

Article

# Islamic Studies in Australia's Universities

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**Abstract:** Islamic studies is an in-demand discipline area in Australia, including both classical Islamic studies and contemporary Islamic studies. While the field of classical Islamic studies has evolved over the centuries alongside the needs of the societies it serves, it has, nevertheless, remained within a well-established Islamic framework. This type of knowledge is sought by many, especially Muslims. Contemporary Islamic studies also plays a critical role in understanding Islam and Muslims in the contemporary context. The higher education sector in Australia contributes to this knowledge base via the Islamic studies courses it offers. This article discusses the positioning of the higher education sector in fulfilling Islamic educational needs, especially in the presence of other non-accredited education institutions such as mosques and madrasas. Despite the presence of other educational institutions, the higher educational sector appeals to a large pool of students, as evidenced by the number of Islamic studies courses offered by fourteen Australian universities. The teaching of classical Islamic studies in the higher education sector is not without its challenges. These challenges can be overcome and have been overcome to a large degree by the Centre for Islamic Studies and Civilisation (CISAC), Charles Sturt University (CSU). CISAC was used as a case study, as it is the largest Islamic studies department offering the greatest number of classical Islamic studies focused courses with the highest number of Islamic studies students in Australia. This article, overall, demonstrates that there is an ongoing need for Islamic studies to be taught, both in a classical and contemporary capacity, in the higher education sector.



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## 1. Introduction

Islamic studies in the higher education sector is an evolving phenomenon in Australia. Not surprisingly, the field of Islamic studies has existed for 14 centuries in different forms since the era of Prophet Muhammad. It has evolved over the centuries based on the needs of the societies it has served. Classical Islamic studies has remained within an Islamic framework founded on the Qur'an, the Sunnah of the Prophet and analytic methods established in the formative three centuries of Islam. Contemporary Islamic studies has emerged as an additional Islamic studies area and continues to grow, where the focus is on Islam and Muslims and how they impact society, as well as their interplay with other disciplines. Over the last few decades, the demand for both classical Islamic studies and contemporary Islamic studies has increased in Australia with the increase in the Muslim population. There is also a demand amongst Muslims to learn about their religion in a systematic way while also receiving a university qualification.

The growing demand for classical Islamic studies has been met in various ways. Mosques and non-accredited education institutions have predominantly taken on the responsibility of teaching classical Islamic studies, while universities have generally focused on contemporary Islamic studies. This is not absolute, as the Centre for Islamic Studies (CISAC) at Charles Sturt University (CSU) offers the largest number of courses in classical

Islamic studies amongst the universities in Australia. It must be noted that other universities in Australia also offer classical Islamic studies and, therefore, these courses are not exclusive to CISAC.

First, this article discusses the definition of classical and contemporary Islamic studies. It then turns to the current and emerging needs of Islamic studies, particularly by the Muslim population in Australia. The focus then shifts to what is actually available in the Islamic studies space within the community as well as within the higher education sector and how demand has driven the development of certain Islamic studies programmes currently available. The prime interest of this article is the teaching of classical Islamic studies within the higher education sector, the challenges faced in this space and how these challenges have been addressed, especially by CISAC.

The data for this article rely heavily on two main sources:

The first is a published report by [Rane et al. \(2021\)](#). It is the most comprehensive report written on Islamic studies in Australia's higher education sector and provides valuable data on the programmes, minors/majors and courses offered by Australian universities. The data for this research were collected in 2015 and 2016, and the research was completed in 2017. The 14 Australian universities that offer some type of Islamic studies are discussed in detail. The seven universities that offer programmes, minor or majors are discussed in greater depth. The report offers information such as the number of students studying Islamic studies courses at each university; the number of courses, minors/majors and programmes offered in each university; and the breakdown of Muslim to non-Muslim students studying Islamic studies at each university<sup>1</sup>.

The second source involves data collected from alumni of CISAC, CSU ([CISAC n.d.a](#)). An online survey consisting of 40 questions was emailed to 160 CISAC graduates<sup>2</sup> from the Bachelor of Islamic Studies and Master of Islamic Studies programmes; 50 surveys were returned. The purpose of the survey was to gauge a better understanding of the demographics of the students who completed an Islamic studies programme at CISAC, their learning and teaching experience while studying, the motivating factors for them to enrol in the programmes in the first place and what they hope to do with their qualifications now that they have graduated.

Since a significant amount of the data in this article come from CISAC alumni and since the CISAC courses and programmes are discussed in detail, it would be appropriate to provide some background information on CISAC from the start.

CISAC is a product of a partnership between the Islamic Sciences and Research Academy (ISRA) and CSU ([ISRA n.d.a](#)). That is, ISRA and CSU signed a partnership agreement which led to the founding of CISAC in 2010. Some key aspects of the agreement between ISRA and CSU include:

“ISRA Australia was to have control over course content while Charles Sturt University was to provide quality assurance; ISRA Australia was to select its management and teaching staff in accordance with the university's qualification criteria; and ISRA Australia would raise and manage its own budget while the university would only provide funding based on student load. In this way, ISRA Australia ensured the Islamic integrity of what was taught while meeting the university's quality standards.” ([Ozalp and Daqiq 2016](#), p. 515)

<sup>1</sup> This article uses the same terminology used in the report produced by Rane, Duderija and Mamone for courses, minors, majors and programmes: Programme: A programme is an approved course of study leading to a university qualification. A student is admitted to a programme, undertakes study while enrolled in that programme and on successful completion of all programme requirements is awarded the qualification to which the programme relates (inclusive of any degree, diploma or graduate certificate). Major/Minor: Majors and Minors are a sequence of courses that develop a coherent academic theme culminating in advanced level courses. Course: A course is a component of a qualification, normally undertaken over a single semester in which the student enrolls and on completion of which the student is awarded a grade, with such grades appearing on a student's academic record. Learning outcomes, assessment tasks and achievement standards are specified for each course appropriate to a level and qualification type (also called subjects/units).

