Original Paper

STEP: From Collaboration to Innovation and from Innovation to Collaboration

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Abstract

Secondary Teacher Education Programme (STEP) is a collaborative program of the University College London's Institute of Education and the Institute of Ismaili Studies in London. Qualitative research was undertaken to collect and analyse data. The findings demonstrate that the collaborative efforts at the senior institutional and lecturers' levels led to the creation of this innovative programme, which had to constantly reinvent itself and keep the collaboration alive so that the unique features of the programme are sustained. It contends that the most innovative and unique feature of this programme is having an integrated approach to knowledge acquisition and production, where the teacher-candidates are equipped with the content knowledge about Islam and the updated pedagogies and methodologies of teaching to enable them to teach religious education to secondary students. In this endeavour, the teacher-candidates' roles are immense.

Keywords

collaboration and innovation, integrated approach to knowledge, Islamic education, Islam and modern teaching strategies, Ismaili Muslims

1. Introduction

Based on the analysis of available documents, qualitative interviews, and reflecting on teaching practice this paper contends that the Secondary Teacher Education Programme (STEP) is an innovative programme that has managed to create a conducive environment for collaborative teaching and learning. STEP is a collaborative program of the University College London's Institute of Education (UCL-IoE) and the Institute of Ismaili Studies (IIS) (Memorandum of Agreement, 2011, 2015). The former is a public institution renowned for its research and teaching in the field of education and the latter is a private

institution conducting research on Islam and its Shia Ismaili branch and delivering educational programmes for the Shia Imami Ismaili Muslims (henceforth Ismaili Muslims). It is a two-year post-graduate programme where the teacher trainees obtain two degrees, MA in Education (Muslim Cultures and Civilisations) and MTeach. The MA and MTeach are designed in a complementary way to equip students with the subject knowledge to do with Muslims' faith, cultures and civilisations as well as methodologies and pedagogies of teaching. The programme recruited its first cohort in 2007 and in September 2017 its Cohort 11 started their studies at IoE-IIS.

Despite its 10-year existence, very little research has been conducted on STEP, except a PhD study on how STEP students engage with faith diversity over the course of their studies (Kadiwal, 2014) and a vignette on how STEP students become effective teacher-researchers (Brown, 2017). There is no research on how the programme started, its specific features, and how the two institutions maintain the collaborative venture. Additionally, although there are discussions among Muslim academics about how to meaningfully integrate Islamic civilisations and cultures into mainstream education (some of which will be reviewed later), there is very little empirical research on programmes like STEP. The findings of this research are significant considering the challenges other Muslim denominations face with regard to religious education (Panjwani et al., 2017; Scott-Baumann & Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2015; Muborakshoeva, 2013a) and are educational for Muslims as well as other faith communities who may want to embark on such collaboration.

In the attempt to fill the gaps in literature, this research aims to explore these two broad questions:

- Why was STEP created and how does the programme reinvent itself for continuous collaboration?
- How does the programme approach teaching and learning and what roles do the teacher candidates play in the process?

To address these questions, a qualitative research was conducted and the findings are presented in this paper.

2. Review Literature

2.1 Collaboration and Innovation: Where to Locate STEP?

STEP not only could be located comfortably among the examples of innovative programmes offered at higher educational institutions globally, but it is a unique case of collaboration between a public institute of education and a private institute of religious studies belonging to a faith community. The vision of the Programme is "to produce professional secondary level teachers by combining strong academic programmes with experiential teaching practices, in an intimate and welcoming learning environment" (STEP Prospectus, 2015, p. 6). It aims to address the need for professional secondary education teachers by educating candidates "to become teachers and mentors who can help to shape and inspire future generations within a global context" (Ibid).

