The Role and Importance of Islamic Studies and Faith in Community Islamic Schools in Australia

A Case Study of Adelaide (SA) and Darwin (NT)

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Ibrahima Diallo

University of South Australia | Research Centre for Languages and Cultures

Chief Investigator

Dr Ibrahima Diallo

Ibrahima.diallo@unisa.edu.au

Senior Lecturer, Research Centre for Languages and Cultures

School of Communication and International Studies

University of South Australia

Saint Bernard's Road, Magill 5072

Research Assistant

Ms Kerrilee Lockyer

Kerrilee.Lockyer@unisa.edu.au

School of Communication and International Studies

University of South Australia

Saint Bernard's Road, Magill 5072

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1.   Introduction

A 2015 study by the International Centre for Muslim and non-Muslim Understanding (MnM) (Hassan, 2015) indicated that Australian Muslims represent 2.2% of the total population. With this figure, Islam is the third largest religion in the country after Christianity and Buddhism and the second fastest growing religion after Hinduism. However, the Australian Muslim population is also one of the most ethnically and linguistically diverse religious communities in Australia. According to the MnM study, which used census data to create a profile of Australian Muslims, Australian Muslims come from 183 different countries. For example, in 2011, 62% of Australian Muslims were born overseas, whereas only 38% were born in Australia. Of those born overseas, around 42% were of North African or Middle Eastern origin and more than 58% were from elsewhere, including 25% from South and Central Asia, 10% from Europe and 4% from sub-Saharan Africa. Another important feature of the Australian Muslim population is its extreme linguistic diversity: the Muslim population speaks a range of languages, including Arabic, Urdu, Turkish, Persian, and Bahasa Indonesia, to name just a few.

Despite these ethnic and linguistic differences, knowledge of the Quran and the Arabic language is essential for any Muslim in order to perform their daily religious duties and rituals as well as to identify as a Muslim. For Australian Muslims, this raises the crucial question of maintaining and developing their Islamic values. Equally important are the ways in which they impart these Islamic values to their children. For example, a study by Clyne (2001) indicated that 'many Australian Muslim parents expect their children to go to schools that could provide an education that is islamically oriented in terms of religion, culture and moral values'. A similar study by Raihani and Gurr (2010) confirmed this view and indicated that the Islamic schools created in the different parts of the country do not seem to have been able to accommodate all Muslim students. As a result, Islamic community schools continue to gain traction and, in parallel with the Islamic schools, contribute significantly to the provision of Islamic education services to a large number of Australian Muslim children.

This case study reports on the role and importance of Islamic studies and faith in community Islamic schools in Adelaide and Darwin. Islamic studies are defined here as studying the Quran (developing Qur'anic literacy) as well as learning the Arabic language. Islamic community schools in Australia, referred to as heritage schools in North America and as complementary or supplementary schools in the United Kingdom, are generally run independently by the Muslim communities or jointly with a local mosque or with Islamic foundations or cultural centres. This report on the Islamic community schools is divided into three main sections. The first provides

an overview and the aim of the study; the second describes the sociodemographic and linguistic background of the participants; and the third and final section discusses the major findings.

2.   Overview and aim

Most studies about Muslims in Australia tend to focus on issues such as stereotyping, identity issues, racial profiling, and prejudice among others to explain the challenges they face as Muslims in Australia. More recently, anti-Muslim and anti-Islam sentiments have exacerbated, following a series of foiled and executed terrorist attacks in the country against the backdrop of the bombings in Paris (in 2014 and 2015), Brussels (2016), Turkey (2016) and the Orlando shootings in the US (2016). This domestic and international tension has resulted in the re-emergence of Pauline Hanson's One Nation party and her election to the Australian Parliament by campaigning on anti-Muslim rhetoric and a ban on Muslim immigration.

For example, Kabir (2007; 2011) discussed the ways in which the post-Gulf War, September 11 bombings of 2001 and the Bali tragedy of 2002 have been central in stereotyping and profiling Australian Muslims. In her research on Australian Muslims she also focused on the media representation of the Muslim community after September 11 bombing and the Bali tragedy (Kabir 2011; 2006), as well as the identity construction of Australian Muslim youths (Kabir 2015; 2006). Rozario (1998) and Hassen (2013) also conducted studies on Islamic identity in Australia. While Rozario's study focused on the role of Muslim women as custodians of Islamic heritage in Australia, Hassen discussed the ways in which identity politics are played out in Islamic schools in Victoria. Studies on Australian Muslims have explored other issues, including on the one hand, issues related to religion, values, employment and income, and on the other hand, issues such as prejudice, discrimination and extremism. These issues are condensed in *Muslim voices: Hopes and aspirations of Muslim Australians*, a report by the Centre for Muslim Minorities and Islam Policy Studies, commissioned by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (2009). The study conducted by the International Centre for Muslim and non-Muslim Understanding in 2015 mentioned above focused on the demographic, social and economic profile of Australian Muslims. In addition to a particular emphasis on the ethnic and linguistic background of Australian Muslims, the study highlighted the identity issues Australian Muslims face in Australia. A number of other studies on Australian Muslims have focused on attitudes towards Muslims in Australia. For example, Dandy and Pe-Pua (2010) conducted research on Australian Muslims against the background of the Sydney riots in 2005, but their study focused on attitudes towards multiculturalism, immigration and diversity. Lentini, Halafoff and Ogru's study (2011) focused on mainstream Australians' perceptions of Muslims, Islam, and Christian-Muslim relations, and Abu-Rayya and White (2010) discussed, among other topics, prejudice towards Australian Muslims.

Although the schooling of Australian Muslims has been examined, most studies have focused on first- and second-generation migrant Muslim youths for whom (Islamic) schools are important places for identity formation and cultural development (Mansouri & Percival-Wood 2008; Raihani & Gurr 2010). Mansouri and Trembath's (2005) study, situated in state public schools, investigated identity, citizenship and attitudes to schooling. Similarly, Raihani and Gurr (2010) discussed, among other issues, parental expectations and motivation for sending their children to Islamic schools.