<sup>2</sup> There are a total of 307 graduates of CISAC programmes; however, the survey was sent to Bachelor of Islamic Studies and Master of Islamic Studies graduates only.

ISRA, who sources the content and teaching staff as per agreement with CSU, was established in 2009. Its educational philosophy is to provide “Islamic education from within the Islamic scholarly tradition and sciences in a model of education that fosters critical thinking, intellectual enquiry and investigation—education that is compatible with tradition and conducive to context” (ISRA n.d.b).

ISRA has a strong community focus in addition to the university programmes it offers through CSU. It runs community events, community courses, workshops, seminars and various other types of initiatives which aim to develop Islamic knowledge and nurture community spirit at the grassroots level. Through the community focus, ISRA has completed 1383 community events and projects since it was established in 2009. During this time, the staff and volunteers of ISRA have also given 1008 talks to schools and the community. As can be seen, there is a strong grassroots focus within the organisation. ISRA has two centres: the main centre is located in Sydney, which was established in 2009, and the second centre is located in Melbourne, which was established in 2015.

The university programmes are a key part of ISRA’s focus. The programmes offered at CSU sit under CISAC. Currently, there are 471 students enrolled in one of the programmes. Of these, 241 are enrolled in the Bachelor of Islamic Studies, making it the most popular programme. There are 102 students enrolled in the Master of Islamic Studies and 61 students enrolled in the Master of Classical Arabic. The rest of the students are spread out amongst the Graduate Certificate, Graduate Diploma of the Islamic Studies and Arabic programmes as well as the Honours and Master of Contemporary Islamic Studies programmes. CISAC also has 12 research students who are either enrolled in Masters courses via Research or PhD. In total, CISAC offers 13 programmes as of 2021. It does not offer any minors or majors. There are 22 staff who service these 13 programmes; 14 of them are academic staff and 8 of them are professional support staff.

Before further analyses of the Islamic studies courses offered in Australia, it is important to expound the differences between classical Islamic studies and contemporary Islamic studies. This shall help to better understand the Islamic studies landscape with its nuance differences.

## 2. Distinction between Classic and Contemporary Islamic Studies

While it is tempting to consider Islamic studies as a monolithic discipline, it is anything but that. There are multiple ways to categorise Islamic studies into various sub-disciplines. One category system that is commonly used is classical Islamic studies and contemporary Islamic studies.

Classical Islamic studies has also been referred to as the basic Islamic disciplines, the Islamic tradition and the Islamic sciences (‘ulum), while they all have very similar, if not identical, meanings<sup>3</sup>. The eleventh century scholar Al-Ghazali’s classification of classical Islamic studies continues to be of influence today. According to Al-Ghazali, knowledge that has been acquired from the prophets and not through other means such as reason (Bakar 1992, p. 205), is what constitutes classical Islamic studies. In the context of Islam, this would include knowledge that is transmitted by Prophet Muhammad, whether as revelation from God (Qur’an), his own words (Hadith and Sunnah) or his life (seerah). Other disciplines that would “stem” from Prophet Muhammad would include the Arabic language, theology, Sufism/tasawwuf and jurisprudence. Methodology (usul) subjects/courses that relate to any of these areas such as Usul al-Hadith (methodology of Hadith) and Usul al-Tafsir (Methodology of Qur’anic Exegesis) would also be included. A number of scholars such as Ibn Taymiyyah have highlighted that making a distinction between knowledge that stems from the Prophet and knowledge that does not is not that straightforward, in that the human mind needs to prove the truth of and apprehend all types of knowledge (Khir 2007, p. 261).

<sup>3</sup> For the purpose of this article, classical Islamic studies will be used when referring to “basic Islamic disciplines”, “Islamic traditional” and “Islamic sciences”.

As can be seen, there are nuanced differences in what is considered classical Islamic studies. Nevertheless, some types of boundaries can be set around what is meant by the term classical Islamic studies. The definition used by Kamali and Nalla is in line with al-Ghazali's definition: "Alongside Arabic, the basic Islamic disciplines such as Qur'anic exegesis, hadith, jurisprudence, scholastic theology and Sufism should be included" (Kamali and Nalla 2014, p. 65).

Khir (2007, p. 261) consolidated the views of various scholars to list the "traditional fields" included in classical Islamic studies and developed the following list:

1. The sciences of the Qur'an: its readings, recitation, miraculous nature, exegesis and juristic interpretations;
2. The sciences of the hadith and its methodologies including its transmission, collection, commentaries and juristic interpretations;
3. Jurisprudence, comprising its methodologies and various branches that regulate every aspect of human life from worship to politics;
4. Creed and theology including the study of various Muslim sects and the study of other religions (milal);
5. Sufism;
6. History in its various forms such as biographies, chronologies and annals;
7. The science of Arabic language including its grammar, literature and lexicology, which is seen as instrumental in understanding the religious textual sources;
8. Logic and philosophy, though strictly not part of religious sciences but included in many religious curricula.

Thus, the definition of *classical Islamic studies* used in this article is "knowledge acquired from Prophet Muhammad" as explained above. This knowledge is noted and accepted as listed by Khir.

