

**SACRED EDUCATION WITHIN A SECULAR LANDSCAPE: MUSLIM EDUCATORS'
PERSPECTIVES IN CONTEMPORARY UNIVERSITIES**

Anita Md Shariffⁱ & Sholehah Abdullahⁱⁱ

ⁱ (Corresponding author). Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Management and Business, Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Terengganu, Kampus Dungun. anita723@uitm.edu.my

ⁱⁱ Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Management and Business, Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Terengganu, Kampus Dungun. sholehah@uitm.edu.my

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Abstract	<i>This study examines how Muslim educators in Muslim-majority universities understand and navigate the secular and sacred dimensions of contemporary higher education. Drawing on qualitative interviews with Muslim lecturers from various academic disciplines, the research explores how educators conceptualize the distinction between secular and sacred education, the ways Islamic values are integrated into teaching practices, their perceptions of the relationship between disciplinary knowledge and divine knowledge, and their views on the need for educational reform. The findings indicate that many educators struggle to articulate clear conceptual distinctions between secular and sacred educational objectives. While most participants do not perceive their subject areas as directly linked to divine knowledge, they often believe that broader ethical or spiritual connections exist. Despite working within largely secular academic structures, many educators attempt to incorporate sacred values through ethical reminders, character-building practices, and reflections on moral responsibility. Perspectives on educational reform vary, reflecting differing understandings of the role of spirituality within contemporary education systems. The study contributes to ongoing discussions on the integration of sacred values in modern Muslim higher education.</i> Keywords: Educators, Secular, Pedagogy, Sacred, Education.
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INTRODUCTION

Education is not just about teaching knowledge and skills; it reflects deeper belief and moral commitments. An education system plays a significant role in shaping the values, identities and intellectual orientations of individuals and societies. This paper examines two distinctive pedagogical paradigms: secular education and sacred education, from the perspective of Muslim educators.

Secular education systems were largely developed within Western modernity and were institutionalised globally through processes of colonisation and nation-state formation. In many Muslim-majority societies, colonial administrations restructured native systems of learning and marginalised traditional religious educational institutions grounded in sacred models of learning (Hefner, 2007). Despite decades of political independence, many Muslim countries continue to operate within national education frameworks influenced by Western secular models.

Secular and sacred education are based on different ideas about knowledge and reality. Secular education usually frames knowledge as a tool for worldly success such as

helping individuals achieve social mobility, support economic development and improve material living conditions. Within such frameworks, knowledge is often treated as a product of human reason and empirical inquiry and is generally separated from religious or metaphysical commitments (van der Veer, 2011; Levinson, 1999).

Sacred education, by contrast, understands knowledge as a means of cultivating divine consciousness (*taqwa*) while engaging responsibly with worldly affairs. Within the Islamic intellectual tradition, knowledge (*ilm*) is closely connected with ethical refinement and spiritual development, and the pursuit of knowledge ultimately aims at knowing God and fulfilling moral responsibility before Him (Nasr, 1989; Rosenthal, 2007).

From this perspective, intellectual development and spiritual formation are inseparable, and worldly achievement is ultimately oriented toward higher-order spiritual purposes, including accountability before God and success in the hereafter (Al Attas, 1991). While sacred Islamic education integrates ethics and spirituality into learning, secular education tends to prioritize utilitarian materialistic goals (Al Farabi et al., 2023).

The secular education is not merely conceptually distinct from sacred education; it is institutionally embedded through policy, curriculum design, accreditation standards, and accountability structures for Muslim communities (Kitching & Gholami, 2023). Muslim intellectuals have long debated these issues. Scholars such as Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas criticized the epistemological foundations of secular education and proposed the "Islamization of knowledge" as a response to what they viewed as the fragmentation and desecralisation of knowledge in modern learning (Al-Attas, 1980; Al-Faruqi, 1982).

Al-Attas (1980) argued that the crisis in modern education stems from the "loss of *adab*," meaning that knowledge has been detached from its ethical, moral, and spiritual foundations. In a similar way, Seyyed Hossein Nasr warned against the desecralisation of knowledge in modern intellectual life, emphasising that classical Islamic epistemology integrates reason, revelation and moral purpose (Nasr, 1989).

