor of the University of Johannesburg, Tshilidzi Marwala, makes the following plea for equilibrium:

"As universities make the shift to operating more like businesses, we must be cautious that they do not lose their core mandates. There is a real danger that if universities follow an entirely corporate mandate, they can lose focus on activities that extend beyond monetary value.

Accordingly, universities may lose core objectives such as intellectual pursuit, knowledge discovery and transmission, enquiry and discourse. What sets universities apart is that they can pursue ideas that have no potential monetary value for no other reason than academic value. Though we are pushing for a more businesslike approach, we must also fight against the proverbial corporatisation of higher education, which would entail a narrow focus on profit-making".⁶⁹

Conclusion

This article reveals an intriguing narrative surrounding the genesis of Islamic Studies at Unisa in terms of the rationale for its implementation, as well as the role of the Muslim community in its introduction.

When we reviewed our course contents and teaching methods in general terms, we discovered that these topics resonated with the ongoing debate at tertiary institutions in other countries around the parameters and perspectives needed for the teaching of Islamic Studies. These challenges were amplified by the different levels of prior

68 Terry Eagleton. 17 December 2010. "The death of universities". At <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/dec/17/death-universities-malaise-tuition-fees> (Accessed 4 September 2021)

69 Tshilidzi Marwala. 5 September 2021. "As universities remodel as businesses, they need to be wary of losing their core mandates" at <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2021-09-05-as-universities-remodel-as-businesses-they-need-to-be-wary-of-losing-core-mandates/> (Accessed 6 September 2021).

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 fluctuated from year to year. When the Unisa Council approved the implementation of Islamic Studies in 1988, it stipulated 150 students as a reasonable figure for financial viability.⁷⁰ 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 were females, while the situation was reversed at postgraduate levels. Possible reasons for this phenomenon and a broader, more speculative profile of students were presented earlier in this paper.

Our funding sources were entirely South African, with the state being the major sponsor. The advantages and disadvantages of this were discussed here. I have also made a brief allusion to my research profile.

The discipline of Islamic Studies has survived three decades, even without its name ever having been mentioned in the cluster of different disciplines within which it has been administratively accommodated. There has been no political interference in our presentation from any state organ, nor have any accusations of harbouring or supporting extremism ever been levelled at our Department.

To ensure a future for Islamic Studies, we will need to remain constantly vigilant of all the issues outlined in this article. Special attention will need to be given to effective digitization of data.

In conclusion, just as some aspects of the past relating to the approval for the teaching of Islamic Studies at Unisa remain shrouded in mystery, so its future prospects remain an enigma. The fate of the discipline could well eventually be determined by market forces, rather than pleas about its academic, strategic, religious, cultural or political value. That would be a tragedy.

70 Unisa. "Implementation of Islamic Studies as a three-year major subject for the BA degree", *Council Minutes of Unisa*, 27 April 1988, p. 150.