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Islamic Schools in Australia

ONE OF THE MAJOR concerns of Muslims living as a minority in a Western secular society is the education of their children. For the early Muslim settlers in Australia there was no formal option, apart from teaching about the faith at home or in the mosque. The first substantial Muslim emigration to Australia came with organised migration from Turkey in the late 1960s and after 1975 with Lebanese families escaping civil war in their homeland. Most of the new arrivals were preoccupied with finding work. Only later, as mosques and prayer halls were established and community associations formed, was there a chance to start formalising proposals for some kind of Islamic education for their children. Until then, most of the children went to state schools, apart from a few middle class professional families who could afford to send their children to private schools, with the girls often being sent to single-sex Catholic schools.¹

Since the first two Islamic schools were opened in Australia in 1983, two questions have come to the fore. Firstly, for Muslims, there is the question of what constitutes an appropriate 'Islamic' education, while for more (sometimes) hostile elements of the wider Australian community, do these schools simply further divide Muslim children from other Australian children and are they promoting what they perceive as un-Australian values?

What Constitutes an Islamic Education?

Although more is now being written about Islam's contribution to learning during the Golden Age,² relatively little has been written about 'Islamic education' since then. Even less has been written about what it means in the West today,³ though initially, when the first Islamic schools began in Australia in the 1980s, it was clear that what Muslim parents were hoping for was some kind of integrated education system whereby their children could not only learn about their faith, but learn about it in a school where Islamic values and practices permeated the whole curriculum. This included observation of dress codes in school uniform, availability of halal food, regular worship, celebration of festivals and, particularly at high school level, some degree of gender segregation. There were also reservations about some of the subjects taught in the normal Australian curriculum, including what can be broadly characterised as personal and social development, art, music, drama and certain sports, included swimming. They wanted their children to have the opportunity to progress in Australian society but they were concerned about the overall impact of the secular curriculum with its emphasis on a Euro-centric syllabus and no faith teaching.

Early research on what Muslim parents wanted for their children in Australia was carried out by Begum,⁴ Donohoue Clyne,⁵ and Sanjakdar.⁶ Zubaida Begum's research was

focused on the creation of the first Islamic school in Melbourne which started as King Khalid Islamic College in 1983, later becoming the Australian International Academy. She refers to the concern expressed at the 1977 World Conference on Education in Islam in Jeddah, which focused on the infiltration of Western ideas into the Muslim world through education and asserted that the modern education system had to be based on Islamic ideology.

However, the Australian Muslim community is extraordinarily diverse, so there was no consensus on what an ideal Islamic education consisted of in this country. Some of the Muslim community leaders she interviewed in Melbourne expressed their fears that children were drifting away from Islam. They accepted that future Muslim children would also be Australian and did not want to isolate them, and had no difficulty with following an Australian curriculum as long as certain controversial subjects such as sex education were not enforced.

Irene Donohoue Clyne, who has written extensively on educating Muslim children in Australia⁷, stressed that ‘Islamic schools aim to educate children for life in what it is hoped will be a diverse and tolerant society, not to indoctrinate Muslims with un-Australian values’⁸.

She stressed again that from a Muslim perspective, it is the absence of a religious dimension which has prompted not only Muslim communities but also other faith communities to establish their own schools, with the particular difficulty for Muslims perceived to be that ‘the secular curriculum of state schools is Euro Centric with insufficient acknowledgement of other cultures and underpinned by Judeo-Christian values’.⁹ All participants in her research ‘wanted an education that reflected Islamic values and beliefs and which supported Muslim cultural practices’.¹⁰ In her thesis, she states that Muslims in Australia ‘believe that without positive teaching about Islam and Islamic cultures their children will be lost’, noting their concern that Australian schools ignore Islamic culture.¹¹

Noha Sanjakdar, who attended King Khalid Islamic College herself, did her research on why parents chose the school for their children. Like other researchers, she reports that what the parents were looking for was a school that would ‘immerse their children in an Islamic environment and study a curriculum underpinned with Islamic values and beliefs’.¹² For these parents, what mattered was that the college provided an environment that was free from drugs and permissive sex education but which also practised Islamic morals and values.

A survey of this early research and my own research interviews with some of the students who attended the first schools in their early days reveal a number of practical problems. Some of these problems have been addressed as time goes by and more schools are set up, and some remain as ongoing concerns.

