

Innovative forms of Islamic Higher Education in Western Europe
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Abstract Submission

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Title:

A Tale of Two Colleges: 'Rehab' and Rewriting the Islamic Curriculum

Abstract:

Britain's Muslims frequent approximately 1,700 mosques, most of which are lead by Imams who were born and trained abroad. The ability of these leaders and teachers to adequately cater for their congregations in the UK is frequently brought into question by the media and within the 'Muslim community'. Many of the current Imams and religious teachers are often considered out of touch with their communities and poorly-educated. Over half of Muslims in Britain are under 25, many of whom come from socio-economically deprived backgrounds or may be disenfranchised from wider society or the political process. There is widespread dissatisfaction with mosque leadership and provisions for spiritual and pastoral education in the Muslim community and the potential 'problems' this demographic represents to the state has been much discussed. There has been a huge proliferation of Muslim youth educational organisations over the last two decades and additionally, many British Muslims have gone abroad to train as scholars and circumvent existing local representatives of religious authority. Increasing numbers of young men and women are choosing the path of becoming religious teachers and scholars. As a relatively young community with few developed institutions and no centralized authority, it has been difficult to address these challenges on any broad scale. Two seminary-like colleges have emerged in the last 10 years with innovative solutions to these issues, with the hope to nurture a new generation of Islamic scholars and leaders. One of these is a 'finishing school' for students who have undertaken the traditional Indian-style Darul Uloom education, allowing them to contextualize and update their knowledge. The other is a development of the Darul Uloom curriculum, streamlining and repackaging it for inner-city London. Both institutions are trying to forge a cohort of informed, active and engaged Islamic leaders, as confident as they are in their Islamic literary tradition as they are with social media. How far these institutions uphold and preserve the authority of the past, or innovate and adapt to the needs of the present, has been a key concern of my field research.