

A Project Still in Motion? Naleemiah Institute of Islamic Studies and the Quest for Integration of Knowledge in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Scholarly analyses of Muslim engagement with modern Western epistemology reveal three major responses: early reformers such as Afghani and Abduh emphasized the compatibility of Islam and the West; critics like Maududi rejected secular epistemologies outright; and the Islamization of Knowledge (IOK) movement sought to reorganize modern disciplines on the basis of Islamic principles, reconstructing knowledge according to the Islamic worldview. Building on these earlier currents, the ‘integration of knowledge’ framework has emerged, sparking debates over its distinction from IOK. However, this discourse has largely developed in Muslim-majority contexts, often overlooking Muslim minority experiences. In this context, this paper examines the Naleemiah Institute of Islamic Studies (NIIS), a prominent Islamic studies institution in Sri Lanka. NIIS aspires to produce religious scholars trained in both Islamic and human sciences, serving as a case study for this examination. Through an analysis

of NIIS's intellectual foundations, curriculum evolution, and graduate perspectives, the study finds that NIIS should be considered a pioneering academic institution in manifesting integrative aspirations. Since its inception, it has incorporated this spirit, producing graduates well-equipped to reflect Islam from a multidisciplinary perspective. Being a privately funded institution, this represents a significant achievement in a Muslim minority context. However, its impact has been constrained by methodological ambiguities. The findings underscore the need for clearer epistemological frameworks and institutional strategies to bridge Islamic and modern knowledge meaningfully. By centring a minority perspective, this study also argues that scholarly discussions on the integration of knowledge and related discourses, such as *Tawhīdic* Epistemology (TE), should consider minority experiences and the specific challenges they face in engaging with these epistemic frameworks. It should explore ways to foster greater collaboration and mutual exchange of ideas, thereby advancing the discourse to make it truly global and relevant.

Keywords: Integration of Knowledge, Naleemiah Institute of Islamic Studies, *Tawhīdic* Epistemology, Muslim Minority, Islamic Reform

Introduction

Debates over knowledge, authority, and tradition have long shaped the intellectual trajectories of Muslim societies, but these dynamics took on new urgency in the wake of colonialism (Zacky & Moniruzzaman, 2023). The colonial encounter did more than impose foreign rule. It introduced an epistemological order rooted in Enlightenment rationality and empirical science that gradually displaced classical Islamic modes of knowing (Masood, 2007, & Tabrizi, 1996). Revelation, spirituality, and inherited traditions were pushed to the margins, giving rise to a sharp dichotomy between what was considered ‘rational’ and what was viewed as ‘traditional’ knowledge (Ingram, 2018, p. 30-35). This rupture not only transformed the foundations of Muslim education but also spurred a range of reformist projects aimed at reasserting Islamic intellectual autonomy.

Scholarly analyses of Muslim engagement with modernist epistemology reveal three key, interconnected responses that have shaped the trajectory of contemporary Islamic thought. The first response, exemplified by early reformers such as Jamal al-Din Afghani, Muhammad Abduh, and Sayyid Ahmad Khan, emphasized the inherent compatibility between Islam and modern science. These thinkers contended that empiricism and scientific reasoning were not only consistent with the Islamic intellectual tradition but could also serve to enrich and revitalize it. Embracing modern scientific knowledge, they argued, was essential for the intellectual and civilizational renewal of Muslim societies (Tabrizi, 1996; Furlow, 1996). In contrast, Abul A‘la Maududi articulated a more critical position, portraying modern educational institutions as agents of secularization that undermined Islamic identity and ethical foundations. He maintained that Islamic and Western worldviews are epistemologically incompatible and therefore called for an educational system rooted firmly in divine revelation and moral purpose (Maududi, 1993, pp. 24–41). A third, more comprehensive response emerged in the 1970s with the IOK movement. This ambitious initiative sought to critically reassess the epistemic foundations of modern disciplines and to reform educational curricula in accordance with Islamic principles. Rather than rejecting Western knowledge outright, proponents of IOK advocated for its selective reorganization through an Islamic worldview, one that integrates scientific inquiry with religious epistemology. Notably, the Islamization movement did not manifest as a monolithic project; rather, it encompassed a diverse range of approaches, methodologies, and intellectual orientations under its broad umbrella (Stenberg, 1996). Building on this trajectory, scholars since the early 2000s have increasingly embraced

the concept of the ‘integration of knowledge’ as an alternative or complementary framework. This shift has generated ongoing debate about whether integration merely rearticulates the goals of Islamization or represents a fundamentally distinct approach/ project (Moten, 2023).

