

Feedback Strategies for Essays with Islamic Content: A Qualitative Study of Faculty at Islamic Higher Education

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Abstract

This qualitative study provides insight into the methods of providing feedback employed by ten faculty members from three higher education institutions in Indonesia when evaluating student papers containing Islamic content. This research provides insight into a significant gap in understanding how to provide feedback when the professor has no formal background in Islamic educational tradition. The study uses interpretive phenomenological analysis to analyze semi-structured interviews with the participants. Once their interviews were transcribed, the interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis. The analysis highlighted three fundamental dimensions to teacher experiences: (1) professional challenges when engaged with Islamic content including, difficulty in recognizing Islamic content and feeling less than authoritative, (2) teacher adaptive coping strategies including collaborating with consultation networks and resource utilization including digital tools for reference and academic resources support in providing feedback. The participants demonstrated impressive adaptability for developing innovative pedagogical approaches while initially struggling with ambiguity and challenges to their professional identity. This study adds to the growing literature on culturally responsive pedagogy and religious literacy in higher education contexts, and has provided practical recommendations for professional faculty development and institutional support systems. This study has provided insight-based recommendations for improving the quality of education within religiously diverse educational contexts.

Keywords: feedback strategies; Islamic education; higher education; religious content; academic writing

INTRODUCTION

The modern higher education landscape has changed dramatically over the last few decades and become increasingly diverse and multicultural, serving student bodies that drawing from diverse cultural, religious, and educational contexts (Abicoglu et al, 2023; Sanger, 2020). While the intention of this diversification should be viewed as an enhancement to the learning process, it can add complex challenges for institutions of higher education that are trying to maintain academic integrity while also valuing diverse systems of knowledge and world views (Celik & Razi, 2023; Eaton, 2024). While all systems of higher education can be considered "diverse," Islamic higher education systems occupy a very specific context where religious knowledge co-exists with disciplines of knowledge that can pose unique pedagogical challenges as well as pedagogical advantages for educators (Gumanti et al, 2023; Mazzei, 2024).

Islamic higher education systems, such as traditional madrasas and current Islamic universities, serve as crucial bridges between classical Islamic epistemological traditions and contemporary academic disciplines (Khairuddin & Siddik, 2025; Maimunah et al, 2021). These hybrid systems are intended to situate Islamic epistemological approaches in tandem with modern representations of teaching and learning and create learning environments that allow students to consider the symbiotic relationship of their faith and academic endeavors (Mahmudah et al, 2023; Ubaidillah and Faiz, 2025). Indeed, students often embed Islamic perspectives, references, and content into their academic writing across disciplines in the humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, and professional programs (Afolabi, 2023; Nuryaman and Rifai, 2024). This approach aligns with the essential attributes of Islamic education, which has traditionally viewed knowledge as inseparable rather than divided into secular and religious boxes (Al Razi et al, 2024; Husna et al, 2023). The incorporation of Islamic content in academic writing has potential opportunities and obstacles for students and educators. Students frequently draw upon Islamic intellectual traditions, including Quranic exegesis, prophetic traditions (Hadith), Islamic jurisprudence (Fiqh), and the writings of classical and contemporary Islamic scholars to support their academic arguments (Al Kausar, 2024; Hussain and Davvies, 2024), which gives them a chance to have their authentic voices that are representative of their cultural and religious background in discussions and debates in the academic world (Mallizal,

2025), and yet it potentially suggests that educators must hold sufficient breadth of understanding Islamic knowledge systems to frame meaningful and appropriate feedback on academic work that has Islamic content integrated (Abdeltawab et al, 2024; Alkouatli, 2024).

Providing meaningful feedback about student writing has long been seen as a core tenet of a quality education, and feedback has consistently been noted as one of the most powerful levers for fostering student learning and academic progress (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Sadler, 1989). Educational research is clear that effective, well-structured feedback has the potential to increase student motivation, achievement, and learning (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). Feedback studies, such as the work of Hattie and Timperley (2007), show that effective feedback must answer three basic questions: "Where am I going?" (feed up) which outlines learning goals and criteria for success; "How am I going?" (feed back) - which describe how the student is currently progressing to the learning goals; and "Where to next" (feed forward) which considers the student next steps to improve and continue learning.