The Islamic Schools Since 1983

The first two Islamic schools in Australia started in 1983, but had radically different origins. King Khalid Islamic College was a project of the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils (AFIC). Originating in the early 1970s, AFIC had initially focussed on halal meat certification but it also had a vision of starting an Islamic school in each of Australia's capital cities. Their Melbourne college started in a former Catholic primary school in Coburg which had burned down, while they were later able to develop a senior campus based on a nearby primary school closed down during the Kennett Government era.

Noor Al-Houda Islamic College in Sydney, on the other hand, had started out as the vision of Silma and Siddiq Buckley, both Anglo-Australian converts, whose daughter was turned away from Presbyterian Ladies' College for wanting to wear her hijab to school. The full story of their struggle to establish the school is told in *Bridges of Light: the struggle of an Islamic private school in Australia*, and was later the subject of a television programme, 'Silma's School'.¹³

One other school started up in Melbourne in the 1980s, The Islamic Schools of Victoria (Werribee College), sponsored by the Islamic Trust of Victoria. Later it changed its name to The Islamic Schools of Victoria (Al-Taqwa College). Its board opted for another approach to finding a site by purchasing land out on the southwest fringes of the conurbation, although it meant bussing ninety per cent of their students to the campus. The same approach was taken by AFIC with their new school, which opened in the same area at Tarneit in 2011.

During the first decade of these new colleges, several problems were already evident. The ethnic diversity within the Islamic community in Australia prevents it from being a homogenous community, and to this day this is reflected in the diversity of the organisations, let alone the individuals, who started each school. While Arabic is always taught as the language of the Qur'an, other secondary languages offered reflect this diversity, as well as what can be included in the curriculum with regard to subjects like art and music. While many of the schools would prefer gender segregation by high school level, none were really in a position to organise separate classes, apart from the Australian Islamic College in Perth, which offers a separate campus for girls in Years 8-10. Instead, boys and girls would sit apart in class or in assembly, or certain subjects were taught separately.

Even within AFIC, Begum pointed to tensions between AFIC based in Sydney and the Melbourne community. This tension was never resolved and eventually King Khalid Islamic College withdrew its connection with AFIC to go its own way so that it was not until 2011 that AFIC got started on another of its own schools, initially established as a Prep-4 campus, with plans to expand year by year.

Another problem for the schools has been in acquiring competent principals and trained staff. There has been a high turnover of principals over the years, though some



A group performing at a concert at the Islamic School, Preston Mosque, 1987.

Photo by Fouad El Hage, H92.250/1332.

schools have achieved more stability than others. Often the tension has been between the principal and the School Board or sponsoring organisation. Some Islamic schools have been prepared to temporarily employ non-Muslim principals while others state that the principal must be a Muslim.

Mujgan Berber, vice-principal of a Turkish school in Sydney, wrote his thesis on 'The role of the principal in establishing and further developing an Independent Christian or Islamic school in Australia'¹⁴ stating that the principal is most important for the establishment and further development of a newly formed school, because of their power to influence both their school and their community. His research was limited to the five principals of new Islamic schools in Sydney who responded to his questionnaire and he notes that three were the schools first principal and the other two were members of staff. Visiting Islamic schools in six cities over the period 2004-2011, I often found a new principal on returning to a school, while other principals had moved between different schools.

Some schools, as Donohoue Clyne points out, 'were opened by individuals for worthy motives, but without consideration of their educational viability'.¹⁵ As a result, they ran into problems over issues such as finances, grossly inadequate teaching resources

or finding a competent principal, and had to be closed down. An example here is the Muslim Ladies' College in Perth.

While a few schools have wholly Muslim staff, most have around fifty percent non-Muslim staff. As the schools build up to Year 12, they hope that some of their students will come back to teach there, and several former students that I interviewed had returned in that capacity, often making interesting observations on changes and improvements since their student days.

The Recent Growth of Islamic Schools and Increasing Opposition

A number of educational commentators have written on the growth of private schools in Australia after the Howard government came to power in 1996 making it much easier to start new private schools, particularly in terms of allocating funding. In 1997, there were fifteen Islamic schools in Australia. By 2008 that number had doubled, with a total of 15,938 students attending Islamic schools. With fifty percent of Australian Muslims living in Greater Sydney, it is not surprising that half the schools are in this area, though several of these are currently only primary schools. Some of them plan to expand each year, building up to Year 12, while others are constrained by space. Apart from Al-Noori Muslim School, which remains a primary school, the largest is the AFIC Malek Fahd Islamic School, started in 1989, which despite its selective entry system, is well known for its sign, 'There are 25,000 Muslim students in Sydney. We cannot take them all. No place in any class K-12'.