After graduating, the students are qualified to teach within the wider Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) institutions with a focus on teaching at Ismaili Religious Education Centres (RECs) with their respective Ismaili Tariqa and Religious Education Board (ITREB). They will deliver the secondary curriculum prepared by the IIS, which focuses on humanistic, civilizational and normative perspectives of religious education (Ibid). The average number per cohort is from 25 to 40 students. 270 teacher trainees have successfully completed this programme till 2017 and have been teaching religious education to secondary Ismaili Muslim students in around 13 countries. The programme has continuous collaborations at different levels, for instance, the senior management, lecturers, lecturers and students, students and students, lecturers/students and school communities, etc. That is why it is important to locate the experience of STEP within the broader scholarship on collaboration and innovation.

Research on collaboration and innovation predominantly focuses on research cooperation between public universities and industries to evaluate the contributions to innovation and national economic development or collaboration at transnational level where corporations work with research universities to enhance the "knowledge—intensive economic practice" (Abramo et al., 2011; Kauppien, 2012; Knobel et al., 2013). Additionally, there is an abundance of research on collaboration between different types of institutions (Kezar, 2006) and mergers to share resources for broader educational or research purposes (Brown, 2001; Czarnitzki et al., 2007).

However, most of these collaborations and mergers are on hard sciences, except for a few that are on teacher training and health education (Russell et al., 2001; Lewis et al., 2012; Abbey et al., 2015). This narrow approach to collaboration and innovation has been questioned by researchers who claim that the place of humanities and social sciences in such mergers and institutional collaborations is either absent or very limited (Benneworth, 2010). These concerns led some universities to initiate collaborative projects with the wider community (Carlton et al., 2009; Weerts et al., 2010; Watson, 2013; Watson, 2014) to conduct and support research that aims to connect diverse ways of knowing in different disciplinary traditions with the academic and public forms of knowledge (Facer & Enright, 2016; Facer, 2016).

There is a shortage of serious research on collaboration between a public university and an institution of religious studies with educational mission for a faith community. A few initiatives to explore collaboration and partnership between universities and Muslim institutions in the UK, to which this author also contributed a paper (Muborakshoeva, 2013b), seem to be a one-off enterprise (Scott-Baumann & Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2015). In fact, collaboration between IoE—UCL as a secular institution and the IIS as an institution for religious studies could be seen as an impossible task. It could be claimed that the first is a secular and the latter is an institution with a certain ideology. However, recent studies have challenged "the superficial responses of the political controllers of education as well as prevailing views' about secular or liberal education" (Pring in Panjwani et al., 2017, p. 4).

Although the debates about secular and religious institutions and how education is generally ideological in nature are beyond the scope of this paper, we nevertheless agree with Jeremy Henzell-Thomas that "all education systems are based on particular conceptions of human nature, faculties, ideas and beliefs, even if underlying ideologies may not be made explicit" and therefore the secular institutions too are ideologically laden (Sardar & Henzell-Thomas, 2017, p. 208). Considering that higher education institutions are becoming big businesses liaising with corporations and investment banking to provide services for their "clients" and "consumers" (Sardar & Henzell-Thomas, 2017), having institutions such as the IIS that conduct research in Islamic cultures and civilisations and promote a different type of collaboration with public universities to enhance teaching and learning in Islamic studies is an innovative endeavour in itself.

2.2 The "What" and "How" of Collaboration and Its Cyclical Nature

Collaboration means when two or more people or organisations work together on a project, however, some sources focus on its positive as well as negative meaning. Henneman's (1995, p. 104) discussion on collaboration in the context of health care emphasises that the "adversarial groups, namely physicians and nurses' have to collaborate together despite the hierarchical structures and different power dynamics to achieve common goals. In an educational context collaboration connotes a variety of activities too".