What is clear from this evolving discussion, however, is that the discourse on integration of knowledge has been shaped primarily within the socio-political and intellectual contexts of Muslim-majority societies. Institutions such as the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT) and Islamic universities in regions like the Middle East and Southeast Asia, particularly the International Islamic University Malaysia, have significantly influenced the development of this discourse, defining its conceptual language, priorities, and institutional strategies (Keim, 2017). Yet this dominant focus has tended to marginalize the experiences and perspectives of Muslim-minority contexts. In these settings, communities must grapple with unique challenges such as navigating secular education systems, marginalization of Islamic institutions, and legal restrictions on religious expression (Sahin, 2023). At the same time, minority contexts present distinct opportunities for reimagining knowledge production, ethics, and education in pluralistic societies. Despite this potential, meaningful dialogue and collaboration between scholars and institutions in Muslim-majority and minority contexts remain limited. This lack of exchange has contributed to a fragmented and uneven development of the integration of knowledge project, one that risks overlooking the lived realities and intellectual contributions of significant segments of the global Muslim community. Bridging this gap is essential for constructing a more inclusive and globally relevant vision for Islamic knowledge reform.

Against this backdrop, this paper examines the experience of the NIIS as a pioneering institutional initiative that engaged with the discourse on the integration of knowledge in Sri Lanka, a country where Muslims have lived as a minority for over a millennium. The paper seeks to broaden the ongoing discourse on the integration of Islamic and modern knowledge by foregrounding the experiences of a Muslim minority context, which is often overlooked in debates predominantly shaped by majority-Muslim societies. Specifically, the study explores NIIS’s engagement with integration of knowledge discourse through three interrelated dimensions: the institute’s ideational origins, curricular developments, and the perspectives of its recent graduates. It argues that while the NIIS has made notable contributions, particularly through its academic programmes, its broader impact has been constrained by the absence of conceptual clarity and a lack of well-defined methodologies for integration. To substantiate this analysis, the paper is organized into four sections. Section two contextualizes the religious

reform and educational debates within Sri Lanka. Section three offers an institutional overview of the NIIS. Section four provides a critical examination of the intellectual foundations of the institute, the evolution of its curriculum, and how graduates of the NIIS view the institute's engagement with the discourse itself. The paper concludes with a set of modest recommendations aimed at enhancing the intellectual coherence and institutional effectiveness of NIIS's integrative efforts. Methodologically, this study employed a qualitative research design. Data were gathered from both primary and secondary sources, including interviews and relevant documents. A thematic content analysis approach was applied to interpret and analyse the data, ensuring a systematic examination of emerging themes, patterns, and insights within the research context.

The Genealogy of Muslim Religious Education Reform Debate in Sri Lanka: A Brief Overview

The NIIS emerged from long discussions about how Islamic knowledge should be understood and applied in late- and post-colonial Sri Lanka. This intellectual engagement can be traced to the immediate aftermath of European colonial rule, which brought about profound transformations in the structures of knowledge production (Shukri, 1986, p. 369-372). Like their counterparts elsewhere in the Muslim world, Sri Lanka Muslims were compelled to grapple with new epistemological paradigms introduced by colonial powers. Colonial governance was underpinned by legal, political, and economic systems that drew upon modern Western epistemologies, resulting in a sharp bifurcation between traditional Islamic sciences and the emergent secular disciplines (Lumbard, 2023). Osman Bakar characterizes this rupture as an 'epistemic sectarianism' denoting the growing divide between religious and secular, as well as traditional and modern, systems of knowledge (Aljunid, 2022, p.41-64). For the Muslim minority in Sri Lanka, navigating this epistemic transformation necessitated engagement with secular forms of education, including science and the English language, to attain socio-economic mobility within the colonial order. Yet, the adoption of secular educational models was not ideologically neutral; rather, it carried with it an implicit attempt to marginalize religious knowledge and relegate religion to the private sphere. In response, Muslim intellectuals and community leaders began to critically reassess both inherited religious paradigms and modern knowledge in a fine way of reconciliation and engagement.

In colonial Ceylon, one of the earliest and most influential Muslim reformers, M.C. Siddi Lebbe (d. 1898), responded to the intellectual and socio-political transformations of his era.

Confronting the marginalization of Muslims within the colonial order, he championed the pursuit of modern education as a necessary strategy for communal advancement. Siddi Lebbe contended that the acquisition of modern knowledge need not come at the expense of Islamic faith. Rather, he envisioned a model in which Islamic principles could serve as a moral and intellectual framework through which Muslims engage with the modern world (McKinley, & Xavier, 2017). For him, the task was not to reject modernity, but to shape it in ways consistent with the ethical and spiritual foundations of Islam. Against this background, Sidde Lebbe critiqued traditional Islamic learning system and religious leaders for their inability to lead the community through responding to new emerging questions and understanding spirit of the religion (Anas, 2007, p.345-348). He further criticized the existing curriculum of the Madrasah education system, highlighting that these religious institutions continue to use outdated textbooks published centuries ago. Sidde Lebbe (2023) uses the subject of logic as a case study to support his argument:

'In teaching general subjects in the humanities, our institutions still rely on Arabic texts that were written long ago. For example, consider the subject of logic. The Arabs initially inherited this subject from the Greeks and then developed it further. However, Europeans later adopted it from the Arabs, critiqued it, and added new dimensions. As a result, modern logic is significantly different from Greek logic. Our religious leaders who teach in the Madrasas need to understand these evolving dynamics of humanities.' (p. 78)

It is interesting to note that after criticizing the traditional learning system, he urged Sri Lankan Muslims to envision a university that combines Islamic religious education with modern education. He (2023) suggests that similar colleges have emerged in India and that Sri Lankan Muslims should consider them as a model to replicate on the island.