However, when student writing has religious content, especially Islamic perspectives and references, the complexity of providing appropriate feedback becomes much greater, especially for faculty who do not have an educational background in Islam (Irawan, 2020; Riwanda et al, 2024). The challenges are larger than not being familiar with the content and goes to issues of authority, cultural sensitivity, religious authenticity, and navigational balance of academic rigor and respectfulness towards a religious perspective (Astuti et al, 2024). Faculty members also have to navigate the complexities of maintaining their primary responsibility of fostering their students' learning and experiences of academic growth (Riwanda et al, 2024).

There is a growing literature that identifies the multiplicitous challenges faced by teachers in multicultural and multi-religious educational environments. Karatas (2020) asserts that culturally responsive teaching will require teachers to also possess cultural competence and sensitivity to multiple knowledge systems and ways of knowing in addition standard pedagogical skills. This cultural competence means understanding how someone's culture and cultural background shapes their approach to learning, the way they communicate, and their approach to constructing knowledge (Zimmer et al, 2024). In the same vein, Gay (2018) identifies that in contexts with diverse populations and contexts for teaching, effective teaching will require teachers to understand the cultural references of the students and affirm diverse ways of seeing the world, and learning within the required academic standards of the knowledge field and navigating the rigor required of scholarship.

Culturally responsive pedagogy has changed in a way to recognize that effective education must recognize and build on the cultural wealth that students bring to their learning experiences (Gist et al, 2025). In relation to Islamic higher education, this notion supports and affirms Islamic knowledge traditions as sources of genuine insight and understanding, and not obstacles toward academic achievement or distractions from academic discourse (Christopher and Revell, 2024; Hanafi, 2022). Acknowledging Islamic knowledge traditions is complicated because educators have to learn a new array of skills and competencies that go beyond their conventional disciplinary training (Memon et al, 2024; Nuryaman and Rifai, 2024).

In addition, the institutional context of Islamic higher education raises quite an issue for faculty and educators who may not have been formally trained in Islamic studies, nor are they accustomed to a pedagogical background called traditional Islamic educational practice. For example, faculty trained in secular universities or viewed themselves in a traditional academic discipline, would likely find themselves (and the students) in the quandary of respecting the academic integrity of the student's work against the religious authenticity of the student's work (Sahin, 2018). The conflict could escalate further, especially when the student provides their arguments using citations from the Quran, hadith (prophetic traditions), concepts of Islamic jurisprudence, or mentioning classical Islamic scholar. In such cases, faculty will be tasked with the issue of assessing 'accuracy' or 'appropriateness', and 'interpretation' while being mindful of their own limited Islamic knowledge.

To complicate matters, Islamic knowledge systems have established and follow particular methodological rules and epistemologies; which follows different logic unknown or unfamiliar to faculty trained in secular academic norms (Lumbard, 2022). For example, in Islamic academic discourse, scriptural reference has specific rules of interpretation and application that require understanding classical Arabic, how it relates to jurisprudential methodology, as well as the evolution of Islamic thought. Without such background knowledge, it would be difficult for faculty to determine if their students are using Islamic sources in an effective and appropriate way.

The increased mobility of academic professionals caused by the globalization of higher education makes the situation even more complex, since it has also led to an increasingly diverse faculty body across colleges and universities worldwide. Many Islamic colleges and universities now employ faculty from a range of educational and cultural backgrounds, not least, from colleagues who do not possess any formal Islamic education. Based on the data from PDDikti, 75% of faculty members in English Department homebase from 10 State University are not educated in Islamic Higher Education Institutions. While diversity adds richness to the academic context and provides institutions with expertise that they would otherwise lack, it can also generate new challenges for faculty assurance to provide feedback on student work, if it includes Islamic content.

The employed faculty members' diversity is consistent with the radical change in higher education that has focused on developing internationalization as well as the expanded belief that excellent research and scholarship could emerge from a variety of educational systems and cultural traditions (Amblee and Dhayanithy, 2018). However, the employment of a diverse faculty body requires back-up systems and professional development opportunities to help faculty develop competencies to work in Islamic educational contexts (Nor et al, 2024). Without this support, institutions can create contexts in which faculty do not feel prepared to educate students, nor do students receive meaningful feedback that attends to the integrated nature of their learning. Recently, researchers have begun to consider these issues, and revealed marked differences in faculty confidence, competency, and approaches to dealing with religious content in to understand the content of students' work. Research has suggested that faculty lack confidence and feel anxious and uncertain when faced with hiring when engaging with new content (Towers et al, 2022). While this is understandable, it misses an opportunity to give students meaningful feedback that makes more explicit connections to how they can build their capacity to make meaning of religious and academic perspectives in their work.