As shown in this brief overview, to our knowledge, the role and importance of Islamic studies and faith affiliation in community Islamic schools in Australia have not been fully discussed in the literature. In particular, it is necessary to understand the role played by community Islamic schools through Islamic studies (Quranic studies and the Arabic language) in the maintenance of language and literacy skills and their development and transmission to the younger generations of Muslims, and as spaces for faith affiliation and reinforcement. This case study fills the gap in the literature by focusing on Australian Muslims' perspectives on Islamic studies and faith. It also highlights the role of community Islamic schools in preparing young Australian Muslims to simultaneously (a) maintain and develop their language and faith and (b) successfully interact with the wider Australian community. In short, the aim of this study is to investigate Islamic studies and faith in community Islamic schools as experienced by members of Australian Muslim communities, and to extend the research into the importance and role of community Islamic schools for the promotion of Islamic studies for faith and language maintenance and development.

2.1   Research questions

This study investigated the ways in which Islamic community schools cater for the Islamic studies needs of Australian Muslim students while accommodating the wider Australian culture. The study is framed around the following research questions:

1. What is the role and importance of Islamic studies and faith in Islamic community schools?
2. Is adequate time allocated to learn Islamic studies in Islamic community schools?
3. To what extent does the curriculum of the Islamic community schools prepare Muslim students the Australian wider community values?
4. What are the attitudes of the Australian wider community towards the Islamic community schools?

2.2   Participants and research sites

There are three groups of participants in this study. The first group includes Muslim students, the second group involves teachers, religious leaders (e.g. Imams) and school and community

leaders, and the third group is made up of general members of the Muslim community. Their different perspectives on the issue of the role and importance of language and faith in Islamic community schools provide the study with an in-depth understanding of the multiple issues at stake (language, culture, and faith) and the various players involved in community Islamic schools (parents, community leaders, and students).

The data collection for this case study took place in Adelaide and Darwin between August and December, 2015. Both cities are important sites for this case study because they are the Australian cities with the fastest growing Muslim population. For example, in 2006 Adelaide's Muslim population was 66% of all Muslims in Australia, but by 2011 it had jumped to 90% of total Australian Muslim population, making it city with the largest Muslim population increase in Australia (Hassan 2015). Equally significant is that these two cities are important symbols for Australian Muslims. Darwin was the first point of entry of Islam in Australia, with contact occurring between Muslim Indonesians and Indigenous Australians in the 1750s. As for Adelaide, it is the place of the first and still existing major mosque in Australia, built in 1880 (Hassan, 2015).

2.3   Data collection tools

To collect data for this study, a combination of qualitative and quantitative data collection tools were used. Both questionnaires and interviews were used to collect data. In particular, a self-administered questionnaire was submitted to participants and semi-structured questionnaires were used as prompts for recorded one-on-one and group interviews. The main reason for the use of these two tools was to capture the complex nature of the population targeted in this research; namely, the sample's heterogeneous Muslim population (i.e. teachers, students, parents, members of the community, community leaders), spread widely across two major research sites.

In both Adelaide and Darwin, the research team was invited to conduct the study at their Mosque Open Day, which was organised by the local Islamic community. These opportunities allowed the research team to engage with a large number of Australian Muslims in one site and to administer the questionnaires to the participants as well as conduct one-on-one and group interviews. In Adelaide, the data were also collected at an Islamic community school, where the interview with the school principal added to the data collected at the Mosque Open Day. In addition, a number of questionnaires were submitted to the members of the Muslim community through a community leader.

Completing the self-administered questionnaire takes on average between 20 and 30 minutes and the administration of one-on-one and group interviews varied between 20 and 45 minutes. However, in some cases, the administration of the questionnaires was modified to fit both the

time available for the interviews and the context of the interview. Besides collecting data on the personal and family socio-economic background of the respondents, the questionnaires contained four sets of research questions. The first set of research questions investigated the role and importance of language and faith in Islamic community schools through the teaching of Islamic studies. The term is used broadly in this study to include teaching of the Quran and developing Quranic literacy, as well as learning the Arabic language. Based on a four-point scale from 'Not at all' to 'Extremely important', respondents were asked to rate the importance of Islamic studies. The second set of research questions tried to ascertain whether or not the time allocated to teach Islamic studies in Islamic community schools was adequate. The third set of research questions investigated the areas of focus of Islamic studies in the Islamic community schools. The aim was to investigate to what extent the teaching provides the students with the knowledge and skills they need to maintain and transmit their Islamic culture and faith (Islamic culture, Quranic knowledge and the Arabic language), while accommodating the wider Australian secular practices and values. This set of questions focuses on Australian Muslims' overall expectations from the Islamic community schools. The fourth and final set of questions asked what the Muslim community think is the attitude of the wider community towards Islamic community schools.

An information session at the Adelaide Mosque Open Day in 2015 (Courtesy ISSA)

3.   Demographics

3.1   *Gender, age and distribution of the participants*

As shown in Figure 1, a total of 61 respondents participated in the research conducted in Adelaide (55.74%) and Darwin (44.26%). Of the respondents, 57.37% were females and 42.63% were males. The ages of the participants ranged from 15 to 60 and above, with the largest group, aged 15–18, representing 29.56% of the respondents. The second largest group was aged 31–45 (27.86%), the third largest was 19–30 (24.59%), the fourth largest 46–60 (13.11%) and the fifth largest 60+ (4.88%). Figure 1 summarises the research sites, the gender