The main problem for the schools in Sydney is finding suitable space as attempts to start schools or expand existing schools or develop a new campus are frequently blocked by hostile councils. The biggest confrontation over a proposed new school was out in the south-western suburbs at Camden in 2008 when the Quranic Society sought planning permission for a new school. They ran into a hostile opposition that included two pig's heads being displayed on the proposed site and protests from local conservative church leaders. Racist political parties such as Fred Nile's Christian Democratic Party, Australia First and the Australian Protectionist Party also weighed in as well as Pauline Hanson. There were public meetings in Camden opposing the school along with heavy lobbying of the local Land and Environment Court and vitriolic abuse put up on hostile websites like the *Australian Islamist Monitor*.¹⁶ One of these public meetings was shown on *Four Corners*,¹⁷ including interviews with opponents of the school as well as with local Muslims. In the end the local Council rejected the application while other Sydney schools, such as Malek Fahd and Al Amanah College, have managed to secure a second campus after protracted campaigns.

There are various ways that local councils can raise objections to proposed new Islamic schools, some of which are mentioned by Silma Ihram in the story of her school, *Bridges of Light*. They include zoning, traffic, parking and planning issues. Two relatively new schools have been set up in the far south west of the Greater Sydney region without

opposition, Unity Grammar at Austral and Bellfield College at Rossmoyne. Bellfield College is one of two Shi'i schools in Australia, the other being Al Zahra in Arncliffe, but after a turnover of principals the current head of Bellfield College is a Catholic and a woman. Noor Al Houda at Strathfield was taken over by the Australian International Academy in 2006, which also opened an affiliated school in Abu Dhabi in the same year.

Not surprisingly, Melbourne has the second largest number of Islamic schools, all of which go through to Year 12, apart from the new AFIC school. Following King Khalid Islamic College (now the Australian International Academy) and Al-Taqwa, Minaret College at Springvale was founded in 1992, Ilm College in Broadmeadows in 1995 and East Preston Islamic College (EPIC) in 1997. This has created something of a pattern of Islamic schools in each corner of the city but inevitably involves a lot of travelling for some of the students. The more orthodox Darul Ulum College in Fawkner was also started just over a decade ago. Former students and staff have said that there is much more emphasis on faith education units at the school as well as strict segregation of the sexes but the school does not respond to requests for interviews.

There are much smaller Muslim communities in the other Australian states so they have only one or two schools, apart from Perth, which has three, and there are no schools as yet in Darwin or Hobart. In Brisbane there are now two schools, the AFIC affiliated Islamic College of Brisbane, founded in 1995, and the Australian International Islamic College (formerly the Brisbane Muslim School), sponsored by the Australian Islamic Educational Trust. The AFIC school has been slowly expanding with new buildings on the south side of the city and has now reached Year 12 classes. By contrast, the second school had to start up in 2002 in demountables, and caters mainly for new arrivals so there is a strong emphasis on ESL teaching.

Adelaide and Canberra have only one school each, both affiliated with AFIC. The Adelaide school is in a former state primary school, with the original buildings extended like many of the other Islamic schools, as a result of the Rudd government 'Nation Building' program funding for education, while the Canberra school finally moved out of its cramped quarters to a new site at Weston in 2011, enabling it to expand beyond Year 6. Many Canberra students here come from student families or members of the diplomatic community, making it somewhat different from the other Islamic schools.

Perth hosts the largest Islamic school in Australia with over 2,000 students accommodated on three campuses. The Australian Islamic College started in 1986 as the result of an initiative by Dr Abdullah Magar, originally from Egypt, and has one campus for girls in Years 8-10 as an option for its students. Dr Magar received some notoriety for being sent to jail for financial misappropriations but the school continues in his absence with members of his family still involved in running the school. The other two schools are Al-Hidayah Islamic School, started in 1994 as a primary school, and the AFIC school Langford Islamic College, which has now also reached Year 12 classes.

