

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE ISLAMIC CULTURE COURSE AT SULTAN QABOOS UNIVERSITY, OMAN: AN ATTEMPT TO INCORPORATE STUDENTS' SPECIALIZATIONS IN THE LIGHT OF LIFELONG LEARNING THEORIES

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Abstract	<p><i>Higher education in the contemporary Islamic world is currently bifurcated, with a divide between the scientific and technical specializations on one hand, and Islamic sciences on the other. This research aims to contribute to closing this gap. The Islamic Culture course (ISLM 1010) at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) is a 2 credit-hour university requirement offered to students of different specializations in their first or second year of undergraduate studies. Its main purpose is to expose the students to Islamic thought and culture and their basic injunctions in the contemporary setting. Further development of the Islamic Culture Course at SQU in order to give credit to and incorporate the students' different specializations under consideration of lifelong learning theories may be an important step in reshaping tertiary education. A research project run in 2018-2020 assessed the students' general perceptions of the course in relation to their own specializations. Hypothesis: The Islamic Culture Course, aiming at instilling Islamic values and culture into students of all specializations, is in need to incorporate the different specialized and professional backgrounds of students so as to induce a lifelong learning experience. Two questionnaires were distributed to current (Q1: N = 326) and former (Q2: N = 120) students of the course. Survey results were analysed and compared. The research has confirmed a need to incorporate the students' different specialized and (future) professional backgrounds to better realize the course objectives and overcome the gap between the students' specializations and Islamic culture.</i></p> <p>Keywords: <i>Islamic, Culture, Course, Specializations, Sultan Qaboos University.</i></p>
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INTRODUCTION

Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) in Muscat is the flagship university of the Sultanate of Oman. Established in 1986, it has remained the only fully funded state university in the Sultanate and remains the most prestigious in the nation to date.¹ The Islamic Culture (*Thaqāfah Islāmiyyah*) course was introduced as a university requirement due to a perceived need to instil Omani and Islamic values in students of all specializations, as mandated by state educational policies (The Education Council, 2017).

¹ The Sultanate of Oman has, since 1986, seen the foundation of a number of universities which have remained in the status of private colleges and universities, such as the universities of Nizwa, A'Sharqiyah and Sohar. Only as recently as September 2020 has a new National University been established, comprising a number of colleges.

The Islamic Culture course at Sultan Qaboos University in Oman is a university requirement (2 credit hours) for students of all specializations.² It is offered by permanent (Omani) and contractual (non-Omani) Muslim staff of diverse nationalities (currently: Jordanian, Sudanese, Syrian, German) and taught in Arabic. The course is offered and coordinated by the College of Education, Department of Islamic Sciences. It is usually taken by students in their first or second year of undergraduate studies. Some students prefer to enrol for the course while they are still pursuing foundation studies, before they enter their respective specialized fields. The department teaches an average of ten section every autumn and spring semester, with up to 40 students in each section.

Anecdotally, students either complained about the additional workload imposed by the course, particularly once they entered their specialisation, or they viewed it (mistakenly) as a means to boost their GPA, presuming the course to be an easy route to achieving high scores.

A cursory review of equivalent Islamic Culture courses in (private) universities in Oman (Nizwa, A'Sharqiyah, Sohar) and other Arabic and Islamic countries has shown that none of these acknowledges the students' different specializations. Results of the present study may therefore be of benefit to the teaching of comparable courses in Oman and other countries.

THE ISLAMIC CULTURE COURSE AT SQU – COURSE DESCRIPTION AND OBJECTIVES

The Islamic Culture course is characterised in the course description as follows:

“The course familiarises the student with the concept of ‘culture’, the importance of Islamic Culture and its sources, characteristics and the miracle of the Holy Qur’an, the Prophetic Sunnah, Consensus and secondary sources, the characteristics of Islamic Culture, the Islamic personality and its characteristics, intellectual invasion and its means, and how to respond to it.”

Objectives of this course (as with any other course offered by the department of Islamic sciences) need to be, by exigencies of academic accreditation purposes, aligned with the College of Education Conceptual Framework³, University Graduate Characteristics, as well as the Department of Islamic Sciences learning outcomes and program standards. Learning outcomes of the course are listed as (Course Description, 2020):

- i. To use research as a tool to develop study skills and professional activities.
- ii. To identify the concept of Islamic personality, its foundations and characteristics.
- iii. To get acquainted with the means of educating the Islamic personality.
- iv. To understand the reality of intellectual invasion, its aims and means.
- v. To correct some commonly spread misconceptions about Islamic culture.
- vi. To identify the relationship between the human being and Allah s.w.t., and with himself, creation and other human beings.
- vii. To instil and be proud of Islamic values.
- viii. To learn how to answer challenges to Islamic culture.