For Goulet et al. (2003) collaboration is when people work together on a project and when people or groups come together for a common goal, which leads to some kind of transformation in the participants. They acknowledge the value of different types of collaboration; between teachers and university researchers, consultants or teachers working with other teachers, faculty advisors working with student teachers, or doctoral students researching their relationship with mentors as well as those projects which examine the essential characteristics of collaboration. However, they felt that these "fell short of explaining" the depth of their own experiences of a collaborative research they were involved in (Goulet et al., 2003, p. 2). As a result of discussions and collective self-reflections they developed a model that explains "the what (phenomenon) and the how (process) of collaboration" (p. 3). They identified features through which the participants start and maintain relationships and work with one another to achieve the goals and how they are transformed in the process. These features are labelled as ways of being, ways of doing, and ways of becoming, which are cyclical and iterative that shape collaboration.

Other models of collaboration are: between a university and a professional development school; a consultation model; one to one collaborations; and multiple collaborations under one umbrella organisation (Slater & Ravid, 2010). However, Slater and Ravid (2010) claim that these do not cover all developing configurations of collaboration and propose a more inclusive framework. It adds to the above: the multiple configurations (partnerships, networks, and research universities the goals of which is dissemination of innovation and knowledge); post-secondary (community college and community/school projects aiming to increase minority enrolment into higher education); technology

24

projects (externally funded to instill technology and innovation in schools); and interagency (a semi-autonomous approach geared towards creating institutional change, experimentation, development of organisations, and innovation and change) (Slater & Ravid, 2010, p. 8).

For others collaboration involves mobilisation of resources, harmonising and synchronising operations to solve shared problems, meeting common needs, making the most of important opportunities:

> Here, stakeholders develop unity of purpose; forge a collective identity; develop shared language, knowledge, norms, and skills; foster equitable relations; develop conflict resolution mechanisms; agree on shared responsibilities and mutual accountabilities; promote norms of reciprocity and trust; reconfigure rule, roles, and jurisdictions; share resources; realign existing policies and create new ones; develop shared governance systems; and accommodate salient features of the local context (Lawson, 2004, p. 228).

Lawson proposes that "collaboration can be a process innovation, a product innovation, or both", where in the former sense it is a new intervention, strategy, or method, and in the latter, it may be an end goal in itself, for instance, when service delivery teams that collaborate become institutionalised. These teams become invaluable product innovations due to generating new ideas on a continuous basis and contributing to more innovation. And most of the time the boundaries between the two (product innovation and process innovation) are blurred and both are manifest when teams/organisations collaborate.

These are interesting models and concepts that have informed this research on STEP and assisted in the analyses of the findings. The process of collaboration itself though, as most research findings report, is cyclical and iterative in nature, for which we need to examine models or theories developed in the corporate world.

2.3 Collaboration for Innovation

As mentioned earlier, research findings highlight the importance of collaboration and its cyclical nature when organisations attempt to work together with the intention of creating innovative programmes and businesses. How though does this collaboration for innovation happen? Research on collaboration for innovation has much benefited from Ring and Van de Van's (1994) framework which examines the process of such collaboration between organisations. They contend that there are a series of events and interactions among organisations that "unfold to shape and modify" Inter-Organisational Relationships (IORs) (p. 91). The three simultaneous stages in the process of collaboration are negotiation, commitment, and execution. The relationship between them is iterative and cyclical and is reconstructed by the continuity of the interactions and events. Personal relationships, tacit knowledge and psychological contracts are replaced by formal functions, agreements and legal contracts as the IOR evolves gradually (Marshall, 2004).

Ring and Van de Van's framework is a useful one to employ in this research, because it enlightens us about how the collaborative process between the IoE and IIS have taken place. More importantly though it allows us to see how an innovative programme such as STEP has emerged and constantly reinvents itself.

2.4 Approaches to Organisation of Knowledge—An Integrated Approach

The attempts for having an integrated approach to knowledge acquisition and production amongst Muslims have gained momentum recently (IIIT, 2013; Sardar, 2015; Sardar & Henzell-Thomas, 2017) and some workshops and conferences have been organised to this end. The thinking behind the "integrated approach" developed partly as a result of dissatisfaction with the earlier movements (e.g., the Islamisation of education movement) that were equally concerned with educating Muslim youth in the matters of faith (Al-Attas, 1980; Al-Faruqi & Nasseef, 1981; Ashraf & Bilgrami, 1985, etc.), but have been criticised for having a narrow approach and sometimes ideological aims (Abaza, 2001; Muborakshoeva, 2013a).