Faith Teaching in the Schools

Given the central place of faith teaching in the establishment of the Islamic schools and some of the wilder allegations about what is taught,¹⁸ it has been important to examine how Islam is taught in the schools. As with most other faith schools in Australia, all the Islamic schools teach the normal curriculum, plus six hours a week devoted to studying Arabic, the Qur'an and Islamic Studies. This can vary a little and tapers off in senior school when the focus is on passing pre-tertiary exam subjects, although some states offer a pre-tertiary Religious Studies course as an option. Minaret College in Springvale has attracted a number of its senior students to study Islam for the VCE by developing a course tailored to this level.

While there are obvious advantages for native Arabic speakers when it comes to learning Arabic, several of the students interviewed during my research pointed out that in many cases, such students may have spoken 'street Arabic' at home but there are many different dialects in Arabic, and it did not necessarily mean that a native Arabic speaker had an advantage when it came to learning the classical Arabic of the Qur'an. Some schools had separate classes for non-Arabic speakers when learning the language, but the main issue when it came to Arabic classes was the standard of teaching. Particularly with the early schools, virtually anyone who spoke Arabic was enlisted as a teacher, often when they were not trained as teachers in the first place and sometimes when they did not even speak adequate English. While this situation has undoubtedly improved, many students spoke disparagingly of their Arabic teachers, and some said they had only learned Arabic by going to weekend school at the mosque. What was clear was that they did appreciate a *hafiz* (someone who has memorised the Qur'an) who spoke beautiful Arabic, and in particular the younger imams who could relate to them as well and had lived in Australia long enough to understand the culture.

Sometimes one of the imams at the school would also teach Arabic but many of the imams did not come from the Arab world although most had studied there. All the schools have at least one imam, while some have several. Sometimes they are connected with a local mosque as well but they are key figures in all the schools, consulted on all manner of issues, ranging from dress codes to the suitability of the curriculum and texts or films. They usually take classes on Qur'anic Studies and Islamic Studies as well as arranging assemblies, prayers and the important Friday noon prayer.

As in Europe, most imams are still educated overseas and it remains a priority for the Muslim community in Australia to one day be able to set up an institution to train imams in Australia, although this training can still be supplemented by travel to the great centres of learning in other countries, like Al-Azhar in Cairo. School imams come not only from the Arab world but from North Africa, Iran, India, Burma, Indonesia, Fiji, South Africa and East Turkestan. A few schools are now insisting on teacher training in Australia and more imams are now university qualified than in the early days of the schools. Some imams seem to double-up as counsellors or offer what amounts to private

tuition to students who want to learn more. Others endear themselves to their classes by being flexible enough to suggest going out and playing soccer when their students are not in learning mode. The ones who clearly alienated their students were ones who expressed prejudice against other sects or faiths, who compared Islam in Australia unfavourably with a purer form of Islam found overseas or who simply had no idea how to teach, especially at high school level.

The lack of Australian teaching materials is also a disadvantage. Materials come mainly from South Africa and the United States, which is not always relevant to young Australians, and more enterprising teachers have prepared their own sheets and games for younger students. At primary level great emphasis is placed on learning good manners, appropriate dress and etiquette, learning what is *haram* (religiously prohibited), learning how to pray, and learning stories about the Prophet and the *sahaba* (Companions of the Prophet). Schools vary in terms of time to worship together, some starting with an assembly, others holding the noon prayers. Some schools have trained students to deliver short presentations on appropriate themes. Senior male students can even lead the prayers at times. A few schools have their own mosque while most make do with a large room or meet outside, boys and girls standing on different sides. Some schools have a nearby mosque they can use.

In terms of the Muslim calendar, there are 2-3 day breaks for the two most important Muslim festivals, the Eid al-Fitr and the Eid al-Adha, while school might finish an hour early or homework be curtailed during Ramadan. At primary school, students could start fasting when their parents felt it was appropriate, and often might last out half the day before heading for a drink and a snack kept ready in case of need. Others would fast for a few days, gradually extending the time as they got older. At high school it seemed to have no effect on physical activity and sport, but clearly it must have been tough a few years ago when pre-tertiary exams in November coincided with the long days of Ramadan between dawn and dusk.

One primary school in Sydney had gone as far as re-enacting the *hajj* in the school grounds over two or three days and inviting other schools to join them while the two Shi'i schools also commemorated the most important Shi'i event, Ashura. When asked about any perceived differences in prayer between Sunni and Shi'i students, imams in all the other schools where students were predominantly Sunni said they did raise the issue sometimes in discussion but nobody made a big issue of it.