We contend that resorting to lifelong learning theories and skills as well as bridging the gap to the students' different specializations are means to realize the objectives of this course.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

For the purposes of this research paper, we focus on six research questions:

² In contrast, there is an Islamic Civilization (*Hadhāra Islāmiyyah*) elective course offered by the College of Arts and Social Sciences, which is more history-focused and Oman-specific.

³ The College of Education Conceptual Framework (CoF)

1. Research Question 1: *What is the students' evaluation of the Islamic Culture course at SQU?*
2. Research Question 2: *Is there a difference between the two samples on the basis of the area of academic focus (humanities/social sciences vs. scientific) with regard to their views of the extent of the Islamic Culture course's acknowledgment of the nature of these specializations?*
3. Research Question 3: *Is there a difference in the perceptions of students from different colleges regarding the extent to which the Islamic Culture course and the contemporary issues it addresses relate to the students' specializations?*
4. Research Question 4: *To what extent do the specialized courses within the Islamic Culture course incorporate issues related to the students' areas of specialization?*
5. Research Question 5: *To what extent do the courses in the respective specializations include issues in the specialization from an Islamic perspective?*
6. Research Question 6: *Are there statistically significant differences ($\alpha \geq 0.05$) between male and female students' evaluations of the Islamic Culture course?*

METHODOLOGY

Based on the initial assessment of the problem (see above), the researchers set out to conduct surveys on two different populations of students.

Participants

Sample 1 ($N = 326$) consisted of students of all nine colleges at Sultan Qaboos University who were enrolled in the Islamic Culture course at the time (Winter Sem. 2019). This sample was 55% male and 45% female. The largest percentage (16.6 %) hailed from the College of Education, followed by Economics (15.6%), Science (15%), Engineering (13.2%), Arts and Social Sciences (13.2%), Medicine (7.7%), Law (7.4%), Agriculture and Marine Sciences (6.1%), and finally Nursing (5.2%).

Sample 2 ($N = 120$) was made up of students in their fourth or fifth year of study at SQU who had taken the course in the first or second year of their studies. Students of all nine colleges at SQU were included in this sample as well, with a percentage of 41.7 % female and 58.3% male students. The descriptive analysis found a distribution of 50% each between scientific ($n = 60$; College of Medicine and Allied Health Sciences, Nursing, Agriculture and Marine Sciences, Science, Engineering) and non-scientific ($n = 60$) specializations (College of Law, followed by Education, Arts and Social Sciences, Economics and Political Sciences).

Validity and Reliability of the Survey

Questionnaire 1 (Q1) consisted of 64 items to which responses were elicited using a 5-point Likert scale (*strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, strongly disagree*). Q1 was distributed in hard copy form to Sample 1. Questionnaire 2 (Q2) consisted of 18 items, also with 5-point Likert scale responses (*strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, strongly disagree*). Q2 was distributed electronically (using Google Forms) to Sample 2 via their respective university email accounts. Both questionnaires were in Arabic language medium.

Content validity and reliability checks were performed on the two instruments (Q1 & Q2). For validation, the two questionnaires were distributed to a number of faculty members in the College of Education, and the instruments were then revised as per their feedback. As for reliability, it was calculated using Cronbach's alpha, where the coefficient of reliability of Q1 reached (.92) and the coefficient of reliability of Q2 reached (.90).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

For Questionnaire 1, the results are summarized as follows:

As mentioned, in this research paper we focus on six research questions with direct relevance to the topic. Therefore, this study examines the responses to only the last

9 of the 64 items in Q1 (see Table 1); those are the items intended to measure students' perceptions of the extent to which the Islamic Culture course relates or is connected to their individual academic specializations. The measures of mean values of Sample 1 were demarcated as low ($M = 1.0 - 2.5$), moderate ($M = 2.51 - 3.5$) and high ($M = 3.51 - 5.0$). Data analysis of Research Question 1 (*What is the students' evaluation of the Islamic Culture Course at SQU?*) indicates a rather low or negative perception ($M = 2.46$) of the course. This low perception does not seem to go back to the instructors and their teaching methods ($M = 2.83$), but rather to the course's textbook and its realisation, which as a topic accounts for items 1 - 55 in Q1. In particular, students evaluated the connection between their respective specialisations and the course as low ($M = 2.44$).⁴