More recent studies show in secular education, there are some efforts by Islamic educators to adapt their teaching to fit institutional rules while still trying to preserve religious values (Zeghal, 2012). Studying schools in Aceh, Irwandi and Rijal (2025) found that *Sharia* values were integrated into lessons through curriculum design and teacher conduct.

Alfi Alfaridli and Agus (2024) further suggest that Islamic values-based leadership such as justice, trust, and consultation can transform educational management. Nur Asiah and Desky (2025) propose that Islamic frameworks can help counter the dominance of secular approaches by re-centering education on moral responsibility and spiritual awareness. These examples show that values are often expressed through ethics and character-building rather than through direct theological framing of subject matter.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Despite extensive discussions on the Islamization of knowledge and critiques of secular education, contemporary higher education in many Muslim-majority societies continues to operate within institutional structures shaped by secular models. Universities are increasingly governed by performance indicators, global ranking systems, and accreditation requirements that often prioritise measurable outputs over moral and spiritual formation.

Within such environments, integrating sacred values into academic life can be challenging in practice. As a result, some Muslim educators may experience implicit tensions between institutional expectations and their understanding of education as a religiously meaningful endeavour. However, there remains limited systematic inquiry into how educators themselves interpret and reconcile these paradigms in their daily academic practice.

Existing studies have primarily focused on broad critiques of secularism, philosophical discussions of Islamic knowledge, or policy reforms in Islamic education. Much less attention has been given to the everyday experiences of Muslim educators

working in modern universities, particularly those teaching subjects outside religious studies.

Important aspects such as classroom practices, curriculum interpretation, educators' understanding of their professional roles, and the ways they connect teaching with ethical or spiritual values remain underexplored. Although debates about sacred and secular knowledge are well developed at the theoretical level, there is still limited qualitative research examining how educators interpret and negotiate these ideas in their daily work.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

This study aims to examine how far Muslim educators in contemporary universities understand the distinction between sacred and secular education and how this understanding influences their efforts to integrate sacred values into their teaching. It also explores how educators relate their subject knowledge to divine principles and how they view the role of sacred education within the broader education system.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design, using semi-structured interviews to explore Muslim educators' perspectives on the secular sacred interface in higher education. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure diversity in teaching backgrounds while sharing the common identity of being Muslim educators within Muslim-majority universities. Eight Muslim lecturers participated in the study. The number of participants was considered sufficient to reach thematic saturation.

The participants represented a wide range of disciplines, including mathematics, engineering, business, art, and economics, with teaching experience spanning from five to twenty-six years, reflecting both early-career and senior academic perspectives. This diversity provided a rich basis for exploring how sacred values are integrated across different fields of knowledge.

Data were collected through individual interviews conducted over the phone and Google meet. Each interview lasted between 20 minutes and one hour, depending on the depth of responses and the availability of participants. Prior to the interviews, participants were briefed about the purpose of the study and assured of confidentiality. Informed consent was obtained verbally before proceeding.

The interviews were guided by a semi-structured interview protocol that began with background questions to establish rapport, followed by thematic questions designed to address the study's research objectives. The interview guide ensured consistency across interviews while allowing participants to elaborate freely on their experiences and perspectives.

All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' permission and transcribed word for word. The data were analysed using thematic analysis to identify common patterns and themes. Coding was done manually. The analysis was conducted in several rounds, with themes refined by comparing responses across the interview transcripts.

FINDINGS

Across the interviews, participants consistently described their role as extending beyond the transmission of technical knowledge to include moral and spiritual guidance. Many lecturers reported deliberately embedding Islamic values into classroom practices through daily rituals and ethical reminders.

As one lecturer explained: *"Every time I enter class, I will include advice-based elements and elements related to religion so that what I teach in economics is not only academic knowledge but also instills values rooted in religion."* Another highlighted daily practices: *"Before we start class or lectures, we read a doa first... I will ask them whether they prayed Subuh or not."* Such practices were viewed as responsibilities inherent to their role.

UNDERSTANDING OF SECULAR AND SACRED EDUCATION

Participants demonstrated varying levels of conceptual clarity regarding the distinction between secular and sacred education. While some described secular education as the separation of religion from knowledge, many expressed uncertainty about the precise meaning of sacred education and often associated it primarily with religious institutions such as *madrasahs* or *tahfiz* schools. Only a few articulated that sacred education is one that are more holistic encompassing moral and spiritual dimensions alongside intellectual growth.