The "other" category of Islamic studies, in addition to classical Islamic studies, shall be referred to as *contemporary Islamic studies*. According to Waardenburg, it is not easy to define Islamic studies in the contemporary context. He states, "there is no generally accepted definition of the discipline of Islamic studies, that its boundaries are not clearly fixed, and that there are no uniform and generally accepted programmes . . . It constitutes a field of studies employing various disciplines" (Waardenburg 1997, p. 15). This approach is much more liberal to how Kamali and Nalla would define non-classical Islamic studies; "the study of the history of Muslim societies, contemporary as well as across the 14 centuries of the Islamic experience of Muslim communities" (Kamali and Nalla 2014, p. 65). Waardenburg's deliberation and consideration of other disciplines is important, considering the growing cross-disciplinary study areas that are emerging in relation to Islamic studies.

Siddiqui echoes the words of Waardenburg as he highlights that Islamic studies are dispersed in politics and economy, sociology and anthropology, gender studies, etc., within universities (Siddiqui 2007, p. 22). Inevitably, Islamic studies has entered other disciplines, rendering them cross-disciplinary. Nasr seeks to take Islamic studies' engagement with other disciplines to the next level by stating that Muslims need to "create their own science by incorporating what is positive in modern science into a worldview where God reigns supreme..." (Nasr 2010, p. 73), which is a very ambitious vision.

Based on these considerations, contemporary Islamic studies can be defined as studies of Islam and Muslims impacted by the contemporary world. This includes cross-disciplinary studies such as the study of Islam and Muslims alongside politics, culture, society, gender, psychology, finance, art, etc. It is also possible to say that classical Islamic studies forms the core of Islamic disciplines, while contemporary Islamic studies forms a thick outer layer around the core.

Thus far, the distinction between classical and contemporary Islamic studies has been explored. Next, we look at the current and emerging needs of students in Australia who want to study Islamic studies.

### 3. Current and Emerging Needs for Islamic Studies in Australia

Islamic studies in Australia continues to grow with a number of universities offering courses and programmes in Islamic studies. “The most well-established programs in Islamic studies, such as at the University of Melbourne, have only been offered since the latter half of the 20th century. Many other Islamic studies programs in Australia were only established in the past decade or so” (Rane et al. 2021, pp. 1–2). Most courses and programmes, however, reflect Western security concerns over Middle Eastern politics, radicalisation of Muslims and the need to understand extreme versions of Islam and extremist Muslims. This is evident by the number of courses offered on contemporary Islamic studies covering Muslim societies, communities and politics (Rane et al. 2021).

A large percentage of students studying some type of Islamic Studies are non-Muslims, and this demand will most likely continue. For instance, Griffith University’s Islamic studies students are 95% non-Muslims and University of New England’s is 96% (Rane et al. 2021). However, there is also a large percentage of Muslim students studying Islamic studies in Australian universities. A total of 98% of Western Sydney University’s Islamic studies students are Muslim compared to 90% at CSU and 70% at University of Melbourne (Rane et al. 2021).

Not surprisingly, some Muslims in Australia have different expectations from Islamic studies, where their preference is to study classical Islamic studies. The number of classical Islamic studies courses available through the Australian universities demonstrates this. According to Rane et al. (2021), a total of 46 classical Islamic studies courses are available in Australian universities, 30.5<sup>4</sup> of these offered by CISAC. That is, CISAC offers 66% of the classical Islamic studies courses offered in all of the Australian universities. The study of Islamic studies stems from needs. Based on CISAC alumni surveys and based on the literature, there are three areas of need for Islamic studies students from a Muslim background.

#### 3.1. Islamic Studies Experts

The need for Islamic studies experts, such as imams and Muslim scholars, continues to be an important part of Muslims’ presence in Australia. These experts need classical Islamic studies qualifications to be at a par with clerics and experts from other faith traditions.

Imams, in particular, have an important place in the fabric of Muslim societies. They lead the five daily prayers at mosques as the most basic aspect of their role. This role is generally complemented with counselling and pastoral care provided to members of their congregations. Often imams are consulted on the moral and ethical issues individuals face in their everyday life. In such cases, sound Islamic knowledge becomes a key point of reference. Imams also give weekly sermons to hundreds if not thousands of Muslims attending Friday prayers.

According to a 2014 report on the mosques of Sydney and New South Wales in Australia, 60% of mosques have full-time imams and most of them had received one form of Islamic higher learning. The report mentions, “Typically, the qualifications of the imam are from an institution located in the country of their own ethnic background or from countries and institutions that are famous for their Islamic studies programs, such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Turkey” (Underabi 2014, p. 11). In 2014, almost none of the imams serving in mosques were educated in Australia (Underabi 2014).

To this day, there are no recognised courses or training for individuals who would like to become an imam in Australia. Many of the imams, who have received their qualifications from overseas, are members of the Australian National Imams Council (ANIC), a peak body that represents many of the imams of Australia. However, this membership has no influence on the employment of an imam by a mosque. There actually is no official register of individuals who qualify to be imams in Australia. Such a register is envisioned to have

<sup>4</sup> 0.5 is allocated to a course where only half the course has a classical Islamic studies focus.

eligibility criteria and a code of practice, which are enforceable by the peak body, ANIC. As of 2021, ANIC has more than 200 imams as members (ANIC n.d.).

Each of the large mosques in Australia have their own recruitment process for imams. For example, the imams at Preston Mosque in Melbourne are usually from Lebanon and other Arab countries, who are brought to Australia by the mosque's committee. "The Broadmeadows Mosque, with its largely Turkish congregation, has an imam who is assigned by the Presidency of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Turkey. These imams are normally assigned for a period of about four years, after which the serving imam is replaced" (Albayrak 2012, p. 31). In other words, there is no centralised way of assigning imams to mosques in Australia.