Figure 1 Research sites, gender and age of the participants
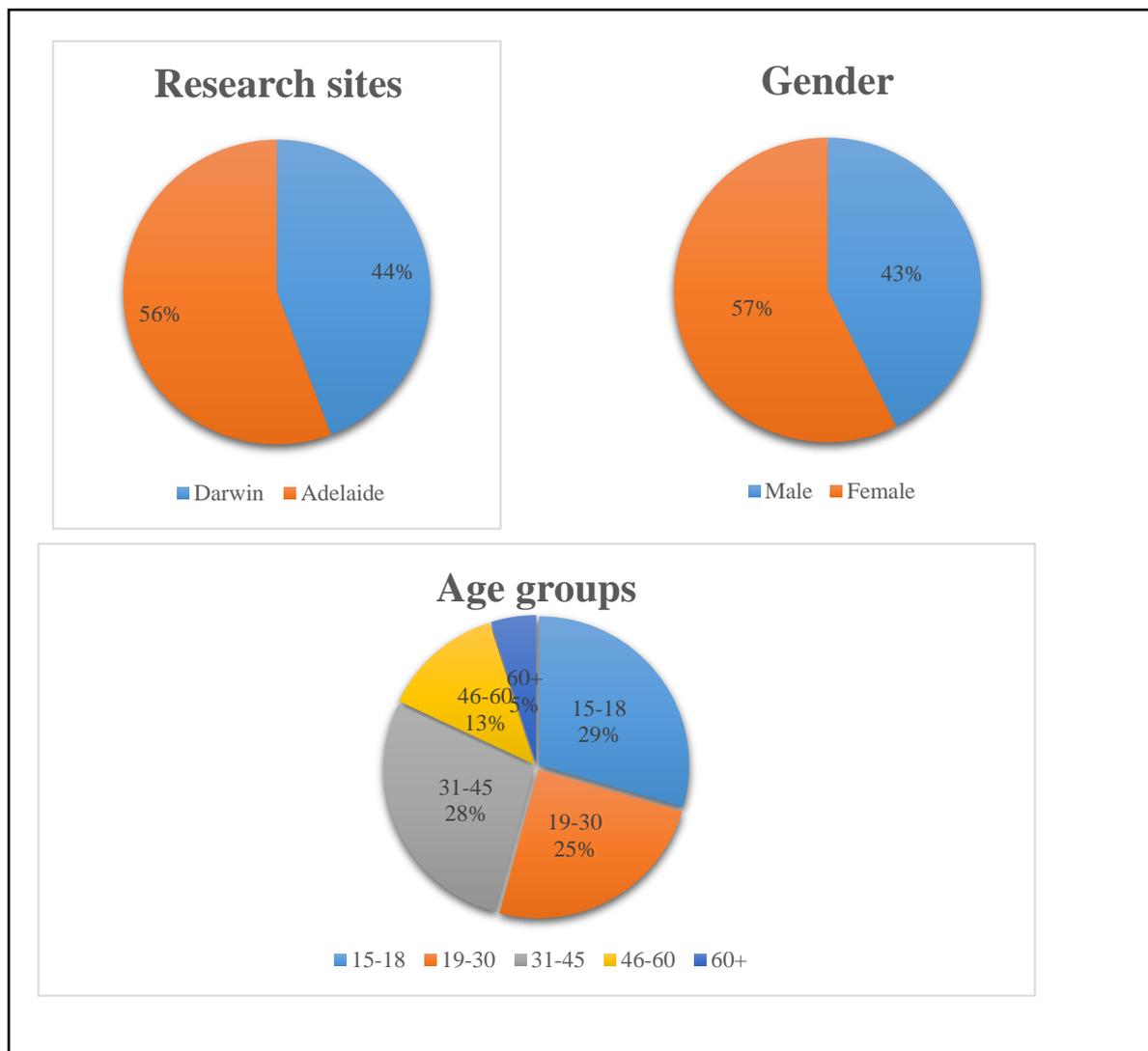
and the age distribution of the participants, showing the inclusiveness and diversity of the sample in terms of geographic spread, gender and age groups.

3.2 Country of origin, length of stay and professional background

The Muslim community that participated in this study is characterised by its diversity in terms of country of birth and length of stay in Australia. In relation to country of birth, the largest group (27.86 %) was born in Australia. The second largest group was born in Pakistan (11.37%), followed by participants who were born in Lebanon (6.75%) and Indonesia (6.75%). The fourth largest group was born in Iraq and India (each 4.91%), and the fifth largest group was born in Bangladesh, Egypt, Malaysia, and Saudi Arabia (each 3.47%). Around 13.54% come from such places like, Syria, Jordan, Mauritania, Afghanistan and Somalia. The remaining 10.03% did not disclose their country of origin and 13.54% represent a range of other countries.

In terms of length of stay in Australia, it can be said that the Muslim community in the sample ranged from less than five years to more than 20 years. Of these, 31.14% indicated they have been living in Australia for less than five years, 16.39 % between five and ten years, 8.22% between 11 and 20 years and 16.39% for more than 20 years are 16.39%. Interestingly, the remaining 27.86% mentioned only that they were born in Australia, not how long they had been living in the country.

Similarly, the participants come from a range of occupational and educational backgrounds, including students at both high school (27.86%) and university levels (19.67%), who are the largest groups. Teachers form 16.39% of the sample, respondents with combined backgrounds in health and medicine form 8.19%, and retirees form only 4.91%. The remaining 18.03% include a broad range of other professions, including imams and government employees, and the unemployed form 4.85% of the sample. Table 2 gives a snapshot of the country of birth of the respondents, the length of their stay in Australia and their professional background, reflecting the complexity of the Muslim population in Australia in relation to country of origin, discussed earlier. These variables are important factors in influencing language maintenance and attitudes towards literacy and faith affiliation.

Table 1   Country of origin, length of stay and the profession of the respondents

Country of birth	Participants (%)		Time in Australia	Participants (%)		Profession	Participants (%)
Australia	27.86%		Under 5 years	31.14%		High school students	27.86%
Pakistan	11.37%		5- 10 years	16.39%		University students	19.67%
Indonesia	6.75%		11-20 years	8.22%		Teachers	16.39%
Lebanon	6.75%		21 + years	16.39%		Health sector	8.19%
India	4.91%		Born in Australia	27.86%		Retired	4.91%
Iraq	4.91%		Total	100%		Unemployed	4.85%
Bangladesh	3.47%					Other	18.03%
Egypt	3.47%					Total	100%
Malaysia	3.47%						
Saudi Arabia	3.47%						
Other	13.54%						
Unknown	10.03%						
Total	100%						

3. 3   Languages spoken by the respondents

As show in Table 1, around 65.72% of the respondents are monolingual speakers who primarily speak their first language, whereas 34.28 % claim to be multilingual primary language speakers with both English and their heritage language as primary languages. Of the participants who grew up with one language, the dominant monolingual group are Arabic speakers (23.3%), followed by Urdu first language speakers (11.22%). There are first language speakers of Bahasa (Indonesian and Malay) (8.10%) and English (6.55%). The Bengali and Hindi first language speakers are each 3.27% and the Somali and Bosnian first language speakers are each 1.63**%**.