Zakat as one of the five pillars of Islam was central to all of the schools, which put as much emphasis on fundraising activities for charity as other Australian schools. Some of the causes were specifically for the Muslim community, like sponsoring a school in Afghanistan, but many others were for familiar Australian causes like the Fred Hollows Foundation, the Red Cross or for victims of the Victorian bushfires. In one high school older students were regular blood donors, and many schools took part in conservation activities, ranging from tree planting to Clean Up Australia Day.

One of the principal charges laid by critics of the Islamic schools is that they teach the students to hate Jews and Christians,¹⁹ but most of the schools with older classes have an extensive outreach dialogue programmes, particularly since the events of September 2001. Some cities, like Melbourne, have programmes like Building Bridges, which bring students together from Islamic, Jewish and Christian schools. On one occasion, when I was visiting the Australian International Academy Primary School in Coburg, there were two Muslims, two Jews and two Christians addressing students, then discussing what was halal or kosher over morning tea.

My own Year 11-12 Studies in Religion class from Hobart visits the Australian International Academy every year to meet a ‘living’ Muslim community, as there is only a small one in Hobart and no school, although we do visit the local mosque opened in September 2005. On our last visit, we heard an entertaining account of his conversion to Islam by an Australian visiting speaker who had the whole senior student audience roaring with laughter when he spoke about his initial visit to the mosque as part of his spiritual search and what he expected to find there.

However, a number of former students who I asked about their involvement in dialogue outreach offered criticism of the process of selection for these programmes, complaining that only the brighter students were chosen and they did not have enough time for informal conversation afterwards, which was what they really valued. Given figures that indicate that prejudice against Muslims is strongest when people have never met a Muslim and know nothing about the faith, the problem appears to be more that there are not enough schools to meet the demand for outreach and dialogue, and that older students have their studies to attend to as well.

An Islamic Curriculum?

An area of concern for some Muslim parents is to what extent the rest of the curriculum can be described as ‘Islamic’. Does an Islamic school simply teach the national curriculum, with an Islamic component tacked on, or does Islam pervade the whole curriculum? Obviously the schools satisfy basic requirements like providing halal food, prescribing Islamic dress codes and observing time for prayers and appropriate commemorations in the Islamic calendar. Boys wear long shorts for physical education and team games such as soccer or basketball, girls wear the appropriate cover, usually with long skirts and scarves. If swimming is possible, it is segregated; a few schools have a pool, most use a council pool if there are facilities for segregated sessions. What sports are provided seems to vary on what is available, but opportunities for playing in local school rosters have improved and there is now an Islamic School Sports Association in Melbourne. Primary schools seem more flexible about dress for girls but this varies from school to school.

In terms of the formal curriculum, part of the problem is that most of the schools have up to fifty percent non-Muslim staff. A Muslim maths or science teacher might be able to mention Islam’s contribution to knowledge in these areas but others simply stick

to the curriculum. Asked about teaching creation science, which is an issue with some conservative Christian schools, teachers usually said that they teach evolution theory where required and leave any alternative views to the Islamic Studies teacher. Students interviewed said it wasn't a big issue and they were aware there were different theories, given that there is not a single 'Islamic view' on the subject. The main thing was to pass their exams by following the ordained curriculum.

A bigger problem was Art and Music. Some schools just did not have the staff or facilities to teach Art, but nor do many other Australian schools, especially the smaller ones. Others said they taught appropriate Islamic Art, with emphasis often on calligraphy, but avoiding portraying the human form. This is another area where there is no single Islamic view but it is an issue for some conservative Muslims and I met a few students who were very firm about not drawing the human form in art. Some students with a more creative inclination felt deprived and left school early to attend other schools where they could pursue their interest.

Music was even more contentious as there are so many different views about music amongst Muslims.²⁰ Several principals said they did not include it because they were aware that more conservative parents would object. Others allowed certain forms of music. *Nasheeds* (religious songs) were seen as part of Islam, along with instruments like the *oud*, and some former students from one school gave me a long list of groups and singers they loved to listen to which they had decided were appropriate for them. Others admitted that students plugged in their earphones once they were out of school and listened to popular music like anyone else of their age.