Furthermore, there are currently no Australian-based programmes that are recognised for producing qualified imams (Musharraf et al. 2019). Thus, there is the continuing problem of not having home-grown imams. The National Centre for Excellence in Islamic Studies (NCEIS) is worth mentioning at this point due to the governmental expectations from it in this context. NCEIS was established in 2007 by the Australian government in a post-9/11 world and in the wake of the London bombings in 2005. After a stocktake of all universities by the government, it became evident that Australian universities had a wide range of Islamic studies programmes and courses and a focus on research (Saeed 2014, p. 88). This has fostered significant intellectual and religious development on Islam and Muslims in Australia (Ozalp and Keskin 2015, p. 218). However, there were "no Australian based study programs available to prepare Australians for Islamic religious leadership and teaching" (Saeed 2014, p. 88). This led to a collaborative arrangement between the University of Melbourne, Griffith University (QLD) and the University of Western Sydney (NSW) (NCCIS n.d.). The NCEIS made important contributions such as offering minors and majors in Islamic and Arabic studies and furthering excelling in Islamic studies research; however, the goal of a university in Australia that trains imams was not achieved through NCEIS. Professor Abdullah Saeed, the founder and director of NCEIS made it clear that the goal of training imams was not a goal which he believed would be possible in a secular university:

"... although when the idea of a national center for Islamic studies was originally floated, the government's emphasis was on training future religious leaders and providing professional development for existing imams, the consortium partners made it clear from the very beginning that training imams in the way it is done at traditional Muslim seminaries (a program focusing on traditional Islamic disciplines for Muslims) cannot be undertaken at secular Australian universities." (Saeed 2014, pp. 93–94)

Another initiative worth mentioning in the context of home-grown imams is the Bachelor of Islamic Studies offered by CISAC, CSU; it is arguably the most appropriate program to achieve the possibility of training imams in Australia due to the fact of its comprehensive classical Islamic studies content. On this point, Musharraf et al. (2019) states,

"Core Islamic sciences (such as Tafsir, Usul Al-Din, Usul al-Fiqh, Adaab, Usul al-Hadith and others) are adequately represented in their (CISAC, CSU's) bachelors and masters courses in combination with units that aim to develop cultural integration of religious leaders and Imams with Australian values—a unique combination that we have not found in any other course." (p. 82)

Training imams in Australia is certainly an area that needs to be explored. One of the challenges is the lack of serious attempts by the ANIC to evaluate the Bachelor of Islamic studies offered by CISAC for the purpose of qualifying imams. As it currently stands, there is no information available on ANIC's website on what qualifies an individual to become a member. Although the website mentions that one must be an "imam" to be a member, the specifics of qualifications needed for one to be defined as an imam are not provided (ANIC n.d.).

Religious studies in the higher education sector for the purpose of training religious leaders is not new in the Australian context. The Bachelor of Theology, a program that focuses on Christian studies, is offered by CSU and is designed to equip students “for Christian ministry or leadership.” (CSU n.d.a). As a professional pathway, “the course can lead to ordained ministry in either the Anglican or Uniting Church” (CSU n.d.a). This programme was first offered in 2005 through CSU and continues to provide graduates who enter into the ministry role, the Christian equivalent of an imam. Bachelor of (Christian) Theology is offered at numerous other Australian universities including Flinders University, The University of Notre Dame Australia, Australian Catholic University and University of Divinity. Therefore, it is only natural that Australian universities also offer Islamic studies with the purpose of equipping students for Islamic leadership, including the role of imam. In due course, this may become a reality.

### *3.2. Islamic Studies to Complement Professional Training and Career*

Historically, Islam has been part of Muslim societies at many levels. In modern times, Islamic perspectives and cross-disciplinary approaches in finance, economics, medicine, psychology, law, social work and chaplaincy have increased. Given that employment opportunities as imams and academics are limited in Australia, Muslim high school graduates pursue careers in a professional sector which can then land them with employment. Having said that, many religious Muslims feel the need to study Islam to cover the gap in knowledge or better understand and serve a large Muslim clientele as part of their existing profession.

For example, the discipline of Islamic finance covers areas such as dealing with interest, superannuation, shares, assets and banking. Religious Muslims want to make their financial decisions consistent with Islamic ethical norms without compromising their faith. This produces a need for financial experts to be familiar with Islamic economics, finance and banking. Islamic psychotherapy is another cross-disciplinary area that is gaining some traction. This encompasses qualified psychologists who also have qualifications in Islamic psychology. This necessitates foundational knowledge in classical Islamic studies, especially Islamic spirituality. Currently, no Islamic psychology programmes are offered in the Australian higher education sector. Furthermore, a growing number of Muslims are entering the legal profession in Australia. Lawyers with a Muslim background deal with Muslim clients in many instances in relation to marriage and divorce. Lawyers understanding Islamic law and how it relates to Muslim culture and thinking are important to complement their standard legal training, making this cross-disciplinary area pertinent. Similar needs and opportunities are present for other professions as well.

In the survey of CSU alumni, 12% of the graduates mentioned that they studied Islamic studies to enhance their profession, and 30.8% of graduates said the programme enhanced their profession “a lot” (26.5%) or “extremely” (14.3%). This suggests that Muslim professionals are seeking Islamic studies to enhance their profession. It could be said that the Islamic studies programmes are attracting professionals.

### *3.3. Muslim Student to Personally Benefit from Islamic Education and Teach Others*

There is a strong culture among Muslims to study their religion for personal reasons and not for career purposes. This was evident in the survey with CSU alumni; 60% of students completing an Islamic studies programme stated that their main purpose was to learn about their religion for self-development purposes.