As for the participants who are multilingual first language speakers, as shown in Table 3, the largest group speak Arabic/English as their primary languages (11.50%), followed by Urdu/English (5.50%). Those who speak Dari/English and Turkish/English are each 3.75%. There are also Hungarian/English, Arabic/Japanese/English, Somali /English, Swahili/English/Arabic/ Wolof first languages speakers, each at 1.63%. Understanding the languages spoken by respondents is crucial to our understanding of the respondents' attitudes towards languages, especially language learning for secular purposes (e.g. language maintenance and communication) and devotional purposes (e.g. language affiliation and religious rituals).

Table 2   First languages spoken by participants

Monolingual first language		Multilingual first languages	
Language	Participants (%)	Language	Participants (%)
Arabic	23.3%	Arabic, English	11.5%
Urdu	11.22%	Urdu, English	5.5%
Bahasa-Malay	8.1%	Dari, English	3.75%
English	6.55%	Turkish, English	3.75%
Hindi	3.27%	Hungarian, English	1.63%
Bengali	3.27%	Arabic, Japanese, English	1.63%
Somali	1.63%	Kurdish, Arabic	1.63%
Bosnian	1.63%	Somali, English	1.63%
Unknown	6.75%	Swahili, English	1.63%
Total	65.72%	Arabic, Wolof	1.63%
		Total	34.28%

The respondents in this study on the Muslim community carried out in Adelaide and Darwin reflect the heterogeneity of the Muslim population at the national level. This section has shown that the profile of the participants is diverse in terms of age group and gender. For example, all age groups are represented in the sample, with those between 15 and the 18 constituting the largest group. Similarly, the gender composition of the sample is inclusive, with around 43 males

and 57 females. This study shows that the Australian Muslim population in these two cities is quite diverse in terms of country of birth, length of stay in Australia and professional background. The study also shows that in addition to those participants born in Australia, the Muslim population comes from a range of different countries, but mainly from the Middle East and Asia. They work in different sectors, such as teaching and health, in addition to studying at high school and university. Another important feature is the linguistic diversity of the respondents. A large number of the participants are monolingual non-English first language speakers (59.17%); while a sizeable number are bilingual first language speakers, mostly English/Arabic (11.5%) and English/Urdu (5.5%). The features of the participants discussed in this section attest to the representativeness of the sample and the overall diversity of the Australian Muslim population; namely, in relation to age, gender, profession, country of origin, and language spoken.

4.   Major findings

In the discussion of the major findings, a qualitative approach is used to analyse the data from the questionnaires and the semi-structured interviews. The major themes of the research questions are summarised below:

1.   The importance of studying Islamic studies

2.   Time allocated for Islamic studies

3.   The curriculum of Islamic studies

4.   The attitude of the Australian wider community towards the Islamic community schools.

These four themes are important to understanding the role and importance of Islamic studies provided to the Muslim community in Australian Islamic community schools (Research Question 1). One could easily assume that Australia's secular and liberal policies and practices are constructed on Judeo–Christian values, and that the current national and international debate on Islam, Islamic radicalisation and security have impacted on and influenced the religious affiliation, practices and values of Australian Muslims. Islamic community schools not only play an important role in providing Islamic education, but they are also influential settings and powerful indicators for Islamic identity formation and religious affiliation. It is imperative, then, to examine the importance of Islamic studies for the Muslim community in Australia and the ways in which Islamic community schools cater for the Islamic studies needs of Muslim students. As discussed, Islamic studies cover crucial aspects of being a Muslim, including the study of the Quran and the development of Quranic and Arabic literacies. Given the fact that Islamic studies cover a range of subjects, it is important to understand the ways in which the Islamic community schools cater for the Islamic studies needs of Muslim students (Research

Question 1) and whether or not the time dedicated to teaching these studies adequately covers the curriculum. It is along the same line of thought that this study examines the time spent studying in Islamic communities schools (Research Question 2) as well as the curriculum of Islamic studies, which covers a range of subjects that are crucial to being a Muslim (Research Question 3). This is done in order to understand the role Islamic community schools can play in preparing young Muslim students for the wider Australian values and the wider community's perceptions of their schools (Research Question 4).

4.1 Finding 1. Affiliation to Islamic culture and faith

An overwhelming number of members of the Islamic community rated studying Islamic studies as 'extremely important' and 'very important'. The respondents gave a range of reasons for the importance of studying Islamic studies:

> *'It is important to teach children to pray, to continue the good deed and humanity worldwide. It's an asset. Arabic is the language of the religion and prayer, access to the Quran.'*

> *'Passing on knowledge to kids provides guidance and rules for how to live and act in the world. The mosque and Islam connects them to their identity, that's why we spend some time also having fun so that they feel connected to the mosque.'*

> *'We read the Quran with Arabic language so it's important for them (the students) to know how to read the Quran for the basic comprehension.'*

> *'The history of Islam, the Quran, all the things that are important for being Muslim people, make them good Muslim, Islamic values. The Muslim rules, we want them to follow that, we are following so we want our kids to follow those rules too.'*

> *'Important to preserve the original language of Islam, and through this they preserve the culture of Islam. In many cases, for many Muslims, because of not understanding Arabic they misunderstand the Quran, they end up committing crimes because of not understanding the texts of Islam. They must understand the language to be able to understand the lessons of the Quran themselves, not through another source.'*

> *'Studying Islamic studies is important for the children's cultural identity.'*

> *'When we teach Arabic, reading and writing, we use the Quran. When they learn to read the alphabet they are able to read the Quran by themselves. So basically you divide all the skill into different categories so that you know one teacher does not have to focus on one thing.'*

> *'To maintain two things for my children in the future, the Arabic language and the Islamic culture or heritage. We believe they nurture unique characteristics in a person's uh personality um and I don't want my children to miss out on*

> *that opportunity, living in Australia, that's a privilege, but at the same time I*
> *don't want them to lose the privileges I had as well when I was a child.'*

These quotations indicate the respondents' strong sense of the schools' role in imparting and supporting Muslim values, as highlighted in '*The history of Islam, the Quran, all the things that are important for being Muslim people, make them good Muslim, Islamic values'*. These values included humanity, universality and cross-cultural understanding. As well, '*It is important to teach children to pray, to continue the good deed and humanity worldwide'* and to '*provide… guidance and rules for how to live and act in the world*'.