There is a large educational institution in Hyderabad, India, known as Deccan Educational Institute. Students who study there are exposed to both revealed knowledge and worldly knowledge, valuing both equally. Upon completion of their course, graduates will be awarded a certificate (p.114)

Sidde Lebbe emphasized the importance of integrating modern knowledge into Islamic religious education. He also insisted that religious knowledge should be approached from a new perspective. He urged Muslims to view their fundamental rituals not just as actions, but as

activities embedded in profound ethical significance and teachings. Additionally, he called for religious leaders to teach Islam in the light of its true spirit (Ameen, 2023, p. 44-46).

Sidde Lebbe's groundbreaking call for reform in religious education has had a lasting impact on Muslim educational discussions over the past two centuries. His vision, which emphasized integrating modern subjects with Islamic learning, resonated well beyond his lifetime, inspiring subsequent generations of civil society leaders and religious figures. Notable Muslim reformers such as A.M.A. Azeez, who is closely associated with the establishment of the NIIS, continued to advocate for the principles that Sidde Lebbe championed. They argued for educational models that could prepare Muslims to meet the challenges of a rapidly changing world without compromising their religious identity. This ongoing discourse should be viewed as a progression, with each wave of reform responding to new socio-political realities. In this historical and intellectual context, the establishment of the NIIS is not an isolated event but part of a broader effort to reconcile Islamic epistemological traditions with the challenges and opportunities of a modern, postcolonial society, while also preserving the community's cultural and spiritual heritage.

NIIS: An Institutional Overview

The NIIS was established in 1973 by MIM Naleem. His contributions represent a significant case study on the impact of philanthropy on educational empowerment in Sri Lanka. Philanthropy entails providing financial support to address the root causes of social issues, while charity is often limited to occasional assistance (Terway, A. & Ridge, N.Y., 2019, p. 06). MIM Naleem, a renowned gem merchant and active community leader, initiated and supported various projects aimed at improving educational opportunities for the Muslim community. His efforts set a benchmark for Muslim philanthropic activities in the country. Among his notable initiatives was the NIIS, which he founded to introduce innovative approaches to religious education in Sri Lanka. This project was developed with the help of academics and close friends from his hometown, China Fort in Beruwala (Shukri, 1993). The mission of NIIS is to cultivate intellectually sound, professionally competent, morally enriched, balanced, and integrated individuals committed to generating and disseminating knowledge through innovative teaching, training, learning, and research, ultimately contributing to society, the nation, and humanity. The goal is to produce a new generation of scholars and thinkers who are multi-skilled, economically independent, and equipped to respond to the myriad challenges of a rapidly changing world.

NIIS is organized into two main departments: the Centre for Foundation Studies (CFS) and the Faculty of Islamic Studies (FIS). CFS provides students with foundational knowledge in Arabic and Islamic studies while preparing them for the governmental Advanced Level examination. Additionally, it offers instruction in languages and moral subjects at this level. FIS offers advanced courses in Islamic studies along with selected secular subjects. FIS students could enroll with state universities as external candidates for recognized degrees. The NIIS also includes an independent unit called the 'Unit for Extra-Curricular Activities,' which is designed to develop students' skills. This unit trains students in writing, speaking, and other essential skills. Academic conferences foster an environment of critical thinking and intellectual engagement. The rich library at NIIS houses more than 45,000 books in various languages, primarily English, Arabic, Sinhala, and Tamil. Furthermore, NIIS is committed to expanding its academic outreach. In line with this mission, it established the Academy for Development, Research, and Training (ADRT) in 2006. ADRT regularly conducts training programs for diverse groups, including media personnel, lecturers at Arabic colleges, and community leaders. The Naleemiah Virtual Learning Centre (NVLC), launched in 2020, offers a variety of online courses, such as *Qur'anic* Interpretation and Translation, to the public. The Research and Publication Unit plays a crucial role in promoting research and publications, including the release of a quarterly research journal titled 'Islamiya Sinthanai' (Islamic Thought in Tamil). Additionally, the Institute of Arabic Language offers courses aimed at enhancing students' Arabic language skills. Lastly, the Salam Centre for Peace and Dialogue seek to promote social harmony through inter-religious interactive programs and publications.