While keen students of classical Islamic studies are divided between the various education institutions, such as mosques, madrasas and non-accredited education institutions, some Muslims prefer to study classical Islamic studies in the higher education sector. For example, 86% of CISAC alumni surveyed said that the offering of a university degree by CISAC had a “strong” to “extreme” influence on their choice to study at the institute. Interestingly, 76% of them also stated that the fact that the programmes were taught from within the tradition (classical Islamic studies focus) had a “strong” to “extreme”

influence on their choice to study at CISAC. Therefore, there is clearly interest within the Muslim community to study classical Islamic studies at the higher education level for self-development purposes.

#### 4. Islamic Studies Currently Available in Australia

Despite the significant changes to the Muslim world, classical Islamic studies has not been abandoned and, if anything, it continues to be considered an important part of scholarship in the Muslim world, and now for Muslims living in the West, including Australia. Islamic studies in Australia has taken on various shapes and forms, being taught by a range of institutions from local mosques to universities.

##### 4.1. Classical Islamic Studies

Classical Islamic studies, also known as the Shari'ah sciences (Saeed 1999), is based on knowledge that covers 14 centuries of scholarship and began with Prophet Muhammad. It comprises knowledge that has developed throughout the centuries in a systematic manner with a large body of literature and is a reference point for many Muslims of today. Classical Islamic studies is an established system of knowledge in various sub-discipline areas such as fiqh (jurisprudence), kalam (theology), sirah (life of Prophet Muhammad), Hadith studies, tafsir (exegesis) studies and usul (methodologies) related to these sub-disciplines. These subject areas are considered an essential part of Islamic scholarship for the majority of Muslims as they lay the foundation of the Islamic sources, beliefs and practices. They also maintain a connection to the 14 centuries of scholarship within the Muslim world, a key aspect that is fundamental to classical Islamic studies.

The study of these disciplines has become the accepted norm for most universities that teach Islamic studies in Muslim-majority countries. In Muslim countries, the purpose of a Bachelor of Islamic Studies (Bachelor of Divinity or Bachelor of Theology) is to prepare students for religious leadership roles, mainly as an imam or mufti within that country (Abu Dardaa et al. 2008). Such programmes comprise three to four years' study of Islamic studies with classical Islamic courses making up a large portion of the programme design.

With the secularisation and colonisation of many Muslim countries, teaching classical Islamic studies on a larger scale has been taken up by madrasa-style institutions. Madrasas have existed since the turn of the 9th century and spread throughout the Muslim world. The innovation of the Nizamiya madrasa system in the 11th century played an important role in the Muslim world for centuries (Marshallsay 2012). As Berkey highlights, however, the medieval madrasas had nothing close to an advanced or well-designed curriculum. Where one studied did not matter; what mattered was who one studied with. Qualification was not certified by an institutional degree but by a personal licence (ijaza), and this was issued by a teacher to their pupil (Berkey 2007). To some extent, in the classic Islamic madrasa education, students designed their own education pathway by selecting what books to study and with whom. This distinction is important and explains why madrasa education struggles to adapt to the modern university framework.

Madrasas significantly vary in their quality of teaching. In the modern era, some madrasa systems founded in the 19th century have developed a curriculum to ensure classical Islamic content is learnt through structured courses and the learning is measured through assessments. Darul Uloom education institutions, established by the Deobandi Movement, are a prime example of such institutions. Having originated in India in 1866, Darul Uloom had 30 institutions, which grew to nearly 9000 institutions worldwide by 1967 (Sikand 2005). Darul Uloom affiliated madrasas have spread worldwide with institutions present in many non-Muslim countries such as the UK, South Africa and Australia. In total, 17 of the 26 Islamic seminaries in the UK follow the Deobandi curriculum (Neyazi 2014). The Darul Ulum College in Australia is a similar education institution following the madrasa curriculum. The college, which is found in Melbourne, was established in 1997 and currently has 950 students (Darul Ulum College of Victoria n.d.). While it is a registered school that teaches the Victorian school curriculum, it offers an optional six-year



add-on madrasa style Shariah course. The course has no accreditation with any higher education institution.

Hence, a major limitation of these madrasa-style institutions is that they have no higher education recognition within the countries they function in. As a result, graduates from these institutions need to undertake a university degree in addition to their madrasa studies for their studies to be officially recognised.

Most mosques in Australia and other Islamic institutions also offer Qur'an reading classes and some form of Islamic studies courses, for which there is a demand. "In the early history of Islam, the mosque was the central place for the transmission of Islamic religious sciences" (Berkey 2007, p. 42). Many of the madrasas were also part of a mosque. This legacy of a mosque's role is reflected in the mosques of Australia. The classes offered are often short courses without assessments and delivered in a lecture style. While these types of courses are popular for a certain Muslim audience, their limitations make them less attractive for individuals seeking more structured, curriculum-based learning where their studies will be recognised with a qualification from a university.

There are implications for offering non-accredited courses that have not gone through the rigorous process of being scrutinised by an accredited education institution's policies and regulations. Lack of accreditation removes the checks and balances needed to ensure quality content, qualification of the lecturers/teachers and proper assessment design to achieve the desired learning outcomes.

Although there is an evident need for classical Islamic studies in Australia, the number of courses offered in the higher education sector covering classical Islamic studies is limited. In the report produced by Rane et al. (2021), 14 universities offer courses that fall under the category of Islamic studies. The report further categorises the courses offered by these universities into classical Islamic studies, history, language and culture, contemporary politics, Muslim societies and communities, security and conflict and other (Rane et al. 2021). Based on the two categories used in this article, other than the classical Islamic studies category, the rest of the categories within the report fall under contemporary Islamic studies.