This research is designed to respond to a significant gap in the literature by investigating what it is like for non-Islamic educated faculty experiences when providing feedback on student essays that contain Islamic content. More specifically, it will focus on three key dimensions that emerged as central to faculty experiences: the professional challenges faculty faced when presented with Islamic content in student work, the adaptive strategies they developed to respond to these challenges and provide useful feedback, and how they utilized these dimensions to provide feedback and develop as professionals.

There are three research questions guiding this inquiry: What are the challenges faced by faculty providing feedback on student writing that draws from Islamic traditions? What strategies have faculty used to successfully provide feedback and develop professionally in this context? What resources helped faculty provide feedback and develop professionally in this situation? Collectively, these three dimensions offer a comprehensive perspective on the experiences and challenges faced by faculty in these contexts to support individual faculty development and institutional systems to provide more effective opportunities for feedback. The implications of the findings in this research go beyond Islamic higher education institutions and the scope of this research, although it does contribute to our understanding of specific understandings about Islam. The findings also inform any educational context where faculty engage with student writing that involves unfamiliar cultural, religious, or knowledge traditions.

As higher education continues to diversify and globalize, the experiences of faculty in Islamic institutions provide opportunities to learn more about educational spaces needing to provide culturally responsive and high-quality education for more diverse student bodies. Faculty who practices effective management of cultural and religious difference in their teaching and feedback practices provide useful case studies that can be used to develop practice-focused, inclusive educational methods that respect both the pursuit of excellence and culturally responsive inclusion.

METHODS

This research adopted a qualitative research design with interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) to explore the experiences of faculty members who provided feedback on student essays that contained Islamic content. The phenomenological approach was selected for the opportunity to examine and explore participants' experiences and perceptions, as well as the processes through which they created meaning (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). IPA is useful to explore a more complex and often under-researched phenomenon where it is important to understand about individual experience and interpretation.

Respondents

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling from three Islamic higher education institutions. The selection criteria included the following: (1) faculty members currently teaching a course that includes essay writing; (2) educators who commonly interact with student work with Islamic content; (3) faculty members who did not pursue their primary education and their further education from Islamic education institutions; and (4) two or more years of teaching experience in Islamic higher education contexts. There were a total of ten faculty members that participated in this study. Ranging in teaching experience from 2 years to 10 years, the ages of the participants fell between 26 and 48 years. All participants had a (Masters or PhD) from secular universities, and all were employed at an Islamic university or college.

Instruments

Data collection procedures

The data collection process was undertaken using open ended questionnaire. The questionnaire item was generated from the literature review and pilot tests with two faculty members not involved in the present study. The focus of the protocol was based on the three target areas regarding the study's research questions: Professional Challenges - Including participants' view on the difficulties faced in providing feedback about Islamic content, Adaptive Strategies - Including the specific strategies and coping mechanisms developed to cope with the identified difficulties, Resource Utilization- Including the different resources utilized to help provide feedback and support building knowledge

Data analysis

Data analysis followed the IPA framework outlined by Smith et al. (2009), involving six stages: (1) Reading and Re-reading: Multiple readings of transcripts to achieve immersion and familiarity; (2) Initial Noting: Detailed line-by-line analysis noting descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual elements; (3) Developing Emergent Themes: Transformation of initial notes into concise themes; (4) Searching for Connections: Identification of patterns and relationships between themes; (5) Moving to the Next Case: Repetition of analysis process for each participant and (6) Looking for Patterns: Cross-case analysis to identify superordinate themes. A reflexive approach was maintained throughout the analysis process, with the researcher keeping detailed analytical memos and regularly discussing findings with academic colleagues to enhance credibility. The analysis specifically focused on identifying themes related to the three core research areas: professional challenges, adaptive strategies, and resource utilization. This focused approach allowed for deep exploration of these key dimensions while maintaining the phenomenological emphasis on participants' lived experiences.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis produced three superordinate themes that describe the key aspects of participants' experiences: (1) Professional Challenges in Assessing Islamic Content, (2) Transition Strategies and Coping Tactics, and (3) Resource Use and knowledge Building. These themes represent the focused inquiry into the core parts of faculty experience when commenting on Islamic content in student writing.