Results and Discussion

1.0 NIIS and Integration of Knowledge: An Intellectual Genealogy

The Idea of an Islamic University in Sri Lanka: A.M.A. Azeez's Intellectual Vision

The intellectual foundations of the NIIS were shaped by the contributions of various scholars. Among these was AMA Azeez, a prominent Sri Lankan Muslim educationist and one of the institute's founders, who played a pivotal role. His writings in the 1960s on Muslim education reform highlighted the community's educational underperformance and its implications in a pluralistic society. Azeez attributed this lag partly to a narrow focus on the spiritual aspects of Islam, arguing that it needed to be balanced with secular knowledge. He called for a new philosophy of Islamic education—one that integrates Islamic teachings and modern sciences into

a unified worldview. Azeez urged Muslim leaders to train scholars who could interpret religious teachings in relation to contemporary socio-political realities. He also criticized the traditional madrasah system for being outdated and inadequate, advocating instead for an alternative educational framework (Azeez, 1963, pp. 131-36). His landmark essay, ‘We Want an Islamic University,’ written in the early 1970s, outlined this vision. While it did not directly lead to the founding of NIIS, it contributed to broader discussions that eventually influenced the institute’s establishment and mission. In that essay, Azeez (1963) famously stated that:

‘We cannot overcome our significant challenges without cultivating Islamic scholars who are equally proficient in both Islamic and modern knowledge. In our current situation, we have struggled to find Islamic scholars who possess such a diverse range of expertise. As a community, we must strive to produce religious scholars who have a deep understanding of both Islamic and modern knowledge. Additionally, it is crucial to recognize that our traditional religious educational system requires substantial reform’ (p.117)

AMA Azeez’s reformist thought was deeply shaped by the philosophy of Allama Muhammad Iqbal, whose ideas he consciously sought to apply to the Sri Lankan Muslim context (Mahroof, 1993). In the preface to his collected essays, Azeez acknowledged that his reflections on the socio-political and educational challenges facing Sri Lankan Muslims were written through the lens of Iqbal’s intellectual vision (Azeez, 1963, p. iv). Central to Azeez’s engagement with Iqbal was the latter’s emphasis on reconciling Islamic spirituality with the demands of modernity. He was particularly influenced by Iqbal’s call for a dynamic interaction with the modern scientific world, one that remains rooted in an Islamic ethical and spiritual framework (Azeez, 1963, pp. 218–22).

As an educationist, AMA Azeez consistently emphasized the necessity of reforming Islamic education through a holistic approach grounded in the Islamic worldview. He argued that meaningful transformation within the Muslim community could only be achieved by cultivating a new generation of Islamic scholars who are not only rooted in traditional religious knowledge but also well-versed in the modern social sciences and contemporary realities. Azeez advocated for the establishment of institutions that would foster this integrated model of learning. In line with this intellectual trajectory, Azeez later became involved in the NIIS, recognizing in it a concrete step toward realizing his educational reform agenda (Shukri, 2020).

Alongside AMA Azeez, scholars such as Tasm Nadvi and ALM Ibrahim were instrumental in shaping the early intellectual framework of the NIIS. Tasm Nadvi, a graduate of Al-Azhar University and the institute's first principal in 1973, emphasized that while traditional Islamic educational institutions had preserved the religiosity of Sri Lankan Muslims, they were ill-equipped to address the complexities of the modern world. He argued for a new model of religious education that could produce scholars capable of engaging with contemporary realities. ALM Ibrahim, a prominent scholar-activist, echoed this view, asserting that traditionalist approaches lacked the intellectual depth and methodological tools needed to respond to the modern challenges facing Muslim society (Arafath, 2023, p. 64).

Global Influences

The education philosophy of NIIS was shaped not only by local Muslim thinkers and Islamic scholars but also by the ideas of prominent international Islamic scholars. According to Shukri, some of the critical works of Islamic scholars such as Sayyed Abul Hasan Ali Nadvi on the impact of secularism and materialism on the Muslim mind were translated into the local language. These works were widely read by Muslim community leaders in the 60s and 70s. As a result, these writings and ideas inspired Muslim community leaders to recognize the need for a new generation of Islamic thinkers who could better understand modern philosophies and their harmful effects on the Muslim mind. (Shukri, 1993, p. 53).

Personal interviews with founder members who are still alive revealed two important sources that guided the founder members to develop the idea of NIIS further. Firstly, founder members were influenced by the educational reform ideas of Egyptian thinker Mohamed Abdhu and Indian scholar Mohamed Ali. Both Abdu and Ali argued that Muslim religious education institutions needed to be reformed but presented modernist solutions to the problem (MHM Hibatullah, personal communication, June 12, 2023, & ARM Sulaiman, personal communication, June 30, 2023). They emphasized that Muslim religious education should incorporate natural and human sciences alongside religious education. In addition, the founding members of the NIIS were directly inspired by the Aleemiyyah Institute of Islamic Studies in Pakistan and its founder, Fazlur Rahman Ansari. The founder members highlight that although they determined to form a new institution that would offer a curriculum combining Islamic science and human sciences, they couldn't find a model to emulate in Sri Lanka. As a result, they travelled to Pakistan to explore potential integration models. During their trip, they met with various university rectors and Islamic thinkers, including Mowdudi, who all suggested

that the integration model the Sri Lankan community leaders were seeking did not exist in the Muslim world and that they would need to build their own model. Nonetheless, they identified the Aleemiyyah Institute of Islamic Studies in Pakistan as a potential model that could be replicated in Sri Lanka (Arafath, 2023, p. 64-65).