CISAC offers the largest number of classical Islamic studies courses, offering 30.5 such courses. These courses are undertaken within programmes, Bachelor of Islamic studies, Master of Islamic studies and Master of Classical Arabic. The University of Melbourne offers the second highest number of classical Islamic studies courses with the offering of 6 courses, Western Sydney University offers 4.5, Australian National University offers 2.5, Monash University offers 2, Griffith University offers 1 and University of New England offers 0.5 (Rane et al. 2021, p. 12).

It is difficult to know from this report how many students have taken classical Islamic studies courses. According to the report, however, there were 3517 annual course enrolments in some type of Islamic studies (Rane et al. 2021); 1200 of those were enrolled in CISAC, CSU. That is, 34% of students studying Islamic studies in Australia, are studying at CISAC, CSU.

The question of why more universities do not offer programmes with a greater classical Islamic studies focus is worth discussing, as there are several reasons. As per the definition of classical Islamic studies provided earlier, a programme with a comprehensive classical Islamic studies component would include courses from the various disciplines of Islamic studies: usul al-tafsir, tafsir studies, usul al-hadith, hadith studies, fiqh, usul al-fiqh, sirah, theology, Sufism/tasawwuf, Arabic and logic.

The reason CISAC is able to offer programmes with a strong classical Islamic studies focus, despite the challenges posed, shall also be explained. Before discussing the challenges, some insight into the courses offered by CISAC shall be provided. This shall help to better understand the response to challenges that will be listed.

The Bachelor of Islamic studies offered by CISAC (CSU n.d.b) is the most comprehensive programme on Islamic studies in Australia where students need to complete 24 courses as part of the programme. Students complete 10 core courses, 4 Arabic courses and

10 Islamic studies elective courses. All 10 core courses fall under the category of classical Islamic studies and include:

- Islamic Worldview and Faith Essentials
- Fiqh (Islamic Law) of the Five Pillars
- Ihsan (Spirituality) Essentials
- Sirah (Life of Prophet Muhammad)
- Usul al-Din (Foundational Islamic Theology)
- Usul al-Fiqh (Methodology of Islamic Law)
- Usul al-Tafsir (Methodology of Qur'anic Exegesis)
- Usul al-Hadith (Methodology of Prophetic Traditions)
- Advanced Study of Tafsir (Qur'anic Exegesis) Literature
- Advanced Study of Hadith Literature

Students choose four Arabic courses from the 9 options available. The courses they choose depends on the level of Arabic they have before they commence the course:

- Arabic Skills 1
- Arabic Skills 2
- Arabic Skills 3
- Introduction to Arabic Reading
- Beginner Arabic Language 1
- Beginner Arabic Language 2
- Intermediate Arabic Grammar 1
- Intermediate Arabic Grammar 2
- Advanced Arabic Grammar

Students also choose 10 elective courses as part of the programme; 5.5 of the electives course options fall under classical Islamic studies, while 6.5 of them fall under contemporary Islamic studies:

- Classical Islamic studies electives:
  - Mantiq (Logic) and Critical Reasoning
  - Akhlaq (Morality) and Adab (Manners) in Islam
  - Purification of the Heart
  - History of Prophets: Adam to Jesus
  - Islamic Family Law
  - Religious Service and Community Leadership (0.5 classical and 0.5 contemporary)
- Contemporary Islamic studies electives:
  - Islam in the Modern World
  - Women in Islam and Islamic Cultures
  - Islamic History and Civilisations
  - Guided Research
  - Muslims in Australia: Past and Present
  - Modern History of Islamic Societies

Master of Islamic Studies (CSU n.d.c) is the second most comprehensive programme with a classical Islamic studies focus, offered by CISAC. The 4 core courses fall under the category of classical Islamic studies:

- Islamic Worldview and Theology
- Methodology of Islamic Law (Usul al-Fiqh)
- Methodology of Qur'anic Exegesis (Usul al-Tafsir)
- Methodology of Prophetic Traditions (Usul al-Hadith)

Students also complete 4 Islamic studies elective courses and 4 research-style courses, which can be classical or contemporary Islamic studies courses.

There are numerous challenges to offering complete programmes which have a strong classical Islamic studies focus:

Challenge 1: Studying classical Islamic studies appeals to many Muslims. However, not all Muslims are inclined to study classical Islamic studies over contemporary Islamic studies. Since Muslims are a significant minority in Australia, the potential pool of students is even further reduced.

Response 1: While Muslims are a significant minority in Australia, making up 2.6% of the population, that still equates to 604,200 Muslims (ABS 2017). CISAC is currently appealing to an Australian base of Muslim students with 471 active students where at least 90% of the students are Muslims. Therefore, there is a demand in this niche area.

Challenge 2: Other options are available to study classical Islamic studies, other than at university. The courses offered by non-accredited educational institutions, such as mosques and madrasas, are usually a much cheaper option for students. They also do not require students to undertake a heavy study load or to complete assessments. Completing a “lighter” course and not having to do assessments appeals to many.

Response 2: While some students of classical Islamic studies are choosing mosques or madrasas for their Islamic studies, there are students who would like to study classical Islamic studies and receive a university qualification at the end of their studies. Based on the CISAC alumni survey, 50% of the alumni stated that getting a university qualification at the end of their studies strongly influenced them to study at CISAC, while 38% said it was of strong influence. Overall, 6% stated that it was of moderate influence and 6% stated that it was of no influence. In other words, 94% of the surveyed students were influenced by the offering of a university qualification when deciding to study at CISAC, where its courses are known to have a heavy classical Islamic studies load.