INTEGRATION OF SACRED VALUES IN TEACHING

Despite working within largely secular academic structures, participants reported integrating sacred values into their teaching practices. For instance, lecturers in economics stress responsible financial decision-making while art educator encouraged students to reflect on creativity as a manifestation of the Creator. In engineering-related subjects, ethical considerations such as safety, responsibility and avoidance of waste were highlighted as part of professional conduct.

A more frequent examples included beginning lectures with *doa* and offering reminders about ethical conduct such as honesty and fairness. However, these efforts often remain secondary, as educators are primarily required to complete the syllabus and follow prescribed textbook guidelines.

Nevertheless, participants also identified several challenges. Some observed that students from more urban or secular educational backgrounds often possessed weaker foundations in religious knowledge and practice. Others reported difficulties engaging students who admitted neglecting basic religious practices such as prayer or Qur'anic recitation. Besides, they also noticed that some students seemed less inclined to seriously reflect on sacred values, most likely because they do not see an urgent need to embrace them when such values are not tested or do not contribute to their academic grades.

CONNECTING KNOWLEDGE WITH DIVINE PRINCIPLES

Participants expressed varying perspectives on the relationship between academic knowledge and divine principles. Some explicitly affirmed that all knowledge ultimately originates from God and therefore carries moral and spiritual significance. Others, particularly those teaching technical subjects such as mathematics, engineering and economics, indicated uncertainty about how directly such connections could be articulated within their disciplines.

Although explicit religious connections were less clear, educators emphasized ethical dimensions of their subjects. For example, engineering lecturers highlighted the importance of avoiding waste and ensuring safety in design processes, while economics lecturers stressed fairness and responsibility in financial decision-making. Participants also reported that some students responded positively when these connections were discussed, sometimes expressing surprise or curiosity about the ethical and spiritual dimensions of their academic subjects.

PERSPECTIVES ON THE MALAYSIAN EDUCATION SYSTEM

Participants expressed differing views regarding the balance between secular and sacred elements within Malaysia's education system. Some perceived the system as relatively balanced, noting the presence of both academic and religious components in the curriculum. They believed that elements of sacred education are also present within contemporary formal education systems through the inclusion of Islamic subjects in the curriculum. Others argued that the system increasingly prioritizes academic performance, technical competence, and examination results at the expense of moral and spiritual development.

Several participants suggested that efforts to strengthen sacred education should begin at earlier stages of schooling, as students entering university often already carry

educational experiences shaped largely by secular priorities. Proposed improvements included allocating greater emphasis to Islamic and moral education, incorporating the concept of adab across disciplines, and ensuring that sacred values are practiced in everyday educational settings rather than being limited to examination content.

ADVICE FOR EDUCATORS

Finally, participants offered advice for fellow educators seeking to incorporate sacred values within secular academic contexts. Many encouraged lecturers to integrate ethical and spiritual perspectives creatively within their respective disciplines rather than treating them as separate topics. Participants emphasized the importance of adopting sensitive and thoughtful approaches when addressing moral and spiritual themes in diverse classrooms. As one participant observed: *"Sacred education is not formally embedded in the system, so lecturers must be wise and tactful when integrating moral and spiritual elements."*

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study aimed to explore how Muslim educators understand and navigate the relationship between sacred and secular education within contemporary university settings. The findings reveal that while educators operate within institutional structures largely shaped by secular academic frameworks, many actively attempt to incorporate sacred values into their teaching practices.

These findings suggest that elements of sacred education may still be sustained within secular institutional environments through educators' individual initiatives. Muslim educators may be willing to embed sacred values in the teachings if they are given more opportunity and freedom to do so.

MUSLIM EDUCATORS' UNDERSTANDING OF SACRED AND SECULAR KNOWLEDGE

A few participants showed clear understanding of the difference between secular and sacred education but the majority struggle to articulate clear conceptual boundaries between the two. Rather than viewing the two as completely separate domains, participants often described them as overlapping or interacting in practice. This understanding reflects longstanding discussions within Islamic educational thought as highlighted by Al-Attas (1980) and Nasr (1989). There are challenges for educators in embedding sacred elements when their own understanding is still vague.