This institute, active in the 1960s and 70s, aimed to educate Islamic scholars with expertise in both Islamic studies and human sciences. Surviving founder members say that the structural design of the Alimiyyah institution gave them a clear framework for an Islamic religious education project that combining both religious science education and modern education. More than that, they highlight that the ideas of its director, Fazlur Rahman Ansari, greatly influenced their thoughts and perspectives of philosophical outlook and helped them to conceptualize the Naleemiah project. It is important to mention that Fazlur Rahman Ansari extensively wrote (2012) about the philosophy of unity and the negative impacts of the division of knowledge in modern universities on Muslim communities. He explained that Islam rejects the classification of knowledge into religious and secular categories. Instead, he stressed that all knowledge comes from one source: God. Moreover, he coined the term ‘intergalactic civilization of Islam,’ arguing that Islam is an exemplary model for future human civilization because it integrates both empirical and rational sources of knowledge and revelation into a single worldview (Ansari, 2017, p. 217). These ideas of Fazlur Rahman Ansari greatly influenced the vision of the founder members. Further evidence of Ansari’s impact on the founder members was that they invited him to Sri Lanka again for more critical conversations (MHM Hibatullah, personal communication, June 12, 2023).

The formation of the NIIS illustrates a distinctive instance of how global and local dynamics interact in the transformation of ideas. In the post-independence period, Muslim socio-religious and educational leadership in Sri Lanka identified a critical gap in the prevailing model of religious education. They observed that traditional Islamic seminaries, while strong in transmitting religious knowledge, were largely disconnected from modern intellectual and scientific developments. This disconnection, they believed, hindered the ability of Muslim scholars to engage effectively with the challenges of a rapidly changing world. In response, these leaders turned to global reformist experiences within the broader Muslim world where similar concerns had given rise to innovative educational models. However, rather than merely replicating these models, the founders of NIIS adapted these ideas to the local context of Sri

Lanka, a multi-religious and multi-ethnic society with its own colonial legacy and socio-political challenges.

2.0 NIIS and Integration of Knowledge from the Perspective of Curriculum and Its Evolution

Another meaningful way to explore the relationship between the NIIS and the discourse on the integration of knowledge is to examine how this discourse has shaped the evolution of the Institute's curriculum over the past four decades. Accordingly, this section analyses the evolution of the NIIS curriculum by dividing it into four historical periods. Through this periodization, we can better understand how the integration of knowledge discourse evolved and how it concretely shaped curriculum practices, content, and pedagogical orientations at NIIS.

Negotiating Early Constraints: 1973-1984

During its first decade, the founders of the NIIS encountered two significant challenges in realizing their vision. First, they faced difficulties in creating a suitable curriculum because no comprehensive model existed elsewhere for the type of integrated Islamic and modern education they envisioned. Second, it was challenging to find qualified lecturers who understood and supported this innovative educational approach (Shukri, 1993). Due to these challenges, the initial curriculum did not represent a significant departure from traditional models; however, it demonstrated a desire to move in a new direction. A review of the curriculum from the early to mid-1970s reveals a hybrid structure. It incorporated subjects from the national education system alongside traditional Islamic studies. The founders believed that this combination would provide students with a basic understanding of both Islamic and modern sciences (MAM Mansoor, personal communication, September 5, 2019). The early curriculum consisted of two categories: Islamic subjects and modern subjects. Islamic studies included theology and jurisprudence, primarily taught using traditional seminary texts. The modern subjects were limited but included areas like agriculture, gemmology, and electronics, added to enhance students' employability and broaden their understanding of the contemporary world. Ayoob Ali, an early graduate who later taught at NIIS, noted that the curriculum and overall strategy during the early years were primarily shaped by traditionally trained *Ulamā* from different theological backgrounds (Ayoob Ali, personal communication, September 25, 2019). This was largely because the more formally educated founders, such as A.M.A. Azeez,

passed away shortly after the Institute's formation. Consequently, the responsibility for managing NIIS fell to the remaining Ulama and a few dedicated founders. However, many of them lacked the necessary skills and experience to fully realize the innovative goals of the NIIS project.

A Shift in Approach: 1984-1996

During the second stage of its development, spanning the years 1983 to 1996, the NIIS witnessed a significant shift in its curricular orientation. This period was marked by the recruitment of the Institute's own graduates as lecturers, beginning in 1983. This strategic move had a notable impact on the reform and evolution of the Islamic studies part of the curriculum. Unlike their predecessors, who were largely trained in traditional Islamic seminaries, the new cohort of lecturers had been shaped by the hybrid educational vision of NIIS itself. As such, they brought with them a more nuanced and reform-oriented understanding of Islamic education.

These newly appointed lecturers began to revise the Islamic studies component of the curriculum, introducing texts and readings that reflected contemporary trends and reformist Islamic thought. Notably, they incorporated works of modern Islamic thinkers who emphasized the compatibility of Islam with modernity, rational inquiry, and social reform. Subjects such as comparative jurisprudence (*fiqh muqāran*) were introduced or given greater emphasis. This marked a clear departure from the earlier reliance on traditional texts and approaches, and it indicated a broader shift in the intellectual trajectory of the institution (MAM Mansoor, personal communication, September 5, 2019).