The responses evidence a strong attachment and loyalty to their Islamic studies and faith in Australian Muslims. They believe that it is important to develop their Islamic culture and faith and transmit them to their children, and that studying Islamic studies is crucial to the formation of their Islamic identities. Their Islamic identities are expressed and embodied through knowledge of the Quran and by developing both Quranic and Arabic literacies. In other words, for the participants in this study, their Muslim identities are intimately associated with the Islamic studies offered in these Islamic community schools; in particular, learning the Quran and developing Qur'anic reading and writing skills and learning the Arabic language. '*Learning Arabic shapes our identity,'* said one student*.* The same idea is echoed by another student in Darwin:

> *'You can just call yourself a Muslim, no one will stop you, but if you want to*
> *become a real Muslim; know what Islam means; what Islam actually means;*
> *and you want to implement that in your life, then the Quran is essential, there*
> *is no way around it.'*

Another said:

> *'It is important to study Quran at a school that promotes understanding and*
> *cooperation of people from all cultures and they have the same values, beliefs*
> *and upbringing. Also, it is strongly linked to the community, the teachers are*
> *known to parents and we know who is teaching the children and what they*
> *are teaching them.'*

These two quotes reinforce that for the participants, learning both Arabic and the Quran helps to define their Islamic culture and shape their Islamic identities; that is, what it is to be a Muslim. This line of thought was a common theme. When asked about the importance of studying Islamic studies, a respondent in Adelaide stated that it is very important to their community and essential, because it helps *'protect the identity of the students*':

> *'If you are a Muslim and you don't know anything about the Quran, it mean*
> *you can't pray, you can't practice anything in your religion, because the Quran*
> *is the main book in Islam … it [learning Islamic studies] will protect and cover*
> *the identity of the students in Western country especially.'*

For this respondent, because there are limited opportunities for Australian Muslims to impart their religious heritage, Islamic community schools play an essential role in teaching their children in Australia. He compared Australian Muslims' lived experiences with the situation of the Muslim community in their own home countries:

> *'in our Islamic countries, regardless, you will learn, in the mosque, at school, at home ... but here if you don't provide the service, because of the parents are busy with work … this service is very important here ...'*

He stressed that this service to the Muslim community seeks *'to protect and cover the identity of the students'*.

The Muslim community surveyed in this research show a strong attachment to their Islamic identity, which they expressed by highlighting the centrality of the Islamic studies provided by the community Islamic schools. They see Islamic studies as crucially important to their Islamic faith. For respondents, the main reasons for learning Arabic, for example, is to access and understand the Quran. Arabic is highly valued as a path to Islamic knowledge and therefore to their Islamic identities. This view is expressed in the four following quotes by students from Darwin who argued the value of Arabic in understanding the Quran as well as its importance in their Islamic faith and practices:

> *'To understand the whole Quran, tells you what happened in the past.'*
>
> *'Learn from the morals of all prophets and learn from them.'*
>
> *'Looking for evidence to see if this religion is right or wrong.'*
>
> *'Do what Allah ask you to do.'*

Teachers who participated in the survey also supported this view. They argued that it is important for students to confidently read the Quran and understand it without relying on others for translation. The teachers indicated that this was the best way to access Islamic teachings as well as be prepared to participate in Islamic rituals; such as in praying:

> *'You need to know Arabic to be able to understand the Quran. Without learning Arabic you cannot learn the Quran. The aim is the Quran, the way is Arabic language. Okay so to read the Quran you have to go through the Arabic language. To get the reward you have to learn Arabic, you cannot say the Quran and prayer in your own language you have to say it in Arabic. So that's why the Arabic language is important.'*

Parents are also of the same view. A parent in Darwin mentioned that

> *'Arabic is important, we want them to learn it in the right way. We all come from different backgrounds so maybe the pronunciation is different, for me it's different from each place so they get to learn the right way. (And what is*

the right way?) The Islamic way is the Arabic way, reading and reciting the Quran the exact way is the Arabic way, we are from India so we have a different way of reciting so not the right way I would say. That is very important for us to give our children the correct education, you know.'

As can be seen, studying Islamic studies is very important to the participants in this case study, not only because it shapes their Islamic identities, but also because knowledge of the Quran and the Arabic language helps them better understand their religion without relying on others to translate and interpret the Quran for them. Islamic studies is very important to the Muslim community as it strengthens their faith and affiliation to their Muslim identity. The participants expressed a strong attachment to their Islamic culture and faith, which they believed to be essential to their Islamic identity construction in the Australian context, where exposure to Islamic education and opportunities to learn are very limited. Therefore, the participants view the Islamic community schools as providers of the key knowledge that helps them shape their Muslim identities.

4.2.   Finding 2. Insufficient time allocated to Islamic studies

The Islamic studies provided in the Islamic community schools are important to the Muslim community for identity construction. However, for most participants the time allocated is largely insufficient. They put forward a range of reasons, including limited teaching time, the large curriculum, and the community's unrealistic expectations, given the available resources. Some respondents claimed that three hours a week on a Saturday is largely inadequate to teach the different components of Islamic studies. For example:

'Not enough time dedicated, only three hours on a Saturday is not enough.'

'Just three hours a week is not enough. If we had an Islamic school it would be better.'

'Only one day a week.'