Ziyauddin Sardar, however, distinguishes between the polemical discourses of the Islamisation project and a useful framework it offers—starting with the Divine Unity and extending to the unity of all creation, knowledge, etc. He agrees with Jeremy Henzell-Thomas that there is a need for going beyond the current competing paradigms and that "the way forward is a new mode of consciousness which is integrative and inclusive" (Sardar & Henzell-Thomas, 2017, p. 92). In this paper, therefore, we see how a religious education programme attempts to be inclusive and integrative.

All these movements, in one form or another, attempt to "correct" the state of affairs in Muslims' education ever since the time of colonialism. European colonialism, and later nationalism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, created a kind of dichotomy in education and thus religious education was marginalised in Muslim contexts. Some scholars consider this marginalisation as the main reason for the Muslim youth being unaware about their cultures and civilisations. In the western context, it could happen that some young Muslims are taught religion by non-professional teachers (Scott-Baumann & Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2015). In some Muslim countries, very often learned scholars teach religion, yet due to lack of knowledge about modern approaches in teaching and learning they are unable to make sense of modern challenges young Muslims face (Muborakshoeva, 2013a).

In Pakistan for example, the teaching of religion is problematic in secular educational institutions too—it has been criticised for its confessional and biased approach which goes against the diversity within and without Muslim communities. Additionally, religion is used by the government, political and religious groups for spreading their ideologies and achieving political aims. As such therefore, a kind of blurred distinction exists in teaching religion at the so called "secular" and "religious" educational institutions (Panjwani et al., 2017).

Therefore, generally speaking Muslims have remained deprived not only from the classical teachings of religion, but also from having adequate knowledge about their educational, civilizational, and cultural heritage. For them it is very important to have an integrated approach to knowledge acquisition and

26

production that enables them to make sense of their broader cultural and civilizational heritage in a modern world (Muborakshoeva, 2016). In such a case, STEP is an innovative program from which other Muslim and faith communities could learn. A visit to the IIS in London by the state delegation from Kyrgyzstan in 2016 testifies that there is an interest amongst Muslim majority countries to learn from STEP's experience. Unfortunately, as stated, there is very scarce research on STEP to present it to the wider scholarly and faith communities and this study is the first attempt to correct the situation.

3. Methodology

3.1 Qualitative Research

Qualitative research was conducted to collect and analyse the data. The main design was a case study, although the researcher kept reflective journal, a method used in action research, during the research. Employing a case study was advantageous because it allowed using multiple tools of data collection (Yin, 2013) such as individual interviews, focus groups, and document analysis. One of the disadvantages of case study, namely the issue with generalizability (Yin, 2013) perhaps was not very much applicable to this research because STEP is a unique programme. However, the findings could be still educational for other institutions that would like to establish programmes like this.

BERA's guidelines for research ethics were followed and confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed for the participants. However, it is not always easy to completely disguise the identity of those in senior positions involved in this programme from the beginning or the lecturers who are few in numbers at both institutions (Muborakshoeva, 2013a). This issue was discussed with the participants, and they were fine with the possibility of their identity being recognised. The participants are referenced according to the source and position, for example, Individual Interviews are referenced as: II- Senior Manager 1, etc. (see Table 1).

3.2 Sampling Techniques and Methods

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group interviews, document analysis, and researcher's reflection journal from January 2016 to May 2017. The interviews were recorded using both a smartphone and a traditional Dictaphone to ensure data was backed up in case one of these tools failed to work. Additionally, data was backed up in a personal computer. A total of 6 hours interview data was collected, out of which the individual interviews were 3 hours and the two focus groups were 1.5 hours each. The documents included the Memorandums of Agreement, minutes from meetings, and other related to the programmes written sources. The reflection journal was kept to record researcher's reflection and non-verbal communications during interviews.