Professional Challenges in Assessing Islamic Content

In different ways, all participants described significant challenges when engaging with Islamic content in student work, which impacted their confidence, teaching behaviour, and professional identity. This

theme encapsulates the complexities of working outside of their zone of experience while attempting to maintain an academic approach.

a. Recognition and verification challenges

Nine of the ten participants talked about having initial challenges with recognition and verification of content in student work that referenced Islamic principles or Islamic scholars. Teacher 1 explained, *"When students reference obscure Islamic scholars or use classical texts, often I cannot tell if the sources they are using are legitimate, or they are just claiming with authority something that is not true."*

Teacher 2 described the challenges of evaluating arguments made by students about Islamic principles regarding jurisprudence, *"In my International Relations course students draw on Islamic principles of governance or international law, but I do not have the background to determine if the interpretations offered are mainstream opinion, minority opinion, or their own interpretation."*

Teacher 3 has noted the thoughtful philosophical complexity here: *"With a philosophy paper on Islamic epistemology or a philosophy paper on ethics from the perspective of some individual or community of Muslims, I have a way to assess their logical reasoning, but I can't know whether they understand and represent the traditions of Islamic philosophy well."*

b. Questions of Authority and Legitimacy

All of the participants face a mundane problem of questioning the authority to assess Islamic content. Teacher 3 stated: *"As an instructor of philosophy, I can assess whether there is good logical argumentation; but if a student makes a claim about epistemology or ethics based on Islam, I have no way to question whether they actually have authority to make that claim on behalf of their religion."*

Teacher 4 pointed out how there is more academic and religious authority at stake with this issue: *"In economics, if a student supports some expansion of Islamic banking in practice, I can assess the claims for economic rationality; but I do not have any way to assess whether or not their understanding of Islamic finance jurisprudence is accurately informed."*

Teacher 5 describes this concern in more relative historical contexts: *"Sometimes students are stating Islamic historical narratives that oppose historical secular scholarship. I struggle with how to appropriately challenge those differences with historical evidence, and not to be responding in a way that rejects Islamic narratives."*

c. Struggling with Rigor and Respectful Religious Perspective

Eight participants described struggles to maintain a scholarly rigor, while relying on religious perspectives and treating those perspectives with attention and respect. Teacher 6 described one such struggle: *"Students sometimes make sweeping generalizing claims about Islamic perspectives on language or society, but do not academic evidence those claims. I want to challenge them academically, but not look like I am rejecting their religious perspectives."* Teacher 7, too, had comparable struggles in sociology: *"I want to be supportive for students who position Islamic values to advance a social argument, but need to help them differentiate between religious tenets and evidence-based resources from social science and feel like I can do this in as respectful a way as possible."*

d. Confidence and Professional Identity Leverage

All participants affirmed that these tensions influenced their confidence as educators. Teacher 7 described: *"I sometimes feel like I'm failing my students because I can't provide the richness of feedback they need on the topics they obviously care about and have a vested interest in as part of their academic progress."*

Teacher 8 expressed the pressure of professional identity: *"I sometimes feel like an imposter when students articulate Islamic approaches which I have no background in."*

Teacher 9 described our experience more holistically: *"This condition question my knowledge of the discipline and also become critical of my effectiveness as an educator in this setting"*

Adaptive Pathways and Coping Strategies

Despite significant tensions, all participants were able to develop something imaginative and able to provide some degree of meaningful feedback, while recognizing their limitations. This theme attempts to describe the creative solutions and professional adaptations that instructors developed through practice.

a. Collaborative Consultation Networks

All ten participants established some form of collaboration with faculty in Islamic studies or with someone from a religious scholar background. Teacher 9 described his systemic approach: *"I've relationships with three teachers from Islamic studies faculty. Sometimes I asked them if I have any questions related to Islamic Content."* Teacher 10 developed an innovative peer review process: *"I asked my friend from other major if the Islamic content is too difficult"*

Teacher 2 created an institutional model: *"I consulted with my friend from Islamic Studies department to verify Islamic references, or at least get a brief explanation of a concept."*