The analysis of Research Question 4 (*To what extent do the specialized courses within the Islamic Culture course incorporate issues related to the students' specialization?*) indicates that the students' perception of their benefit from the course to solve some ethical issues in their specializations is moderate ($M = 2.53$). Interestingly, students perceived a moderate benefit ($M = 2.77$) of the course to help understanding some problems in their specializations. The extent to which course instructors have encouraged students to reflect some Islamic dimensions in their respective specializations is perceived as low ($M = 2.40$).

This may be natural as, for the time being, it is not part of the course objectives to explore this dimension. The same low perception ($M = 2.28$) can be seen with regard to the course instructor's encouragement to acknowledge Islamic dimensions in future professional practices. The need for the Islamic culture course for students' respective specializations is perceived as moderate ($M = 2.67$), while the need for an additional course incorporating some issues in the students' specialization from an Islamic point of view is perceived as low ($M = 2.38$). There seems to be a discrepancy between the students' evaluation of the missing Islamic input and the need for additional courses that might fill the gap. This apparent contradiction may be explained by the students' concern that work and study loads might increase with the introduction of additional courses.

Table 1

Statistical means of items measuring aspects of *The connection between the Islamic Culture course and the student's specialization* ($N = 326$).

No.	Item	Statistical mean	Standard deviation	Level of Evaluation
56	I benefit from the Islamic Culture course to solve some ethical problems in my specialization.	2.53	1.22	moderate
57	The Islamic culture course helped me to understand some problems in my specialization.	2.77	1.30	moderate
58	The Islamic culture course instructor encouraged me to consider some Islamic dimensions in my specialization.	2.40	1.12	low
59	The Islamic culture course instructor encouraged me consider some Islamic dimensions in my professional practice.	2.28	1.08	low
60	Some of the ideas I acquired in the Islamic culture course will benefit me in my professional life.	2.05	1.08	low
61	I find that there is a need for more Islamic orientation in the field of my specialization.	2.38	1.17	low

⁴ Questions 2, 3, 4, and 6 to 7 are not directly relevant to the topic of this article and are not analysed here.

No.	Item	Statistical mean	Standard deviation	Level of Evaluation
62	I feel that the Islamic culture course is important for the student of my specialization.	2.67	1.32	moderate
63	The course gave me a good idea on Muslim scholars and the role of Islamic civilization in the field of my specialization.	2.57	1.21	moderate
64	I feel that there is a need for a special course that treats some problems in my specialization from an Islamic point of view.	2.38	1.33	low
	General evaluation of the theme	2.44	0.81	low

The analysis of Research Question 3 (*Is there a difference in the perceptions of students from different colleges regarding the extent to which the Islamic Culture course and the contemporary issues it addresses relate to the students' specializations?*) has revealed a difference between students in scientific and humanities/social sciences specializations in their perceptions of this aspect. While students in the Colleges of Nursing ($M = 2.76$), Sciences ($M = 2.71$) and Engineering ($M = 2.69$) held a moderately positive perception, students in the Colleges of Arts and Social Sciences ($M = 2.27$), Education ($M = 2.21$) and Law ($M = 1.97$) had a less positive view.

We have not found a convincing logical explanation to this difference, as the Islamic culture syllabus and textbook seem not to favour or disfavour any of these specializations in particular. A reason for this may be that examples given by some lecturers are more effectively presented in the scientific specializations than they are in the humanities and social sciences.

The analysis of Research Question 6 (*Are there statistically significant differences [on the level of $\alpha \geq 0.05$] between male and female students' evaluations of the Islamic Culture course?*) found that differences in perceptions of the course between male and female participants were non-significant. The measures of mean values of Sample 2 was measured as low (1.0-2.5), moderate (2.51-3.5) and high (3.51 – 5.0).