Challenge 3: Few lecturers have sufficient qualifications in classical Islamic studies in addition to having a PhD qualification which is recognised by Australia. While such academics do exist in various Australian universities, a whole department of Islamic studies staff is needed in order to be able to teach a programme that is composed of 24 courses, which is the number of courses in a Bachelor of Islamic Studies programme. One or two staff cannot teach a whole programme as each course requires specialised knowledge.

Response 3: Four of the staff at CISAC have completed 6–10 years of classical Islamic studies in a Muslim country after which they completed their PhD in Australia or USA. Six staff have completed PhDs in contemporary Islamic studies or on a topic that combines classical and contemporary Islamic studies, while four staff are Arabic teachers with expertise in Arabic. Currently, there are 14 academic staff at CISAC. Putting together a department of 14 academic staff where more than half of them have classical Islamic studies expertise in the Australian context is not easy. Furthermore, the differing expertise of the various staff at CISAC ensures a 24-course undergraduate programme and a 12-course postgraduate programme can be taught.

Challenge 4: A high cost is associated with establishing and administering a higher education institution which offers programmes that have a strong classical Islamic studies focus: a niche market. Even though many Muslims want to study, the numbers are still limited, making these institutions a financial liability. With finite student numbers, and hence income, the cost of investment becomes a deterrent to aspiring leaders who would like to teach a whole programme on Islamic studies.

Response 4: CISAC currently has 14 academic staff and 8 professional staff. Some staff work part-time or as sessional staff. Developing a faculty of this size has required significant financial support from the community. Without the community support, it would have been very difficult to establish a faculty of this size for Islamic studies courses in the Australian context for the niche market that exists.

Challenge 5: The challenge of teaching classical Islamic studies in a secular university where the methodologies used in classical Islamic studies are different from methodologies used in a secular university.

Response 5: The methodologies of the classical Islamic studies courses offered by CISAC in a secular university (CSU) were significant considerations when the courses were being developed. As discussed previously, the content of a classical course is often

set. Memorising content and understanding concepts that have been established over the centuries is an important part of studying classical Islam. More often than not, such content is traditionally not critiqued. On the other hand, studying in the higher education sector requires critiquing, analysis and the development of new content/ideas, especially towards the end of a bachelor's degree and, most importantly, at the master's degree level. The CISAC classical Islamic studies courses have found a way to ensure students learn the content of a discipline as established throughout the centuries, while developing skills needed at university level such as writing, referencing, analytical skills and research.

The sirah (life of Prophet Muhammad) course offered by CISAC shall be looked at as a case study. The course discusses the significant events that took place during the time of Prophet Muhammad. That is, students are expected to know the sirah as established in the classical sources. However, students are provided with a wide range of readings, classical and contemporary, about the sirah to demonstrate that differing views exist on the sirah. Thus, exposure to the different views is an essential component of the course. Furthermore, the sirah is contextualised for today's world so that the events that took place during the time of Prophet Muhammad can be applied to the current times. Students are encouraged to do this through their own analyses to ensure they are able to apply the knowledge they have gained. The sirah is also discussed in the contemporary context by addressing the many misconceptions that exist about the life and character of Prophet Muhammad.

Sirah students are expected to develop their writing and research skills through the writing of an essay where they need to use a wide range of sources, including classical and contemporary sources. Below are some examples of essay questions that are included for this course:

- Discuss and analyse the marriage of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) to Aisha focusing on the deliberations related to her age;
- Analyse Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) as a role model: elaborate on his methodology of problem solving in the modern context;
- Analyse the Last Sermon in regard to human rights, race and gender relations;
- Discuss Prophet Muhammad's conflict resolution and peace-making methodology and how this can be implemented in modern days.

Assessments are an important part of a course. The sirah course is composed of 5 assessments:

- Participation and engagement 10%: students are expected to attend weekly online tutorials;
- Research and referencing quiz 5%: being a first-year course, the development of research and referencing skills has been incorporated into the course;
- Submission of a first version of essay 25%: being a first-year course, students submit a 1000-word draft essay which they receive feedback on before they finalise their essay;
- Submission of final version of essay 20%: students are expected to incorporate the feedback they have received from their lecturer to finalise their essay;
- Exam 40%: students are asked questions from the lecture content in a closed-book exam.

As can be seen from the assessment breakdown, knowledge about the sirah is important and is assessed mainly through the exam. Writing, analytical and critical skills are also important and are mainly assessed through the writing of the essay. It is beyond the scope of this article to provide all the details about the learning and teaching strategies used in this course. However, it is hoped that the brief insight provided helps to understand how a classical Islamic studies course is taught at the university level. Each classical Islamic studies course is evaluated individually and offered in a way that established knowledge related to the course is taught, while fulfilling the standards of a university course. A whole range of CSU policies are taken into consideration, such as Course Outline Policy, Assessment Policy, Moderation Policy and Graduate Learning Outcome mapping.

Through the above discussions, it can be seen that there are numerous challenges confronting a university that seeks to teach a complete programme where the prime focus

is classical Islamic studies. Despite these challenges, CISAC has been able to achieve this as explained above.

#### 4.2. Contemporary Islamic Studies

The place of Islam and Muslims in the contemporary world is just as important, with many questions demanding answers, particularly in relation to understanding Islam and Muslims in the Western context (Kurzman and Ernst 2012). With the growing population of Muslims in Australia and as a result of world events, the need for contemporary Islamic studies became even more apparent. This type of study has generated a lot of interest among Muslims and non-Muslims to better understand the role of Islam, the religion followed by more than 1.8 billion Muslims worldwide.