'The limitation of the classes are due to the time constraints, only on a Saturday. It is not enough. This is why we want to establish a full time school so we can have more subjects and time, so the kids can understand the religion and the values.'

'It will never be enough, not enough time to teach everything — language, Islamic studies and Quran.'

Other respondents, however, believed the community expectations to be unrealistic in the light of the available (e.g. time). The following statements from a community school leader illustrate this view.

'Their parents expect their kids to be able to speak Arabic, read and write and know everything about Arabic but that's not really how it works. If the parents

are not engaging them at home and not following it up with them then it is difficult for the teachers to provide everything for them and teach everything in those three hours. And those three hours are not only for Arabic, you know, there's other things that we do teach. Sometimes the parents are too busy to help at home or can't.'

'Three hours per week we have 30 minutes recess and uh so its 2.5 hours, so we must start 10:30, and maybe you noticed that even the teacher was late, they come 10:40 or then, and you see like me I want to photocopy everything, takes 10 minutes or 15 minutes, so it is 45 minutes already gone, and you see as well some of the parents were late as well so the teacher would start when at least enough students. So practically they have 2 hours, so when they are fresh at the start they start memorising the Quran, okay at least 15 to 20 minutes, and then start uh repeating what they got the previous week.'

'There is never enough time to learn everything. We teach them enough to be able to read the Quran, if they come every day. I give you an example. I have three kids, they all come here and I help them at home with their homework. I got in a big fight with the parents here because they come to me and they say, my kids have been coming here for 6 months and they don't understand Arabic. Husband tries to speak Arabic with the kids but they don't understand him. I say okay that's fine, okay they don't understand anything from the Quran. They read the Quran but they don't understand anything, so because it was like first experience for me as a principal here so I have to absorb all the complaints. I have to find the solution. I had a meeting with like I asked for a meeting with the parents and uh I was really honest with them. I told them if you want your kids to uh like uh write article in the newspaper after they have finished level four please don't send your kids to here. If you want your kids to uh understand the meaning of the Quran after level four here, it's not the right school, and if you want your kids to talk Arabic with you after level four it's not your school. Okay, so let's be very like open with you this school at the end level four your kids maximum they can open the Quran and start reading, okay, and if you ask him to write, okay you want to dictate him you can talk to him and he can start writing. This is the maximum I can offer for you in three hours per week. So if you ask me is it enough, yeah for my aim, my target, three hours, per week after four years is enough for them to write and read. No more than that.'

From the comments, it is clear that the respondents place an important value on learning Arabic in order to communicate with their fathers and possibly other community members. For example, '*their parents expect their kids to be able to speak Arabic*' or '*my kids have been coming here for 6 months and they don't understand Arabic. Husband tries to speak Arabic with the kids but they don't understand him*'. The last quote highlights the challenge of teaching the Quran and the Arabic language in a three-hour weekly course over a period of three to four years.

However, there were community members who understood the challenge faced by the Islamic community schools in providing Islamic education. The following participant, for example, supported the idea of the Islamic community schools as providers of basic Islamic knowledge and Quranic skills:

> *'It is a step towards it, so I won't say that a child who comes here and completes the program in two to three years will completely understand Arabic but um Arabic is a language and you need more effort to spend uh we only give them about three hours a week but once they come in, they are able to read and write, Arabic, uh which is an important thing, understanding that's a bit more effort, like any language. Over a longer term hopefully they will be able to learn more.'*

For most of the respondents, the three-hour weekly Islamic classes provided by the Islamic community are inadequate and fall far short of meeting the Australian Muslim community's expectations. However, a small number of the community are aware of the challenges faced by the school and support the idea of the Islamic community schools as providers of basic Islamic education so as to enable Australian Muslim students to maintain and develop their Islamic culture and faith in the Australian context.

4.3   Finding 3. Inclusive Islamic studies

This section which explores Islamic studies in the Islamic community schools shows that overwhelmingly the respondents expect Islamic studies to provide the Muslim students not only with the Islamic knowledge and the Qur'anic and Arabic literacy skills they need to maintain the Islamic culture and faith, but also to accommodate mainstream Australian cultural practices by preparing them to engage with the mainstream culture. The following responses show that in their view, Islamic community schools help students to maintain their Islamic culture and faith.

> *'The curriculum helps to be a real Muslim, what Muslim really means, not so much the language but knowing the Arabic language creates a connection to Muslim identity.'*
>
> *'The curriculum aids in their understanding of their religion, because the religion is vast and complicated they need guidance […].'*
>
> *'We teach them how to pray, how to behave, what to know, too fast. I believe that if we could have a school here we could solve children's poor behaviour because I have seen it.'*
>
> *'Teaches Islamic values and the stories from the Quran. They come to school and they see other children learning and that encourages them as well.'*
>
> *'Yes, very important for maintaining Islamic culture. As a Muslim, Arabic has to be our first language. They need to learn how to read the Quran, and write,*

that's the main priority. I think that is important, very helpful to keep the Islamic culture.'

'The parents put their kids in the Saturday school to help connect them to their culture, their community maybe, um yeah. Really important role of the ethnic schools to keep connection to who they are, their culture (the students) and their identity. Especially learning Arabic. Some parents do not see it as important; it really depends on the parents and how they see its importance.'

'We feel that the parents value the contribution that the school has. Many of them come back to us and they are happy with the maintenance of the culture and the Arabic language, at the moment we are over capacity and we have waiting lists, which indicate that people are happy with what we are doing. We try to build the basics of Islamic faith.'

According to the respondents, the Islamic community schools prepare the students to engage with the mainstream Australian culture through dialogue, discussion and referral to Islamic experts (teachers, Imams, community leaders) in their Islamic studies.

'In Islamic studies with give them the perspective of the community in which they are living, for example, the children will ask me about halal food. We try to explain to them what we eat and the sources in Australia that are halal and that's becoming more acceptable, but generally the topics that we touch upon are very broad. … At the moment we do not have much trouble, we teach them about charity, we teach them about prayer, being good to their parents, these are the main concepts that we teach, things that are different but are not a conflict, differences I think are encouraged and enrich the community rather than limit it, and um yeah we get cases where some of the children will ask us why are we doing this, can I eat this or not. We generally refer them back to the community leaders. We are not in the position to give them religious facts; we are not qualified to do so, we are trying to give them the basics. Their parents first, and then who they see as a good reference that their parents and community accept.'