Questionnaire 2 was analysed on the basis of the following research questions. Research Question 5 *To what extent do the courses in the respective specializations include issues in the specialization from an Islamic perspective?* was analysed and the results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Statistical mean and standard deviation for items under the question: *To which extent do the specialized courses in the respective specializations include issues in the specialization from an Islamic perspective, from the students' point of view?" (N = 120)?*

No.	Item	Statistical mean	Standard deviation	Level of Evaluation
1	The courses in my specialization help me to develop as a Muslim personality, given that I live in a Muslim society.	3.65	1.01	high
2	The courses in my specialization help me to develop professionally in light of Islamic principles, given that I will work in an Islamic society.	3.42	1.09	moderate

3	The courses in my specialization encourage me to think of solutions to some problems from an Islamic point of view.	3.12	1.06	moderate
4	The courses in my specialization give me enough Islamic intellectual and ethical advice.	3.12	1.05	moderate
5	The lecturers of my specialized courses help me to reflect on some problems from an Islamic point of view.	3.27	1.05	moderate
6	My specialized courses acknowledge and address the special needs of the Muslim society.	2.13	1.05	low
7	My specialized courses contain ideas that contradict our esteemed religion.	3.17	1.20	moderate
	General evaluation of the theme	3.13	1.07	moderate

The results shown in Table 2 reveal that participants in this sample perceived that the special needs of the Muslim society were not acknowledged or addressed (Q6). The answers seem to hint at the presence of Islamic input in the specialized course on a moderate level, which may be seen as in need of development.

Research Question 3 asks: *Is there a difference in the perceptions of students from different colleges regarding the extent to which the Islamic Culture course and the contemporary issues it addresses relate to the students' specializations?*

Analysing this question, the survey has not yielded any statistically relevant difference between students of scientific and humanities/social sciences specializations in their perceptions, as Table 2 illustrates. Students from all different colleges in Sample 2 therefore have similar perceptions on the extent to which their specialized courses acknowledge Islamic perspectives.

Table 3

Results of *t*-tests of differences between views of students of humanities/social sciences and scientific colleges on the extent to which their specialized courses incorporate issues from an Islamic perspective.

Colleges	<i>n</i>	Statistical mean	Degrees of freedom	Standard deviation	Statistical significance	<i>t</i> -test value
Humanities & social sciences	60	3.20	118	0.77	0.21	1.27
Scientific	60	3.04		0.56		

Research Question 4 asks: *To what extent does the Islamic Culture course incorporate issues related to the students' areas of specialization?* This question places the focus on the Islamic Culture course. To answer this question, statistical means have been analysed. Results are displayed below in Table 4.

Table 4

Statistical means of items measuring aspects of *The Islamic Culture course considers the nature of different specializations from the student's point of view* (N = 120).

No.	Item	Statistical mean	Standard deviation	Level of Evaluation
8	I benefitted from the Islamic Culture course in my specialization.	2.87	1.02	moderate
9	I benefitted from the Islamic Culture course in order to solve some ethical issues related to my specialization.	3.04	1.126	moderate
10	The Islamic Culture course helped me to understand some issues in my specialization.	3.23	1.11	moderate
11	The lecturer of the Islamic Culture course helped me to recognize some Islamic dimensions in my specialization.	3.61	1.04	high
12	The lecturer of the Islamic Culture course encouraged me to recognize some Islamic dimensions in professional practice.	3.78	0.98	high
13	Some of the ideas and information I acquired in the Islamic Culture course will assist me in my professional life.	4.06	1.01	high
14	I think that there is a need for more Islamic advice in my specialization.	3.85	1.09	high
15	I think more attention should be paid to my field of specialization in the Islamic Culture course.	3.67	1.13	high
16	I feel that students in my specialization are in need of the Islamic Culture course.	3.13	1.14	moderate
17	The Islamic Culture course gave me a good idea about Islamic scholars and the importance of Islamic culture in the field of my specialization.	3.86	1.14	high
18	I feel that there is a need for a special course, in addition to the Islamic Culture course, to address some issues in my field from an Islamic point of view.	3.89	1.09	high
	General evaluation of the theme	3.54	0.73	high

The answers range between moderate and high with regard to the benefits gained from the Islamic culture course for professional practice and development, indicating that overall, they have already benefitted from the course. In addition, students in Sample 2 have taken a clear vote both as to the need to give more attention to their special field in the Islamic culture course, the need for more Islamic advice in their respective fields of specialization, and additional courses discussing some issues in their respective specializations from an Islamic point of view.