3.3 Participants

Purposeful sampling was used for the semi-structured interviews and focus group interviews with students. This allowed the researcher to select participants who had the highest potential of contributing to the research, but also those that may have had "a divergent" view, especially among the students. The total population of STEP teacher trainees during this research was 59 students (33 Cohort 9 and 26

27

Cohort 10). 9 students were selected from Cohort 9 for the focus group in the first term of their second academic year, 2016-2017. Since the researcher had taught these students for two terms, they had a good idea about whom to select for the focus group. Country of origin, educational background, and male and female ratio was considered. However, because generally the number of male students is low in STEP (usually 4 to 6 males per cohort of 26-40 students), the focus group selection is 2 males and 7 females. For the focus group interviews with the lecturers, purposeful sampling played a role due to the strong knowledge base of the lecturers about the programme, however, because there were only 5 lecturers who taught for the programme during this research, all of them were invited for the focus group interview:

Table 1. Description of Participants and Methods

Tools and frequency	Participants-Gender	Involvement with programme	As referenced in the findings
3 Individual interviews	A Male Senior Manager	Since 2007 to 2010	II-Senior Manager 1
	A Female Senior Manager	Since 2007 to present	II-Senior Manager 2
	A Female Senior Manager	Since 2010 to present	II-Senior Manager 3
		Since 2007 to present	
1 Focus Group Interview with Lecturers	1 Male Lecturer	3 lecturers since 2007 to present	FG—Lecturer 1-5
	4 Female Lecturers	1 lecturer since 2010 to present	
1 Focus Group with Students	9 students (2 males and 7 females)	Since 2015 to 2017	Students 1-9
Document analysis throughout the research			
Researcher's Reflective journal throughout the research			

3.4 Methods of Data Collection

An interview schedule was developed for the individual and focus group interviews, which contained open ended questions as well as semi-structured questions. Depending on the responses, some questions were adjusted during interviews. In some instances, the same questions were asked to different groups to see how each group perceived of the phenomena under investigation and to

triangulate data (Denscombe, 1998). As the interviews progressed a few questions were modified so that the respondents could contribute more or provide clearer answers.

Three senior managers-lecturers from the IoE and IIS were selected for semi-structured interviews, among whom two were involved with the programme since its inception and one has taken a leadership position midway through the programme's existence. It allowed the gathering of the most relevant material in a short period of time (Robson, 2012), but also gave opportunity for the scholars to speak about the programme, who otherwise would not have shared their ideas.

Two focus group interviews were conducted; one with the STEP lecturers (5 lecturers) from both institutions and one with STEP, Cohort 9 teacher trainees (9 students). In the focus group with the lecturers there were no major issues with a person dominating the discussions (Kelly, 2003), possibly because as professionals they knew how focus groups work. Additionally, since the researcher was a STEP lecturer, the interviews and discussions with the lecturers in some instances resembled a collective self-reflection rather than anybody dominating the discourse, echoing the approach taken by Goulet et al. (2003). In the focus group with the STEP teacher trainees there were occasions where one or two students would control the discussions or divert from the main topic (Kelly, 2003). In such cases, the researcher tactfully intervened and brought the discussions back to the topic and invited more people to contribute.

With regard to document analysis, while documents offered ready and available data, the fact that they were not prepared for the aims of this research were taken into account (Robson, 2012), and were carefully and critically reviewed as per their relevance for this research. The researcher recorded the reflection on teaching as well as the research process, where non-verbal communication and body language during interviews were recorded.