'We believe that 90% of the Islamic value is like meet the Australian value. Okay so when we give them the Islamic value we give them the Australian value. For example, to obey the rules in this country, alright, in the Islamic rules if you are uh breaking the rules of the uh the country, alright, that means you will get sins from the God. Because Allah will not love you if you are breaking the rules. If the traffic light is red and you pass on the traffic light is red that means you break the law, the rules. If the police didn't see you that doesn't mean Allah didn't give you the sins. For example if you see any bad thing on the road, okay, you have to remove it, don't say no one here no one can see me, you have to remove it, if no one see you, no Allah saw you, and will give you good reward if you remove it, and don't throw anything on the road even if there is no police or no people uh so if you did it don't say that no one saw me, no, Allah saw you.'

'We kind of do it in general, how they have to be good to other people and to the community, how to get involved, how to be a good citizen, um we do if you see the wrong thing how to deal with it, regardless of Muslim or non-Muslim, how to show respect to another person, things like that.'

'I keep in mind that the parents don't want their kids to be too Western, even though they are in Australia; they want the kids to maintain their own cultural identity, ethnicity, but with a strong foundation of Islam. So even when I teach Islamic studies, previously when I taught Arabic reading and Arabic writing, it's not, it's more to the Arabic alphabet, when I taught Islamic studies, I have to relate to the, because we learn about how the Prophet live and so on, so I have to relate that topic with how they live now so that they can make sense, it's not, they will be questioning like why do we have to learn about someone who lived 1,000 years ago okay so I've got to relate to, okay kindness, for example, patience and tolerance. I've got to remind them okay when you live here you have to be patient and tolerant for example during the fasting, um that subject requires me to do some thinking especially teaching the teenagers, aged 10, 12 and 15, because they already have their way of thinking so I've got to relate what I teach to how they live, I've got to understand that they are not in an Islamic country, they are not in Malaysia, they are in Australia, so I've got to think about how teenagers in Australia live, then I can relate to them. When they are, like in some culture you don't say no to your parents and stuff but um I think in Western culture you tend to be more independent. So yeah.'

'The kids are quite young, most are 6 to 12, and most are born here so they are used to here already. If we had more migrants that are not used to the Australian way and society then we may consider you know including something where we can make them fit in better or understand the culture behind you know Australia, but at the moment we don't do that.'

Despite challenges and conflicts posed by living, growing, and socialising in a secular country, the Muslim community sees Islamic studies as opportunities to create awareness about issues in the Islamic community and discuss these in terms of complementarity of values rather than differences and conflicts. For example, for the respondents below being a Muslim is not in conflict with being an Australian; instead, they are complementary.

'I think it is possible to be a good Muslim and a good Australian, because if you say to me good Australian is to love the country, so I think the students they love the country and yet they are Muslims, I think the two complement each other. You cannot be a Muslim and not love your country, um and yet there are people who love their country but they don't have a religion so that's a different thing.'

In this section, the responses provided by the respondents show that, while the Islamic studies focus on providing students with Islamic culture and faith, they also prepare them to engage with the secular and liberal values practised by the wider Australian community. In other words, the Islamic community schools are sites where the Australian Muslim community and students

discuss and negotiate Islamic values with the values practised by the Australian wider community. This is an important feature of Islamic community schools for the respondents. One stressed the value of this approach:

> *'We teach them and encourage them to be Australian Muslims. Next year we are going to run a program about how to be a good Muslim in Australia. There is a difference between religion, culture and national culture identities. 10 years ago, people didn't want to identify as Muslim, they were too scared. People changed their names and stopped coming to the mosque. This really damaged our community. Now we encourage the kids to embrace their identity as Australian Muslims, just like any other, like Australian Buddhist or whatever. We want these students to be the future leaders of the community. The aim is to equip these young people with the right information and the right knowledge to be able to answer these things. You are terrorist, no I am not terrorist, why because of these things, it is like that.'*

> *'Mm so what we do is um uh we try to address this peer pressure where their colleagues at school have bad habits. So every Sunday we have a youth group that get together, no adults, it is run by youth leaders. So some kids who don't feel comfortable talking with their parents or the elders can relate to their peers here so he finds solace in his friends so this is why we created this youth campaign. This youth meet so they go out and play and sometimes they have a BBQ and in the interim they discuss their problems. We supervise from the sidelines. We get feedback from the student leaders, like okay what are their problems, can you address it from this angle. So we don't physically go there and show our faces but they discuss their things amongst themselves and it has a good impact, unlike when you go there it's like oh I cannot listen to you but they um someone of their age, tells them something, it works. This is a strategy that we have done here. We do it for both the boys and girls.'*

4.4 Finding 4. Mixed attitudes of the wider community towards the Islamic community schools

When the Muslim community was asked what they thought was the attitude of the wider Australian community towards their schools, the reaction was mixed. Overall, they believe the attitude of the wider community to be positive, despite cases of negative attitudes, which they attribute to the media. The positive attitudes are given below:

> *'From my experience I think people see it as good; some of my friends say it's good for people to be able to learn about your culture.'*

> *'The ethnic board is very supportive, but that's the ethnic board. From personal experience I haven't had a bad experience; it's actually the opposite. People smile at me and are nice.'*

> *'Not everything agreed with, what is taught is tolerance, so the image is generally is positive.'*

> *'Mostly positive.'*

'Positive in Darwin though.'

'Darwin is a very positive, multicultural society and the Aboriginal people make it different. It is more obvious that we are all immigrants.'

'Darwin is multicultural, so far no negative incidents or feedback.'

'The Darwin people have been very warm and welcoming. I am happy I brought my daughter into this place.'

'Most people are good about the school and the mosque.'