Half a century ago, the study of Islam and Muslims appeared more as Orientalist studies, where Muslims were often the object of study. Since the influential criticism of Orientalism by Edward Said, the inadequacy of Orientalist framework in understanding Muslims and Islam has shifted the approach to contemporary Islamic studies. The greater presence of Muslim academics in Australia since the 1970s has also been of great influence. In the post-11 September world, the change has become even more apparent with a desire to genuinely understand and represent Islam and its adherents. These forces produced new approaches to contemporary Islamic studies.

It is important to note that there have been a significant number of Muslims students in Australian since the 1950s, but their affiliation was not always based on religious grounds (Ansari 2018, p. 105). That is, they were studying in disciplines other than Islamic studies as Muslim students, whereas the focus here is Islamic studies in Australian universities.

As part of the NCEIS initiative, Melbourne University, Western Sydney University and Griffith University developed a suite of courses, minors/majors that sit well under contemporary Islamic studies. While their programmes have elements of classical Islamic studies, their main focus is contemporary Islamic studies. As of 2016, the mentioned universities offer a minor and major in Islamic studies (Rane et al. 2021). Other universities with a major in Islamic studies include Monash University and University of New England. Deakin University also offers a minor in Islamic studies (Rane et al. 2021).

At the postgraduate level, Melbourne University offers an Islamic studies specialisation (four courses) in its Graduate Certificate in Arts and Graduate Diploma in Arts. Other than Melbourne University, CSU is the only other university that offers postgraduate programmes. It is also the only university that offers a master's programme in Islamic studies, with two of them falling under classical Islamic studies—Master of Islamic Studies and Master of Classical Arabic—and one course falling under contemporary Islamic studies—Master of Contemporary Islamic Studies (CISAC n.d.b). Continuation of these courses suggests a demand for contemporary Islamic studies in the higher education sector, at undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

Overall, it seems that contemporary Islamic studies is almost always offered by Australian universities, whereas classical Islamic studies is offered primarily by non-accredited education institutions as well as some universities. This means contemporary Islamic studies courses have been developed on the foundation of university standards, where universities ensure academic staff are sufficiently qualified and provide the framework needed to develop the courses in line with the university's policies and guidelines stipulated by the Australian Qualification Framework (AQF) (AQF n.d.) and Tertiary Education and Standards Agency (TEQSA) (TEQSA n.d.).

The methodology of study of the courses in contemporary Islamic studies programmes uses theories and methods from other disciplines such as sociology, political science and cultural studies. Such theories and methods have a strong focus on analysis, evaluation and critical thinking. Consequently, the methodology of contemporary Islamic studies is different from the methodology of classical Islamic studies, whose methodologies (*usul*) are often considered by Muslims to have been perfected by classical Muslim scholars, leaving no room for new development (Saeed 1999). CISAC has, however, found a way to integrate

the contemporary and classical methodologies in their courses, as demonstrated through the example of the sirah course.

## 5. Conclusions

There is a growing need to provide Islamic studies programmes in Australia. This growth is spearheaded by the growing prominence of Islam and Muslims in the post-11 September world. This prominence has also highlighted the different needs of Islamic studies students. The distinction between classical and contemporary Islamic studies has become more significant as a result. Classical Islamic studies is more identifiable and limited to core Islamic disciplines that trace their origin to classical Islamic scholarship. Contemporary Islamic studies is used to indicate all other studies of Islam and Muslims, particularly in the contemporary world. This includes cross-disciplinary studies such as the study of Islam and Muslims alongside politics, culture, society, gender, psychology, finance, etc. It is possible to ascertain that classical Islamic studies forms the core of Islamic disciplines, with contemporary Islamic studies forming a thick outer layer around the core.

In the Australian context, there is a growing need for Islamic studies to fulfil specific educational and training needs, namely the need for Islamic studies experts, including imams and other religious leaders; the need for Islamic studies to complement various professional sectors such as finance, law and psychology; and the need that Muslims feel to study their religion in a systematic manner. All three of these needs require classical Islamic studies to be part of the knowledge base. While some of these needs are fulfilled by educational institutions that are not part of the higher education sector, the higher education sector is still playing a significant role in this space.

Overall, the higher education sector in Australia has played an important role in educating Muslims and non-Muslims about Islam, with 14 universities offering some type of Islamic studies. The focus of each of the universities varies significantly; while some have a strong focus on contemporary Islamic studies, others have a stronger focus on classical Islamic studies. CISAC, CSU has the greatest focus on classical Islamic studies.

Despite the demand for classical Islamic studies in the higher education sector, there are various challenges for universities to offer these courses, especially in the form of a programme. This may explain why there is a limited number of university programmes which have a strong classical Islamic focus. Classical Islam is a niche study area. It can also be offered by other educational institutes such as mosques and madrasas, which further thins out this niche market. Moreover, offering a classical Islam programme in the higher education sector requires a pool of lecturers who have qualifications in both classical Islamic studies and a PhD. While such lecturers exist in various Australian universities, getting a pool of such lecturers together who can teach 24 courses to make up a programme is not easy; a whole Islamic studies department is needed to teach a complete programme. This has huge financial implications. Finally, there are challenges around teaching classical Islamic studies in a secular university, especially in relation to the methodologies used in teaching such courses. CISAC has been able to address all of these challenges. Not only is it the leading university centre to offer the greatest number of Islamic studies programmes, the largest number of Islamic studies courses with the highest number of Islamic studies students, but it also has the strongest classical Islam focus out of all the Australian universities.

Islamic studies, including classical Islamic studies, is here to stay in Australia. This article sought to provide a better understanding of what is available in this space, especially in the higher education sector. Given that the Muslim population in Australia is increasing, teaching classical Islamic studies complemented by contemporary Islamic studies in universities is crucial to fulfil various needs.

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