It can therefore be argued that this second stage in the Institute's history was characterized by a more deliberate and structured attempt to reform and enrich the content of Islamic studies. The priority given to revising course texts and introducing reformist thought represented a significant step forward in realizing the original vision of the NIIS—an institution that aimed to bridge traditional Islamic scholarship and modern intellectual currents.

Collaboration with IIUI: 1996-2011

The NIIS undertook a significant curricular reform following the establishment of an academic collaboration with the International Islamic University Islamabad (IIUI), Pakistan in 1996. During his visit to NIIS, IIUI's president Hussain Hamid al-Hassan offered postgraduate

educational opportunities at IIUI for NIIS graduates, contingent upon NIIS aligning its curriculum with IIUI's academic standards. This proposition marked a pivotal turning point in the development of structured Islamic studies programme of NIIS, prompting a comprehensive revision of its academic strategy and program architecture (Ushama & Fouz, 2023). In response, the NIIS undertook a structured overhaul of its curriculum and academic planning. The reform process focused on three interrelated domains: program structure, curriculum content, and institutional operational systems. Within the curriculum, Islamic Studies subjects were reorganized to correspond with IIUI's academic model, thereby adopting a more systematic and internationally oriented approach. In addition to core Islamic disciplines, NIIS integrated key subjects from the humanities and social sciences-such as sociology, philosophy, and comparative religion-into its curriculum. This interdisciplinary shift reflected a broader commitment to equipping students with both traditional Islamic knowledge and modern scholarly tools for critical engagement with contemporary issues. The revised academic framework also entailed improvements in administrative planning, student assessment, and academic coordination, aiming to elevate NIIS to the standards of an international Islamic institution of higher learning (Ushama & Fouz, 2023). This phase illustrates the dynamic interaction between global Islamic academic trends and localized institutional reform.

National Education Policies and Impact of IIUM: 2012 Onwards

This period of curriculum renewal was shaped by both domestic and global shifts in the socio-economic and political landscape, which compelled NIIS to respond proactively to evolving national educational expectations and labour market demands. Policy frameworks implemented by the Sri Lankan higher education sector required institutions to revise and realign their curricula to reflect national economic goals and employment strategies (NIIS Curriculum, 2020). NIIS wanted to respond to this demand while ensuring the continuity of its educational philosophy. In pursuing this goal, NIIS actively engaged with international models of Islamic higher education to draw insights and best practices for curriculum enhancement. A key source of inspiration during this phase was the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), particularly the curricular framework employed by its Kulliyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences. The emphasis at IIUM on harmonizing Islamic revealed knowledge with the human sciences resonated strongly with NIIS's long-standing commitment to educational synthesis and relevance (Haris, Personal Communication, September 20, 2019).

A close examination of the updated course plan helps us to better understand the Institute's direction. For instance, the most recent NIIS handbook (2020) outlines the institute's vision to be internationally recognized as a leading centre of excellence in higher education for *Islamic Studies, Human Sciences, and Technology* (p.05). Moreover, the stated learning outcomes of NIIS's degree programme, according to the handbook, also strongly stress the importance of integration of Islamic sciences with human sciences (NIIS handbook, 2020, p.33). In the field of Islamic studies, which is a fundamental part of NIIS, the handbook outlines that students will gain extensive knowledge of the core texts of Islam. They will also be able to demonstrate a broad understanding and utilize appropriate methods to critically analyse the foundational texts of Islam in their original Arabic form, including Quranic exegesis, prophetic traditions, as well as key areas of theology, law, and mysticism (NIIS handbook, 2020). In addition to the specific Islamic studies-related learning outcomes, the handbook also states that students will develop the ability to address real-world problems, gain knowledge in the field of political science, and acquire an overall understanding of sociology, social anthropology, and cultural analysis (NIIS handbook, 2020). The course structure provides deeper insights into the integration of different areas of knowledge. The updated version now includes more advanced subjects in Islamic studies and traditional Islamic sciences, such as the objectives of Islamic *Sharī'ah*, Islamic Jurisprudence of Muslim Minorities, and Islamic Banking and Finance, among others (NIIS handbook, 2020). It also covers human sciences subjects like human resource management, social psychology, education, peace and social harmony, contemporary politics, and the study of Sri Lankan society (NIIS handbook, 2020).

3.0 Assessing the Impact of Integration of Knowledge Discourse at NIIS: Insights from Graduates' Perspective

This section draws on interviews with five selected NIIS graduates who have either completed or are currently pursuing postgraduate studies in Islamic studies and various human sciences, both locally and internationally. These interviews explored how the educational philosophy and curriculum of NIIS have shaped their approach to integrating Islamic and modern knowledge in their respective disciplines. The data also offer insights into potential areas for enhancing this integrative educational model.