Research Question 2 *Is there a difference between the two samples on the basis of the area of academic focus college (humanities/social sciences vs. scientific) with regard to their views of the extent of the Islamic Culture course's acknowledgment of the nature of these specializations?*

The analysis of this question indicates that there is no statistically significant difference between students of humanities/social sciences and scientific specializations with regard to their perception of the extent to which the Islamic culture course acknowledges the different specializations.

Table 5

Results of t-tests of differences between views of students of humanities/social sciences and scientific colleges on the extent to which the Islamic culture course considers the nature of their specializations.

Colleges	<i>n</i>	Statistical means	Degrees of freedom	Standard deviation	Statistical significance	t-test value
Humanities/ social sciences	60	3.59	118	0.78	0.41	0.84
Scientific	60	3.48		0.69		

We may therefore summarize that Survey 2, carried out on a sample of SQU students of all specializations in their 4th/5th year of studies, indicates both a perceived benefit from the Islamic Culture course taken in their 1st/2nd year at university and a perceived need for more Islamic perspectives in their specializations and more acknowledgment of their specializations in the Islamic Culture course. The analysis of Survey 2 has also revealed that specialized courses consider Islamic perspectives on issues in the specializations to a low degree. The results of Survey 2 indicate that some ideas and information in some specialized courses contradict Islamic culture.

The results have shown that students perceive a great benefit to their specializations and professional practices from having studied the Islamic Culture course. A comparison between the analyses of Questionnaires 1 and 2 shows that students seemed to evaluate the Islamic Culture course as more positive in hindsight. That is, those students who took the course two or more years ago had a more positive perception of the course than did students who were currently enrolled in the course. This may be due to more holistic evaluation of the course's benefits after the student has been shaped by the courses of his/her respective specialization.

THEORIES OF LIFELONG LEARNING AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR THE COURSE

The term 'lifelong learning' has been used interchangeably with the basic completion of education or associated with any standard adult education. It can be defined as "the process of learning which occurs throughout life" (Jarvis, 1990, p. 203) and is

commensurate with a well-known saying in Islamic culture which states: *"Seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave."*⁵

A broader contemporary definition reads:

"Lifelong learning is a continuously supportive process which stimulates and empowers individuals to acquire all the knowledge, values, skills, and understanding they will require throughout their lifetimes and to applying them with confidence, creativity and enjoyment in all roles, circumstances and environments". (Longworth, 1996, p. 22)

Lifelong learning is also operationally defined as education provided to people of all ages (Cheng et al., 1999). It includes all kinds of learning experiences in life (Candy, Crebert, & O'Leary, 1994) and is regarded as an essential part of improving one's life and society (Dowd, 1979). Lifelong learning has also been defined as "development after formal education: the continuing development of knowledge and skills that people experience after formal education and throughout their lives" (Encarta, 2008). It uniquely involves the society as a whole and encompasses all learning forms: formal, informal, and non-formal learning, regardless of where it may occur and who organizes it (Cropley, 1978, 1979; Matheson, 1996; Candy, 2000; Preece, 2011; Wain, 2009).

Formal learning is "learning that occurs in an organized and structured environment such as in an education or training institution or on the job and is explicitly designated as learning (in terms of objectives, time or resources)" (CEDEFOP Glossary, 2017). Formal learning may also be referred to as structural learning as it is always organized, planned, and has learning objectives. It is ordinarily delivered by trained instructors and teachers in a systematic, intentional manner, chronologically graded and hierarchically structured within a school, higher education establishment, or university (OECD, n.d.; Coombs, 1974) through classes, web-based training, e-learning courses, seminars, webinars, workshops, and the like. The learning outcomes of this form of learning are assessed by tests and other tools.

Informal learning, as opposed to formal learning, is a form of gaining knowledge and/or experience that is unorganized, often unintentional (CEDEFOP Glossary, 2017), does not have a set curriculum or objective in terms of learning outcomes (OECD, n.d.) and occurs lifelong through daily experience and exposure to one's environment (Coombs, 1974). It is regarded as "the natural accompaniment to everyday life" (European Commission, 2000, p. 8). A study by Peeters et al. (2014) that looked at informal learning in a formal setting found several associations between formal and informal learning.