'It's more an individual thing rather than a community attitude. Some people are just mean or not nice.'

'But I have heard stories from other people who've been sworn at in the street or had their hijab pulled in the street. Oh my God I'm glad I haven't experienced that. I don't know, they might be judging on the inside I don't know but all I've seen is a good attitude from Australians.'

In particular, they mentioned the following attitudes from the wider community:

'People [the wider Australian community] see it [the Islamic school] as good.'

'[Some members of the [the wider community] think it's good for people to be able to learn about their culture.'

'People smile at me and are nice.'

'Most people are good about the school and the mosque and all I've seen is a good attitude from Australians.'

However, the positive attitudes are counterbalanced by negative comments, which are mostly attributed to the media. For example:

'Some things are negative.'

'Sometimes negative, mainstream media.'

'Very negative.'

'Negative in general, from the media. '

'It is negative to an extent.'

'A bit of Islamophobia towards the school, you know like calling our school an Islamic school, because a lot of them don't open their doors to the wider public, they are more closed, and hence why people don't know what is going on … In South Australia there isn't much; there is a bit but there isn't much compared to Melbourne and Sydney.'

'I honestly think the attitude of the media is not quite positive, but from work, from my interactions with my work colleagues, my friends around, uh, my

neighbours, I see everyone as being neutral towards what I do. They don't try to discourage me from anything, I pray at the university and I openly talk about it with my colleagues at university and I don't see it as a topic of tension so the way I perceive it, it's a media perspective more than anything else.'

'I think generally locally they don't think like that but globally the image of Islam is negative.'

'Our community should be a role model for the whole world. It's like any other school, it's just an Islamic school but because of the issues in the media perhaps there is some negative feelings in the community. I try to understand those people. So long as the system or the government is not against me I'm okay.'

This section shows the Muslim community perceive the wider Australian community as having mixed attitudes towards Islamic community schools. Even though they believe that the attitude is generally positive among individuals in the wider Australian community, they acknowledge that there are also negative attitudes, but these are generally attributed to the media.

5.   Conclusion

The report, which is based on a limited sample of 61 participants in Adelaide and Darwin, has shown that the Australian Muslim community has a strong attachment to their Islamic studies. Participants overwhelmingly indicated that Islamic studies are 'extremely' to 'very important' to them because Islamic education defines and shapes who they are; that is, their Muslim identities. Islamic studies are essential to being a Muslim. Also highlighted is the fact the respondents believe that it is very important for them to learn Arabic because it is associated with accessing Quranic knowledge, which for them is an integral part of being a Muslim. They also see being able to read and understand the Quran in Arabic as intimately related to Islamic studies. However, the respondents overwhelmingly indicated that the three-hour weekly Islamic studies classes offered over a period of four years is inadequate for providing the level of basic Quranic knowledge, Quranic literacy and Arabic language that they expect from the Islamic community schools.

In addition, the case study found the Islamic studies in the Islamic community schools aim to develop and maintain the students' Islamic identities by teaching them their Islamic culture and faith, while at the same time, seeking to create opportunities for the students to engage with the social, cultural and political issues faced by Muslim communities in Australia and elsewhere. As a result, although these Islamic community schools focus on teaching Islamic studies, they have also become sites for discussing Islamic values and mainstream Australian secular values, in the context of national and international tensions and debates around Islam. They are sites where Muslim students have the opportunities to discuss Islamic teachings and values with their peers as well as with their teachers, the imams, or the community leaders on issues affecting them personally and their communities.

The Muslim community accessed in this case study believe that the overall attitude towards their schools and the Islamic institutions (e.g. mosques) is positive, despite a challenging context. They acknowledge that there are negative attitudes, but they believe these are mostly from the media and not from individuals in the wider community.

In light of the findings of this case study, it is clear that providing Islamic community schools with adequate support and resources will better enable them to fulfil their mission, which is to provide Islamic studies to the Australian Muslim community. Australian Muslims' loyalty and attachment to their Islamic heritage and faith remain profoundly strong despite local and global tensions and conflicts and the daily challenges they face as Muslims living, socialising and operating in a secular and liberal context. Janica Nordstrom (2016:2) claimed that community schools have an important function in 'strengthen[ing] cultural identities of children of migrants and encourag[ing] a sense of belonging with a target community through both their aims and practices'. Supporting the community schools has the potential to ensure that they focus mainly

on providing quality and culturally important services to the Muslim community in Australia, in particular, teaching Islamic studies to a large number of Australian Muslims who regard their faith and culture as vital and who would like to transmit their Islamic faith and culture to their children. One way in which additional support could be tendered would be to offer optional Islamic studies classes in mainstream schools as part of the regular school curriculum. At the same time, Islamic community schools would continue to offer quality after-school Islamic studies courses during the teaching weeks and school holidays if provided with more support and resources. This would send signals of inclusion to the Muslim community and strengthen their sense of belonging to the Australian society. In return, providing extra support to Islamic community schools would strengthen the resolve of the community to support young Muslims in placing a high value on involvement in the Australian community and to model the strength of Muslim values, as discussed by the respondents.

This could be an important step in reconciling the Muslim community with the media, which they see as being instrumental in creating negative attitudes towards their religion and their institutions in general. As one respondent argued:

> *'We are producing good members of society, we strongly discourage violence, drug use, and things like that. We are very cautious and wary about that and I think that these are things that it is very important for the youth to be aware of when they are growing up. Having grown up in Australia for part of my life, I know the challenges that they go through and I think if awareness was not a focus of my upbringing, I wouldn't be able to sit in front of you in my position.'*

In a proactive spirit of reconciliation with the wider community, the Islamic community, in collaboration with their local mosques and Islamic community schools, have established public relations campaigns across the country to make their community more visible. They organise regular public information days and open mosque days in an effort to improve the public image of their religion:

> *'We open the doors to the general public with information days and open mosque days. We have been organising let's say open mosque day, which is for the 31st of October, we are inviting people to come down, see what goes on in the mosque you know what we do, what Islam is all about that kind of thing so I think you know we will diminish slowly, slowly the Islamophobia.'*

6.   References

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