Teacher 6 created informal networks: *"I make a point of having coffee with my Islamic studies colleagues. During these meetings, we debrief challenging student work, and it's amazing how helpful it can be to have others share their experiences and insights, even if it's just informal consultation."*

b. Digital Resources

While all participants were using digital resources, the participants did so to a variety of degrees of success. For example, Teacher 6 stated, *"I checked a variety of reputable Islamic reference sources, theological dictionaries, and academic articles that gives some indication of concepts students are talking about."*

Teacher 4 created a checking mechanism, *"I check at least two online Islamic databases to confirm the citations students provide. If I see that a couple of scholar sources talk about consistent, distinct concepts, then I feel a bit more comfortable about the accuracy."*

Teacher 2 mentioned about the use of AI, *"I have experience of using AI, but I learned later that the answer could vary widely in quality. Now, I use a reference or source from a colleague who is an academic study of Islamic studies and academic databases only."*

Teacher 9 also had experience with AI, *"Before AI era, I check and compare two or three websites, but now using ChatGpt is easier"*.

c. Print and Reference Resources

The eight participants had developed their own personal reference libraries of Islamic concepts, terminology that they were referring to in their disciplines. For example, Teacher 3 explained, *"I borrowed some reference works of Islamic philosophy and theological dictionaries. It is nice to have the physical books to refer to when I am providing feedback and I can look up what I know of the concept."*

Teacher 5 explained his is methodical, *"The first couple of reference works I had were the later, I ended up getting key reference works on Islamic history, civilization, and intellectual tradition. I also have a personal glossary of terms that there are terms I recognize that students include in their work."*

Discussion

The results of this study reveal a complex web of professional factors that faculty face when providing feedback on students' essays that included Islamic content, especially when these faculty are not formally trained in Islamic studies. The three superordinate themes that emerged from this interpretive phenomenological analysis speak to the professional factors and remarkable flexibility of faculty immersed in Islamic higher education contexts.

The professional challenges uncovered in this study go well beyond being unfamiliar with content; they reveal fundamental questions of epistemological authority and academic legitimacy. The tension the participants felt with recognizing, and verifying, Islamic sources of information is a function

Lumbard (2022) illustrated with differing methodologies, or their different ways of knowing. For example, when Teacher 1 indicated some uncertainty about their ability to distinguish between legitimate Islamic scholarship and possible fallacious claims, this clearly demonstrates a shortcoming in faculty formal preparation that has broad implications for quality teaching and student learning.

The concerns participants raised about issues of authority and legitimacy were illustrative of a deeper concern around authenticity and culture in Islamic higher education institutions. Teacher 3 observed that being able to assess sound logic - syllogistically - does little to indicate if an individual's evaluation is 'culturally' or 'religiously' authentic. This idea parallels the work of Karatas (2020) and Gay (2018) regarding culturally responsive pedagogy in that effective teaching in diverse contexts requires more than disciplinary expertise, it requires "a culturally competent educator with sensitivities to multiple systems of knowledge" (Karataş, 2020, p. 69). Negotiating academic rigor and respectful engagement with religious ways of knowing demonstrates what we might term "epistemological navigation," or how to reconcile scholarly integrity while acknowledging the multiplicity of ways of knowing. The challenge is especially pressing and pertinent for Islamic higher education because, as Al Razi et al. (2024) noted, the notion of knowledge is often seen as integrated in traditional Islamic scholarship instead of differentiated between secular and religious. The experiences of the participants indicate that integration requires new approaches that may not be addressed by faculty development approaches historically used.

Interestingly, the impacts on all participants' professional confidence and identity reflect the faculty anxiety of engaging with knowledge about content they are not necessarily familiar with, as noted by Towers et al. (2022). The novelty is accountability in different ways that contextually specific to religiously diverse educational contexts. Citing Teacher 8 stating they felt "like a fraud" and Teacher 9 questioning effectiveness of the disciplinary, means these encounters challenge not only their pedagogical practices, but their personal and professional identity and self-worth.

The adaptive strategies the participants were able to develop also represent a tremendous professional resilience and creativity. The universal engagement in collaborative consultation networks suggest faculty have an instinctive awareness of what Gist et al. (2025) referred to as engaging with the cultural wealth that students bring to the learning experiences. These networks were not basic help-seeking behaviours for the colleagues to supplement their practice, they were a form of professional learning community identified by their focus on culturally relevant pedagogy. The systematic means of becoming competent utilized by participants in this study, such as Teacher 9's relationships with Islamic studies faculty and Teacher 6's informal consultations over coffee, indicate the emergence of a perduring form of "collaborative competence-building." This study finding implies that successful responses to cultural and religious diversity in higher education would require institutional configurations that would enable collaboration and competence-building with other colleagues rather than individual faculty having to build competencies in isolation.