Impact of NIIS's Education Philosophy: Encouraging Multidisciplinary

The interviews revealed a shared conviction among participants that the NIIS educational experience has significantly influenced their understanding of how to approach Islam and contemporary knowledge debate. Rather than relying on a singular disciplinary method, graduates recognized the importance of drawing from multiple fields to develop comprehensive solutions from an Islamic perspective. One graduate pointed out that the curriculum offered valuable exposure to core themes and debates in the social sciences, effectively complementing their study of Islamic disciplines and broadening their intellectual horizons (Respondent 02, Personal Communication, July 14, 2024).

Another interviewee emphasized that the structural design of NIIS's academic programme reflects an integrated knowledge framework. This, they explained, was a major factor influencing graduates to pursue further studies at universities that embody similar principles, such as the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), which promotes a holistic educational vision (Respondent 03, Personal Communication, July 25, 2024).

Another respondent elaborated on how the NIIS philosophy challenged the notion of rigid disciplinary boundaries. For him, the curriculum instilled an appreciation for viewing knowledge as interconnected and encouraged critical engagement with the epistemological foundations of modern social sciences from an Islamic intellectual perspective (Respondent 04, Personal Communication, July 26, 2024).

Furthermore, multiple interviewees observed that even core Islamic studies subjects at NIIS are taught with attention to real-world relevance. Contemporary social and political issues are regularly incorporated into classroom discussions, which necessitate familiarity with modern societal dynamics. In response, instructors integrate introductory concepts from the humanities and social sciences into their teaching of Islamic subjects. This pedagogical strategy supports the development of an integrative outlook even within the religious studies framework itself (Respondent 01, Personal Communication, July 16, 2024).

Limits of Knowledge Integration at NIIS: Missing Conceptual Coherence

A major concern raised by several graduates was the absence of a well-defined conceptual model for the IOK within the institution. Although NIIS promotes the idea of integrating Islamic and modern disciplines, the interviewees noted that this vision remains largely implicit

and underdeveloped in its academic framework. They emphasized that without a coherent theoretical foundation or clearly articulated methodology for integration, the institution struggles to translate its integrative ethos into a systematic and effective educational practice. This, they argued, represents one of the most significant limitations of NIIS's current approach. One respondent stated:

'We studied human sciences courses along with Islamic studies at NIIS. However, we learned those subjects without a proper conceptual background. We were not clearly informed of why we studied those human sciences along with Islamic courses. I heard that very recently NIIS has taken some serious steps in developing a conceptual outlook for their courses by introducing subjects like Islamic world view'
(Respondent 01, personal communication, July 16, 2024).

Despite the inclusion of human sciences courses in the NIIS curriculum, interview data suggests that the institution has not effectively addressed how these disciplines are to be meaningfully connected with Islamic studies. As a result, students often perceive the social sciences as supplementary or even irrelevant to their core academic formation. One interviewee explicitly noted:

'NIIS merely introduces some social sciences subjects but doesn't effectively work towards integrating Islamic and social sciences. Although we study social sciences, we are not trained to evaluate how what we learn in these subjects impacts our understanding of Islamic themes. If we learn human science along with Islamic studies, we should be given a clear idea about how it helps us to understand our core subjects. There is no substantial discussion about it. In that sense, NIIS lags far behind in attempts to truly integrate knowledge debates. I believe NIIS needs to have a thorough conversation on this aspect'
(Respondent 02, personal communication, July 14, 2024)

Suggestions for the Improvement: More Awareness, Training and Collaboration

The interviewees also highlighted aspects that need to be addressed for further improvement of the curriculum and delivery in terms of harmonization of Islamic studies and human sciences. In that regard, one respondent stressed the pressing need for NIIS to revisit and update its curriculum regularly to keep pace with evolving global academic debates in both Islamic studies and the human sciences. He stated that integrating *more new courses in the social sciences and*

humanities with greater academic weight would elevate their relevance within the broader educational framework. Moreover, the respondent underscored the importance of involving subject specialists, rather than relying solely on Islamic studies lecturers, to deliver these human sciences courses effectively. To strengthen the integration model, he recommended fostering institutional collaborations with universities pursuing similar interdisciplinary approaches. Such partnerships, he suggested, would enable valuable exchanges of experience and pedagogical methods. He also called for seminars and training programs to help students develop the skills necessary to approach contemporary social issues from a multidisciplinary perspective (Respondent 01, personal communication, July 16, 2024). Another respondent shared the similar concern as follows:

‘The lecturers, especially, need to be trained in this concept because they are the ones who bring this vision to the students. Therefore, NIIS’s academic strategy should focus on equipping both students and staff with this framework. The human sciences courses need to be taught by experts, and NIIS must establish a collaborative network with these experts and plan how to integrate these subjects within the context of Islamic studies’ (Respondent 05, personal communication, July 223, 2024)

One of the interviewees emphasized the importance of grounding students in the understanding that the integration of knowledge lies at the core of the Islamic intellectual tradition. He noted that classical Islamic scholarship was inherently interdisciplinary, with many renowned scholars being well-versed in multiple fields of knowledge. While acknowledging that replicating the achievements of past polymaths may not be feasible today, he stressed the need to foster an academic culture that reflects this integrative legacy. In his view, Islamic studies should not be taught in isolation from other branches of knowledge; rather, students must be continually exposed to frameworks that encourage meaningful engagement between Islamic thought and the wider human sciences. Such an environment, he argued, is essential to revitalize the holistic nature of Islamic scholarship in the modern context (Respondent 02, personal communication, July 14, 2024).