...formal and informal learning were often considered complementary. On the one hand, informal learning leads some participants to enrol in formal education to extend what they had informally learned before. On the other hand, participation in the (formal) program itself leads to (self-directed) informal learning in some cases. (Peeters et al., 2014, p. 185)

As for non-formal learning, Coombs (1974) defined it as:

...any organized, systematic, educational activity carried on outside the framework of the formal system to provide selected types of learning to particular subgroups in the population, adults as well as children. It is found to be a combination of both formal and informal learning." (Coombs, 1974, p. 8)

It is similar to formal learning in that it may be organized and have learning objectives, and may happen alongside formal learning or in other settings. However, it does not lead to a qualification (European Commission, 2000, p. 8).

Up until the twenty-first century, formal learning dominated policy thinking and education systems, creating an indirect definition of what people believed learning was.

⁵ The saying is not an authentic hadith, but it may be described as commensurate with overall meanings of the Prophetic Sunnah.

Although the idea of learning throughout our lives was not something new, it was not clearly addressed or even studied with an aim to include it in education. In the 1970s, three international bodies shed light on lifelong learning as a more defined concept. These included the Council of Europe, which advocated *permanent education*, using a collection of fifteen studies that aimed to reshape European education for the whole life span (Titz, 1995).

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), through the Center of Research and Innovation (CERI), called for *recurrent education* as a strategy for organizing and financing lifelong learning (Kallen, 1973). The subject was addressed for the first time at an international level by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 1972 through the *Faure Report, "Learning to Be"*. The UNESCO report was considered among the main contributors to the establishment of lifelong learning as a global educational paradigm. It moved away from focusing only on schools and educational institutes towards learning that would "enable the formation of the 'complete man' who is an 'agent of development and change', 'promoter of democracy', 'citizen of the world' and 'author of his own fulfilment'" (Elfert, 2015). The Faure Report addressed lifelong learning with the term 'lifelong education'.

Towards the end of the 1990s, lifelong learning gained more attention. By then, the OECD, UNESCO, and European Union (EU) had produced a plethora of reports and calls for action. All contended that lifelong learning was essential for "social inclusion", "personal fulfilment", improved job prospects, economic growth, and realization of the learning society (Latchem, 2008). The year 1996 was even designated "The Year of Lifelong Learning" by the EU.

The focus of lifelong learning in higher education was addressed by different commentators, including Knapper and Cropley (2000) and Candy et al. (1994) as a key of development. They stressed that universities, colleges and other higher education institutes played a role in providing knowledge and skills to students in different areas, yet had a bigger role in equipping their students with the ability to guide their learning through their lives on their own.

These authors also noted that much of the academic knowledge learned in universities and colleges would not be directly used in their lives after formal education. The concept of "learning how to learn" should be emphasized. For this reason, learning is not only to be lifelong, but must also be "life-wide", with no restriction to a formal education system. Instead, it can take place in many different settings (Dobsom, 1982).

All the previous findings must be taken into consideration while promoting education to higher education students as they move onto other, more diverse environments. They are no longer attached only to a formal institutional setting but will be active in their professional and social fields, which provide learning in all formal, informal, and non-formal modes.

The attempt to instil lifelong learning skills is part of the Philosophy of Education of the Sultanate of Oman (2017), the objectives of which can be achieved by:

1. reinforcing opportunities for lifelong learning
2. developing positive life skills
3. developing independent learning and lifelong learning skills
4. developing long-term planning skills
5. promoting the role of cultural centres and public libraries for learners and the wider society (The Education Council, 2017)

Although lifelong learning is an act from within an individual, it must be reinforced at different stages and through different channels. Educators, instructors and faculty in different settings play a facilitating role in promoting learning as a lifelong practice in different fields. Implementing and facilitating lifelong learning comes with leading approaches, starting with student-centred learning. As defined by the European Students' Union:

Student-Centered learning represents both a mindset and a culture within a given higher education institution and is a learning approach which is broadly related to, and supported by, constructivist theories of learning. It is characterized by innovative methods of teaching which aim to promote learning in communication with teachers and other learners and which take students seriously as active participants in their own learning, fostering transferable skills such as problem-solving, critical thinking and reflective thinking. (Sursock, 2015, p. 70)

It is an approach to education that targets overcoming some of the problems associated with more traditional methods of education. That is achieved by focusing on the learner and their needs, instead of being centred around the educator or teacher's input (EHEA). This approach was adapted in a project called *Time for Student-Centred Learning (T4SCL)* by Education International (EI) and the European Students' Union (ESU), as a means of lifelong learning by flexible and individualized learning paths.