Having reported differing use of digital resources, the findings demonstrate both the affordances and constraints within technology-supported faculty development. While some participants (e.g., Teacher 4) developed systematic means of verifying information through numerous Islamic databases, others like Teacher 2 who explored AI encountered both perceptions in a singular instance. There appears to be a consistency in rationale regarding the inconsistency of AI "answers" when querying Islamic content, demonstrating that technology can not supplant the need for substantive cultural and religious knowledge. Human expertise and consulting networks continue to be emphasized in this study.

The establishment of a personal reference library for eight participants served as a form of self-directed professional development that provides insights on institutional forms of support. Teacher 5's

deliberate approach to developing a personal glossary implies that faculty can develop functional competency over time, but the early stages could have benefitted from institutional forms of support. The patterns of resource use presented in this study confirmed the complexities of knowledge building within cross-cultural educational contexts. The convergence of collaborative networks, digital technologies, and traditional reference materials indicates that navigating Islamic content in a meaningful way will require what could be called a "multi-modal competency approach."

The participants' reliance on colleagues in Islamic studies departments indicates re-evaluated collaborative networks can be useful for interdisciplinary work as academic units in higher education institutions. However, the informal nature of many of these interactions raises questions about sustainability and equity. Some faculty may have access to and comfort level to reach out to Islamic studies colleagues, creating potential inequities in the type of feedback students receive.

The trajectory of digital resource use, notably including the cautious embrace of AI teaching tools, reflects the shifting nature of academic practice. Teacher 2's learning process with AI, wherein they initially found it a helpful resource and subsequently had to contend with variations in quality of responses, reveals the need for one-to-one faculty development that is industry-led and encourages the critical evaluation of new technologies for academic purposes.

The study demonstrates the contribution of religious diversity to the discussion of culturally responsive pedagogy and specific challenges posed to traditional modes of faculty preparation. The participants' experience shows Gay (2018)'s framework of cultural responsiveness should also include what might be conceived as "epistemological responsiveness", the extent to which educators can recognize, respect, and appropriately interact with different systems of knowledge and truth claims.

The study also highlights the inability of individual solutions to what are in effect institutional problems. Though participants exhibited noteworthy adaptability, their experiences imply that Islamic higher education institutions need to adopt systematic approaches to faculty development that extend beyond disciplinary focus. This is consistent with Memon et al. (2024) and Nuryaman and Rifai (2024), who advocate for new competency frameworks in Islamic educational contexts.

Sources discovered several areas in which Islamic higher education institutions may introduce more effective faculty support systems. First, the near-universal reliance of participant faculty on their collaborative consultation networks indicates a timely opportunity where institutions develop formalized mentoring or partnership programs, to link faculty from disparate disciplinary backgrounds. Such programs could ensure more equitable access to Islamic studies expertise while encouraging reciprocal learning.

Second, the inconsistency in participant faculty success with digital resources implies the need for institutional endorsement on trustworthy sources for verifying Islamic content. Institutions could create centrally curated databases or resource guides that willing faculty could utilize with confidence in offering feedback upon student work.

Third, the creation of personal reference libraries by all study participants implies that institutions could provide starter collections or recommended readings for faculty working in Islamic educational contexts. This may help balance the rapid development of individual competencies, while ensuring more quality will be evinced in student feedback.

While this study provides important validation of different faculty experiences towards Islamic content in student writing, there are several limitations that need to be recognized. First, the fact that the study consisted of ten faculty members from three institutions is reasonable given a phenomenological study proposal, it does restrict the overall study findings from further generalizability. Future studies may remark upon the similar phenomena with a wider range of institutions and cultures.

Second, this study was only concerned with examining faculty understandings and experiences. Future studies should investigate student experiences and perceptions of faculty feedback on assignments where faculty provided varying levels of Islamic knowledge. This perspective would help enrich professional understanding regarding the educational impact of these interactions.

Third, the study did not inquire into the long-term professional development of faculty in the Islamic higher education contexts. Longitudinal studies could reveal how faculty's confidence toward indigenous pedagogy responds and changes over time and which factors support or inhibit successful adaptation.

