

Post-Conference Update

2nd Annual Australian Islamic Schooling Conference

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Educators, policy makers and thought leaders gathered on the 11th and 12th of July for the second Annual Australian Islamic Schooling Conference held at picturesque *Yurebilla*, known also as MT Lofty in Adelaide Hills. The theme explored at the conference was that of curriculum in Islamic schooling.

These now whole-of-field gatherings hosted by the Centre for Islamic Thought and Education (CITE) aim to assist in the transition from the establishment phase in the field of Islamic schooling to an exciting phase of renewal, bolstering the momentum needed to forge best practice across the sector. So far, the response to our call for renewal has witnessed the gathering of minds from Australia, the USA, Canada, the Sultanate of Oman, Indonesia, Singapore, Canada and from around Australia.

The two-day learning and networking fest was a stunning success with many delegates expressing how insightful and motivating the plenary session presentations and panel discussions were.

A defining moment on this path toward renewal was of course the first annual Islamic schooling conference in 2016, where more than 220 stakeholders gathered in Melbourne. From this watershed event, a 10-year roadmap was proposed to shape and operationalise the process of renewal. Top of the agenda list was to explore the theme of curriculum renewal in Islamic schooling which was realised across these inspiring two days.

Keynote speaker on day one, Dr. Nadeem Memon (Director of Education at Abu Dhabi University Knowledge Group), beautifully encapsulated the intent and mantra of curriculum efforts as well as renewal broadly with his challenge to delegates, “Acknowledge the past...Critique the present...Be part of the future”.

Dr. Seema Imam (Co-Chair of the National College of Education, at National Louis University), keynote speaker on day two emphasised the need for ongoing collaboration on curriculum. She shared that, “No one person can write curriculum”.

Ms Aynur Simsirel (Principal Advisor, Independent Schools of Victoria, former Executive Principal of Ilim College and Chair of Islamic Schools Association Australia), offered a passionate plea that “Educational leaders need to discover their heroes in the classroom (teachers)...[as] they are transforming classrooms and holding the sector on their shoulders...they are in every Islamic school”.

Renowned and respected Aboriginal Educator Professor Lester-Irabinna Rigney (UniSA) raised the roof with his statement: “We (educators) make nations...we build them from the classroom”.

Delegates would hear from experts both inside of and as well as colleagues across sectors and in partnership with Islamic schooling, and were reminded of the breadth and the agility of the Australian Curriculum. It was reinforced that the Australian Curriculum was intended to offer a framework from which teachers could enact in the context of their schools and their student’s needs. This paved the

way for presentations that inspired those in attendance to continue with efforts to engage in innovative efforts toward curriculum renewal. Naturally a reoccurring theme related to approaches to the integration of beliefs, values and traditions within Islamic schools.

The conference also explored other curriculum sub themes around worldview and curriculum, historical and contemporary models, contested spaces, inter-faith perspectives, innovative practice in Arabic and Islamic studies and the importance of pedagogy as well as leadership for enactment of quality curriculum.

Key take-away points included, collaboration is essential, 'we cannot go it alone with curriculum'; a recognition that our focus must move to enactment of curriculum; that we acknowledge loudly and proudly that culture and religion are not deficits; equally that we acknowledge that research is essential for renewal. Finally, we were reminded not to forget pedagogy and that sharing stories of hope in Islamic schooling (as there are many) must be ongoing.

Some big questions that emerged from the conference included: What would be overarching aims and objectives for Islamic schooling in Australia? Can we articulate terms of reference to an Islamic worldview? What might be KSAs (knowledge, skills and attitudes) that we develop in our students? Can we come up with an 'Islamic' curriculum model? Mastery model over spiral model? How can we move forward in Arabic studies and Islamic studies? What mechanisms and processes do we have in place for collaboration (processes)? How do we take this back to our individual schools?

A major outcome of the conference was the formation of a steering committee to undertake the much vaunted national consultation process that tackles the design, development and roll out of a National Islamic Studies Curriculum. Additional outcomes include the call for a collaborative process to post overarching aims and objectives for Islamic schooling in Australia.

The Centre for Islamic Thought and Education (CITE), University of South Australia, in collaboration with partners such as the Islamic Schooling Association of Australian (ISAA) will continue to work on the process of renewal of Islamic schools, that will lead to further whole of field improvements in Australia and elsewhere.