Morgan-Klein and Osborne (2007) also emphasized that one of the important elements in a lifelong learning implementation is flexibility. The need for more flexible educational environments in general increases according to continuous learning, which comes to be considered more of a necessity for almost everyone, particularly in today's increasingly global society (Chen, 2003).

This is through learning via more of an experience and interaction, through discussion rather than drilling in 'right' and 'wrong' answers. With focus on adult learners, classmates share ideas and teach each other. Group projects may be treated as assignments rather than as graded exams. Even in disciplines where exactness counts and tests are mandatory — such as nursing and medicine — using informal and non-formal methods of obtaining knowledge, combining traditional methods with lifelong learning is possible, keeping memorizing facts to a minimum while increasing the scope of learning (Masclé, 2007).

Other approaches include setting national strategies that focus on lifelong learning, providing the resources on how to find information, and the constant motivation to seek knowledge.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Q1 was a quite a lengthy questionnaire, and contained 64 items. As mentioned earlier, this study has examined only the responses to items intended to measure students' perceptions of the extent to which the Islamic Culture course relates or is connected to their individual academic specializations. The 9 questions of interest to this study were placed at the very end of the survey (Table 1).

Hence, it is possible that some respondents experienced survey fatigue, which is a form of response bias, and thus they may have resorted to responding negatively or even randomly to those items. A second limitation is that this quantitative research relied on self-reported data and did not use additional methods to measure the variables of interest.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The research project entitled "The development of the Islamic Culture Course at Sultan Qaboos University, Oman, so as to align it with students' specializations" at the College of Education, SQU, 2018-2020, has confirmed a need to incorporate the students' different specialized and (future) professional backgrounds to better realize the course objectives and overcome the gap between the students' specializations and Islamic culture.

The Islamic Culture course at SQU (as with similar courses at other academic institutions within and outside of Oman) has an ideal trajectory to realize the objectives of both formal and informal lifelong learning through :

1. Creating awareness about the need to acknowledge and address the exigencies of Islamic culture in the fields of academic knowledge, as well as in generating new knowledge and in professional practice;

2. Creating awareness about the lack of recognition of Islamic values in these fields, due to a bifurcation in academic disciplines (scientific/humanities/social sciences vs. Islamic stream); and
3. Providing the students with key skills and aptitudes to close the gaps between Islamic culture and their fields of specialization and profession.

Theories of lifelong learning have been consulted to underpin the possibility to use formal and informal ways to provide students with a lifelong learning experience through the course. Based on the assessed need (by survey), the Islamic culture course can be developed so as to instil Islamic values and concepts in the specialization and professional practice through a number of amendments in teaching practices. We suggest designing ways of bridging the gap through coursework, assignments, and including real-life examples from different specializations (focus on key skills and aptitudes).

Suggested strategies to translate these objectives into action through instructional means and techniques:

1. Explanations/examples to explain course content may be taken from the students' different fields, such as explaining *ijtihad* through the case of genetically modified (GM) food, as well as other examples from the biomedical field (mitochondrial transfer, cloning, etc.), targeting students of science, medicine and allied health sciences, economics;
Explaining the difference between *hadhārah* (civilization) and *thaqāfah* (culture) through the example of different architectural styles, targeting students of architecture, engineering;
Explaining the juridical system through the acceptance/non-acceptance of evidence (cameras, genetic fingerprints), targeting students of law, sciences and political sciences.
2. Plan research-based assignments with a focus on bridging the gap, let students choose topics bridging between their field of specialization and Islamic culture (e.g., "Islamic perspectives on brain death", "Islamic rulings on music", "the architecture of mosques", "the Islamic economic system", "prominent Muslim scientists in history").
3. Ask students to assess their own specializations and the extent to which the Islamic history of their specialization is taught or acknowledged; alternatively, ask them to provide an action plan for the respective development of this aspect in their specialization.
4. Ask students to develop a project theoretically or practically bridging between their specialization and Islamic culture.

Other (recommended) options to bridge the gap between the diverse fields of specialization and Islamic culture are to set up additional courses (electives) in the students' special field. Splitting students into different groups according to their specializations for the Islamic Culture course is not recommended due to the benefits of exposure to different inputs from the various specializations. We also recommend providing additional course material for students of different specializations, highlighting the link between Islamic culture and the respective specialization.

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