Lastly, though the current analysis was limited to Islamic content, the findings gathered may be useful in diverse ways for other religious and cultural contexts. Comparative studies of faculty experiences with different religious traditions may advance broader frameworks of faculty culturally responsive pedagogical practices.

CONCLUSION

This project has offered critical insight to illuminate the largely unknown territory related to faculty experiences providing feedback on student written work using Islamic content. Through interpretive phenomenological analysis of the ten faculty experiences situated in three Islamic higher educational institutions, this study shared key findings and highlighted important challenges and unique adaptation in this unique educational environment.

The findings demonstrate that the standard for rich engagement with students' writing representing Islamic content demands what we describe as "epistemological navigation", the simultaneous working within different knowledge systems while recognizing each at an academic level that continues to remain culturally responsive. The construct of epistemological navigation extends existing conceptions of culturally responsive pedagogy by positioning intentional decisions to engage religious and traditional knowledge systems within a larger academic context.

Even though the study was situated explicitly in the context of Islamic higher education, the implications are broader for higher education institutions that serve religiously and/or culturally diverse populations. The challenges articulated, verifying practices or scholarship from sources that one is not familiar with, questions of authority and legitimacy, and the balancing of rigor and respect, are likely present in many educational contexts where faculty engage with student work that is grounded in traditions that the faculty member is less familiar with.

The adaptive strategies developed by participants in the research study, collaborative consultation, pedagogically advanced resource usage, incremental building of competency, present paradigms that may be modified in their adaptation for other contexts of cultural and religious diversity in higher education. Moreover, the research suggests that viable responses to the growing cultural and religious diversity of higher education institutions will be dependent on both institutions being committed to supporting, and faculty being willing to build, the practices of development instead of individual adaptation.

As higher education globally is increasingly diverse, the faculty experiences documented in this study will increasingly be meaningful and relevant beyond the Islamic construct of higher education. The educators' hardship and subsequent adaptation is illustrative of how educators around the world grapple with educational space that will consist of students that attend higher education institutions from diverse cultural and religious contexts.

The epistemological navigation developed in this research project may be useful for studying faculty experiences in other contexts where different systems of knowledge intersect, such as: indigenous knowledge traditions, other non-Western philosophies, and other religious traditions that students bring into spaces of academic discourse.

This study presents several avenues for future research. Longitudinal studies focused on how faculty competency changes over time in adapting to teaching and learning regarding culturally complex dynamics would go a long way to inform our understanding of the best pathways to professional development in culturally complex environments. Comparative studies across related dynamics in other religious and cultural contexts would also be valuable in discerning the wider relevance of the findings.

In addition, research on students' perspectives on the feedback they get from faculty in relation to their own cultural and religious knowledge will provide important information about the educational

implications of these dynamics. That research can in turn inform the development of more effective institutional support frameworks and faculty development programs.

Research investigating institutional dynamics that facilitate or would inhibit effective adaptations to cultural diversity, also would add important knowledge for educational leaders interested in establishing more effective and inclusive learning environments.

Persons who work in a range of professional contexts will sometimes face significant challenges, and at times these challenges may appear insurmountable. The faculty members involved in this study exhibited extraordinary agency, imagination, and commitment to student learning in a very challenging professional context. Their experiences importantly reveal both the dilemmas as well as the opportunities inherent in becoming culturally responsive educators in religious contexts. The faculty members involved in this study could suggest, without denying that the challenges related to epistemological diversity are substantive and real, that they are manageable.

While Islamic higher education institutions continue to serve a more diverse faculty and student population, and while higher education in all parts of the globe is becoming more multi-cultural and multi-religious, the evidence from this study provides a foundation for developing greater effectiveness and inclusiveness in developing culturally engaged educational practice. The actions of the ten faculty members presented both caution about the complexities yet to come, and inspiration regarding what is possible in creating educational 'spaces' that encompass academic quality and cultural diversity.

In this sense the research extends understandings of how educational institutions can better prepare faculty to navigate the complexities of working across cultural and religious difference, while maintaining the epistemological integrity and academic rigor that contribute to quality higher education. In doing so, it informs the wider project of developing inclusive educational environments that engage all students effectively and with respect for the diversity of traditions and perspectives that students develop as they come to learning.

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