NEGOTIATING SACRED VALUES WITHIN SECULAR INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURES

Another key finding relates to how educators work within institutional environments that are mainly shaped by secular academic norms, such as curriculum requirements, disciplinary boundaries, and performance indicators. Despite these constraints, many participants described subtle and informal ways of integrating sacred values into their teaching. These included beginning classes with doa, giving ethical reminders related to course topics, and highlighting the moral aspects of their disciplines.

Such practices show how educators try to maintain elements of sacred education within systems that do not always prioritise spiritual or moral development. This supports earlier observations that modern education systems often separate technical knowledge from ethical or religious concerns (Nasr, 1989) but there are some efforts by Islamic educators to embed religious values to fit institutional rules (Zeghal, 2012).

As a result, educators often rely on their own initiative and creativity to connect these two aspects. Muslim educators have to take practical approaches to balance institutional expectations with their personal religious commitments.

PEDAGOGICAL APPROACHES TO INTEGRATING SACRED EDUCATIONAL VALUES

The findings also highlight the importance of discipline specific approaches to integrating sacred values. For instance, educators teaching economics incorporated discussions on

financial ethics, while those in engineering emphasised responsibility, safety and the avoidance of waste in technological design.

These examples demonstrate that sacred educational principles may be expressed differently across disciplines while still maintaining a shared emphasis on ethical responsibility and adab. In this regard, the educators' practices resonate with the broader Islamic educational tradition that emphasises the cultivation of character alongside intellectual development (Al-Attas, 1980).

However, these initiatives may be limited due to the pressure to complete the syllabus and fulfil other academic requirements. Students may also be less inclined to embrace these values since they are not assessed and do not contribute to their academic performance or grades. This suggests a need to explore creative ways of incorporating sacred values into academic assessment.

IMPLICATIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

Participants' reflections on the Malaysian education system further reveal ongoing tensions between academic performance-oriented priorities and the cultivation of moral and spiritual values. While some participants perceived the system as relatively balanced, others expressed concern that the increasing emphasis on measurable academic outcomes may overshadow ethical and spiritual dimensions of education.

These concerns suggest that the integration of sacred values within higher education may depend not only on institutional policy but also on the individual commitment of educators. As the findings indicate, many lecturers see themselves as moral guides as well as subject experts, seeking to nurture students' character alongside their intellectual development.

Overall, the study highlights how Muslim educators actively negotiate the relationship between sacred and secular educational paradigms within contemporary universities. Although institutional structures largely reflect secular academic models, educators continue to find ways to incorporate spiritual and ethical dimensions into their teaching, albeit on a limited scale.

These practices demonstrate that sacred educational ideals can still be advanced through Muslim educators' personal initiative and creativity, even within predominantly secular institutional environments. Therefore, it is recommended that additional supplementary notes and teaching guides be developed, alongside existing textbooks, to better equip educators with sacred values that can be transmitted to students.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how Muslim educators understand and practise sacred education within contemporary university settings. The idea of sacred education is rooted in the Qur'anic call for a complete commitment to Islam: "*O you who believe! Enter into Islam completely (kaffah)*" (Qur'an 2:208). The term *kaffah* suggests wholeness and reminds Muslims that religious principles should guide all aspects of life, including education.

The findings show that although universities are often organised around secular academic models, some Muslim educators in Muslim-majority universities still attempt to incorporate sacred values into their teaching. They do so through simple practices and personal efforts in the classroom. These efforts indicate that sacred educational values remain present within modern university environments, albeit on a limited scale. A clearer understanding and more structured approaches may help strengthen their integration into teaching and learning.

Overall, the study suggests that integrating sacred values in higher education does not necessarily require a complete restructuring of existing systems. Rather, greater conceptual clarity, institutional support, and professional development opportunities may enable educators to more effectively incorporate sacred dimensions into teaching and learning.

Such efforts may contribute to nurturing individuals who embody God consciousness (*taqwa*), recognise their accountability before God and strive for success in both this world and the hereafter. Ultimately, this may help foster stronger Muslim societies and contribute to the upliftment of the ummah and the nation.

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