Analytical Conclusion

The NIIS represents a significant yet underexplored experiment in integrating Islamic and modern knowledge within a Muslim-minority context. Its trajectory shaped by local reformers like A.M.A. Azeez and global influences such as Fazlur Rahman Ansari demonstrates a

conscious effort to reconcile tradition with modernity. Despite its limited capacity and resources, NIIS has made a considerable impact in advancing the integration of knowledge discourse in Sri Lanka, producing hundreds of graduates who have obtained Islamic studies credentials alongside degrees in the human sciences. These graduates serve in diverse capacities across religious, educational, socio-political, and economic sectors, contributing meaningfully to the intellectual and professional life of the community. However, a critical assessment reveals persistent gaps between its aspirational goals and practical outcomes. NIIS was conceived as a response to the epistemic bifurcation caused by colonialism, aiming to produce scholars versed in both Islamic and secular disciplines. While its founders drew inspiration from reformist thinkers (e.g., Iqbal, Abduh) and institutions (e.g., IIUI, IIUM), the institute struggled to operationalize these ideas methodologically. Early curriculum (1973-1984) retained traditionalist leanings due to resource constraints, and subsequent reforms (1984-2011) relied on external models for inspiration. The curriculum evolved to include social sciences and professional disciplines, reflecting a commitment to integration. Operating in Sri Lanka's pluralistic, post-colonial milieu, NIIS faced unique pressures secular accreditation demands, resource scarcity, and community expectations that add more challenges and dimensions to its integrative vision.

The alumni acknowledged NIIS's role in fostering multidisciplinary thinking, with many pursuing advanced studies at institutions like IIUM. However, they critiqued the lack of structured frameworks to harmonize revelation-based and empirical knowledge, noting ad-hoc approaches to integration. Unlike the IOK movement, which articulated clear epistemic critiques, NIIS lacked a coherent theoretical foundation for integration. This ambiguity weakened its ability to innovate beyond curricular hybridity. For instance, while students studied *usul al-fiqh* (principles of Islamic jurisprudence) or *Quranic* studies alongside sociology, few courses explicitly bridged their methodological divergences.

To elevate NIIS from a promising local initiative to a globally recognized model, the following three strategic steps are recommended:

Establish Strong Knowledge Partnerships and Collaboration

It is recommended that the NIIS, while maintaining its strong foundation in the core Islamic sciences such as theology, the *Qur'anic* and *Sunnah* Studies, and Islamic Jurisprudence-continue to advance its mission of integrating knowledge. Given the complex intellectual and

socio-political challenges faced by contemporary Muslim societies, NIIS should actively foster dialogue between Islamic scholarship, modern disciplines, and global perspectives. To achieve this, the institute ought to innovate and experiment with new models and approaches for integration, supported by a vibrant culture of internal and external engagement. This includes organizing discussions, debates, and collaborative initiatives that bring together local and international scholars, both Muslim and non-Muslim.

Reimagining Islamic Studies as a Multidisciplinary Specialization

The NIIS must rethink its paradigm of Islamic studies to move beyond the traditional conception of producing scholars solely focused on the core Islamic sciences. While retaining this foundation, the institute should broaden its mission to cultivate professionals such as Islamic educators, economists, sociologists, and historians, all grounded in an Islamic perspective. This requires systematic reimagining the curriculum to integrate Islamic teachings with relevant applied disciplines, fostering a multidisciplinary approach. Such a vision would enable NIIS to produce a vision capable of engaging both the religious and contemporary intellectual spheres, addressing complex challenges faced by Muslim communities in Sri Lanka and beyond.

Seek Global Institutions' Support and Recognition:

Global institutions such as IIIT and IIUM should develop structured initiatives to support Islamic educational institutions in Muslim minority contexts. This effort should include identifying potential partners across different regions and establishing collaborative programs that enhance academic quality, research, and curriculum development. Through such partnerships, institutions like the NIIS can gain greater exposure to global intellectual debates, pedagogical innovations, and best practices in integrating Islamic and modern knowledge. These initiatives would not only strengthen institutional capacity but also enable minority-context Islamic institutions to contribute meaningfully to international scholarly and policy discussions on Muslim education.

Finally, NIIS's journey underscores both the potential and pitfalls of integration in minority contexts. While its graduates exemplify the intellectual agility needed for such projects, the institute's unfinished trajectory calls for renewed vision. By addressing methodological and institutional gaps, NIIS could emerge as a model for minority Muslim communities navigating

the tensions of modernity proving that integration is not merely an academic exercise but an imperative for sustainable intellectual and social renewal.

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