

New Teacher Training Programs – Filling a void for educators of Muslim students

The Centre for Islamic Thought and Education (CITE) and the School of Education, University of South Australia (UniSA) will launch two new and exciting on-line programs in 2018.

The programs are sure to be attractive to current and prospective Islamic school educators as well as educators of Muslim students in other schools. They are the first and only qualifications of their kind in Australia. They aim to fill a void in formal, accredited teacher training and professional learning programs.

The first program, a Master of Teaching (secondary) provides a pathway to becoming a teacher in Australia with a specialisation in Islamic pedagogy for those with a relevant undergraduate degree.

The second program, a Graduate Diploma in Education (Islamic Education) offers professional learning for existing teachers aligned with contemporary educational policies, standards and practices, within the framework of Islamic pedagogy.

For readers not acquainted with the term Islamic pedagogy, this refers simply to the principles of education derived from the Islamic tradition that inform what we teach and learn, and the way we teach and learn.

The programs respond to the long-held need for formal teacher training and professional learning programs in Islamic pedagogy within an established faculty of education. As far back as the First World Conference on Islamic Education in Mecca in 1977, the need for a teacher education program was identified. CITE Program Director for Islamic Education, Dylan Chown has emphasised that these programs are *“important milestones and significant achievements for the entire field. They are the result of collective inspiration, perspiration and prayers from many in the field, nationally and internationally”*.

The new UniSA CITE programs are a recognition that a vast Islamic education tradition exists. Students in these programs will study Ghazali, Ibn Sina and Zarnuji alongside Dewey and Vygotsky. They will also be exposed to the contemporary scholarship of Naquib Al-Attas and Seyyid Hossein Nasr. The programs introduce students to epistemologies (ways of knowing), philosophies, pedagogies (methodologies of teaching) and perspectives from within the rich Islamic educational heritage consistent and aligned with research in broader and contemporary education contexts.

Students can study courses on Islamic pedagogy such as ‘Principles and Praxis’, ‘Contemporary Issues and Muslim Students in the Classroom’, ‘Quality Teaching and Learning’, ‘Managing Learning Environments’ and ‘Critical Perspectives on Curriculum, Pedagogy and Assessment’. Students can also study courses relating to the Islamic tradition as this informs educational theory such as an ‘Introduction to Islam’, ‘Empires of Islamic Civilisation’, and ‘Advanced Studies in Islam & International Relations’ or ‘Advanced Studies of Sharia’.

CITE Director, Professor Mohamad Abdalla has a history of establishing ground breaking centres. Professor Abdalla formerly set-up the Griffith University Islamic Research Unit which would become part of the National Centre for Excellence in Islamic Studies. In his tenure the Islamic studies program proved hugely popular. He now brings his invaluable experience to the fast growing Centre for Islamic Thought and Education at UniSA where his vision and leadership has seen the formation of these innovative and other exciting programs.

Why the need for such programs?

As we know, students, families and school communities that share a religious affiliation identify with common values, beliefs and traditions. They see these as orientating, enabling, and empowering as well as sources of guidance and as resources for lifelong learning. The UniSA CITE programs wish to honour these resources and seek to equip educators to be religiously and culturally responsive.

The aim of UniSA CITE programs is therefore to provide training and professional learning responsive to schools contexts and the needs of Muslim students. The programs do not narrow or limit the educational scope and potential of the curriculum but rather deepen and widen teaching and learning by integrating a religious, cultural and spiritual dimension.

What does this mean for Islamic schools?

The objective of Islamic schools is similar to other faith-centred schools – such as Catholic or Jewish schools – this is to foster a deep connection to faith and prepare students to play active and positive roles in society.

Despite the growth of Islamic schools in the Australia as in United States of America, Canada, Europe, South Africa and New Zealand, to date there has been no formal, accredited teacher training or professional learning degree programs for Islamic school teachers or teachers of Muslim students generally. There are such programs in parts of the Muslim world and a handful of programs elsewhere that are not accredited, but no existing program exists.

Internationally renowned Islamic education expert Dr Nadeem Memon wrote that teachers in other faith-based schools, unlike in Islamic schools, are trained specifically about pedagogical (methodology of teaching) aims, teachings of the faith, and instructional strategies necessary to nurture faith-consciousness. Whilst every Islamic school community contains those heroic teachers who champion such priorities, Islamic schools according to Dr Memon have been inconsistent in setting standards for and supporting the development of teachers.

One underlying assumption across the field has been that a trained and registered teacher who identifies as a Muslim will know automatically how to teach 'Islamically'. Another assumption is that teachers who do not identify as Muslim need only to focus on their craft and/or subject specialisation and the 'Islamic' can be facilitated in other quarters of the school. In fact teachers are very interested in the life worlds of their students and understand the importance of student's beliefs values and traditions as this informs their learning. Quality teachers value the relationships they share with their students and value what the student brings to the classroom. These assumptions have often left it to already busy and overworked teachers to navigate and overcome these challenges themselves.

In the 35 year history of Islamic schools in Australia and over 75 year history in North America, there has previously never been an accredited teacher education program or recognised professional learning degree to equip Islamic school teachers with an understanding of an Islamic pedagogy. This is not necessarily a criticism rather a reflection of the limited capacity in the establishment phase and more positively a sign of maturity and growth in the current era.

Mr Chown shares that, "Our colleagues in Catholic education have set a beautiful precedence and have long provided access to quality teacher training and professional learning to educators in their schools". All full-time teachers in Catholic schools in Australia complete a Graduate Certificate in Catholic studies within the first five (5) years of service. Mr Chown said with reference to the new

UniSA CITE programs, *“We envisage the Graduate Diploma in Education (Islamic Education) will set the standard for professional learning for Islamic schools”*.

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