Views on appropriate texts in English varied as well. Many English teachers were non-Muslims and taught those texts they were supposed to cover. If there were any references they felt were dubious, such as those involving sex or alcohol, then the principal or imam would have a look at it. In some schools, all texts and films were subject to scrutiny before being used. Many of the students enjoyed texts such as *Looking for Alibrandi* because it described experiences they could identify with, while more recently English teachers were able to get their students reading Randa Abdel-Fattah's Young Adult novels such as *Does My Head Look Big in This?* and *Ten Things I Hate About Me*.²¹ At one school in Sydney, the author had come to talk to the students in person which was a great highlight.

In Studies of Society and the Environment (SOSE) there was a similar issue, given the Euro-centric nature of the curriculum. Windle has done some research on SOSE textbooks in this respect, reporting that Islam's contribution to world history is largely left out, apart from perhaps a reference to the Crusades.²² A few Muslim SOSE teachers said that they added some awareness on the subject themselves by referring to Islam's contribution to world history. They felt that this would give their students some pride in their identity, rather than thinking that all progress had only come from the West.

The Values Education Debate

When Brendan Nelson was Minister for Education in the Howard government (2001-2006), he triggered the Australian values debate after reporting in 2003 that concerned citizens across the country had written to him alleging that anti-Christian and anti-Western sentiments were being fostered amongst students at Islamic schools. As a result he had written to state counterparts asking them to ensure Islamic schools were meeting curriculum requirements and not encouraging such sentiments. This culminated in the government issuing its list of official Australian values and schools being sent a poster with this list to display somewhere. Following the example of other countries in Europe and North America, the government also developed a citizenship test, which emphasised an understanding and knowledge of what were perceived to be Australian values.

Much of the debate focused on the allegation that somehow Islamic values were incompatible with 'Judeo-Christian' values which formed the basis of Australian values. The implication was that Muslims did not fit into Australian society. Apart from the fact that the concept of Judeo-Christian values is a very recent and artificial construct, given the long history of Christian anti-Semitism, the debate in Australia seemed to polarise over what critics alleged was the incompatibility of the so-called value systems.

In 2005, one Muslim student in Melbourne had tried out an early on-line citizenship test, which included the question: Australian Values are based on (a) Judeo-Christian tradition, (b) Qur'anic teaching; (c) secular or something else?

She knew perfectly well what the official correct answer was but, like all other students asked, said she saw no incompatibility between what they were taught in school as Islamic values and what the government declared to be Australian values. Some students from Melbourne and Sydney schools had been invited to address Values Education conferences and a number of schools had emphasised Values Education after 2003 or already addressed it in different ways. The issue once again came to the fore during the heated opposition to the proposed Camden school in 2008-2009 but it is patently obvious that here the community was dealing with a form of Islamophobia that will never be reconciled. However, educational leaders in the Sydney Muslim community like Dr Intaj Ali from Malek Fahd Islamic College did agree that they needed to be more transparent and reach out to the wider community to allay unfounded fears about their faith and their schools.

Conclusion

Given that the Muslim population of Australia will continue to increase, as the recent (2011) census is expected to indicate, so too will the demand for more Islamic schools. Even so, most young Muslims will not have the opportunity to attend these schools, because their parents cannot afford it, or there is no school near where they live and they cannot afford the school bus levy. Some parents have no problem with the state schools or they can afford other independent schools which have the high academic standard

that they aspire to. Weekend schools can also still supplement parental learning about Islam at home. Although a number of people have spoken of fears that these schools would form a ghetto mentality, it is clear that in nearly all cases the schools encourage outreach into the wider community, though this was not always the case in the early days when students sometimes spoke of living in a 'bubble'.

Few students that I interviewed felt that going to an Islamic school had isolated them from other young Australians. Some said it took a while to adapt to university life and the strong emphasis on alcohol and boy-girl relationships, but most said that going to their school had strengthened their faith and they had plenty of opportunities to mix with other students in their local community. Many of them had attended other schools at some point, while a significant number had left their Islamic high schools to go to other schools or colleges for further education. This was for a variety of reasons, both positive and negative. In some cases it was to study courses not on offer at their school, at other times, it was because of a feeling of alienation.

Nonetheless the demand is clearly there, as most Islamic schools report long waiting lists. The schools receive substantial amounts of government funding based on the low socio-economic status of the areas where most of them are situated. The problems, as with other small faith-based private schools, still remain: having adequate sponsorship and support from the community as well as knowledge of how the system works, getting well trained staff and an experienced principal, and in the long run, having properly trained imams qualified in Australia as well as Australian teaching materials.