3.5 Methods of Data Analysis

A qualitative method was employed to analyse data, where major themes were identified, some in relation to the questions asked (Miles & Huberman, 1994) and some linked to the theoretical frameworks. The recorded interviews were transcribed, which took a considerable amount of time (Robson, 2012). To save time, the diverted discussions during interviews were listened to carefully and summarised by the researcher briefly rather than being transcribed fully. Template analysis was used to analyse data, which "refers to multiple but related techniques for thematically organising and analysing codes, and can be applied across multiple methodological and epistemological approaches" (King, 2004, 2012 in Jabbar et al., 2017). The researcher came up with priory templates using the interview guide as well as theoretical frameworks for collaboration (King, 2004, 2012).

Table 2 presents how the priory templates helped the researcher to come up with more codes and sub-codes during data analysis. The first two priory templates were developed using Ring and Van de Van's (1994) framework on cyclical nature of collaboration and innovation. The other three priory templates are based on the questions asked during interviews. The use of template analysis was helpful in this small-scale research (King, 2004, 2012) since it allowed the researcher to know where to stop

29

and clearly see the relationships between various codes. For instance, codes such as "integrated approach" and "pedagogies and content" relate to two priory codes. Ultimately, these thematic codes were merged together and the findings are presented under four larger themes as seen in the findings and analysis section.

The analysis of reflective journal added to the richness of the findings. It allowed the researcher to test their own views and practices with other colleagues as well as see the value of reflection for teaching and research (Robson, 2012).

Table 2. Coding Templates

Priory template	Template A	Template B	Template C
Collaboration leading to innovation	Reasons for STEP	Reasons for STEP	Reasons for STEP
		Rationale for choosing IoE Negotiations	Rationale for choosing I Negotiations
			IoE's concerns & IIS' vision
			Innovative Programme is created
Innovation reinforcing collaboration	STEP's innovative features	STEP's innovative features	STEP's innovative features
		Integrated approach	Integrated approach
		Pedagogies & content/Isl. Studies	Pedagogies &content/ Islamic studies
			Other features reinforcing collaboration
Approaches to knowledge acquisition	The overall philosophy	The overall philosophy	The overall philosophy
	Integrated approach	Integrated approach	Integrated approach
		Methodologies	Methodologies
			Pedagogies
Role of Teacher Trainees	Integrating the two degrees	Integrating the two degrees	Integrating the two degrees
Comfort level when integrating	Comfort level when integrating	Various views about MTeach	Students/students & lecturers collaborations
Challenges the programme faces	External lecturers	External lecturers	External lecturers
		Workload (students &	Workload (students &

	lecturers)	lecturers)
		Professional vs
		non-professional teachers
		Other challenges

4. Analysis of the Findings

4.1 Why Was STEP Created and How It Reinvents Itself?

The analyses of data demonstrate that the creation of STEP was a long process and involved careful planning and preparations before its launch. Data analyses from all sources indicate that the need among Ismaili Muslims globally to educate their young generations about the historical past and present of Islamic heritage was one of the main reasons for creating STEP. The concern was that the youth should be exposed not only to religious education, but also to broader cultural and civilizational aspects of that heritage. Additionally, after completion of a rather well established primary religious education programme called *Ta'lim* (Education), the Ismaili youth were not taught RE very systematically at the secondary level. Above all, the emphasis on having professional teachers for secondary RE by the leader of the Ismaili Muslims, Aga Khan IV or Shah Karim al-Husseini, was decisive in creating such a programme (II-Senior Manager 1, 2, & 3; FG-Lecturers and Students).

Once initial discussions and meetings were conducted with wider intellectuals and students, the next stage was to find a partner institution which could be valuable in terms of offering high quality education but also be able to validate the programme, because IIS is not a degree granting institution. At that point, the senior scholars at IIS approached the management of IoE because of its programmes and high reputation and prestige in teacher education as well as the opportunities it presented:

> We looked at what were the strengths of the IoE and what were some of the things we would be interested in, for example, they had interesting programmes like Citizenship, Ethics, and we felt that the teachers needed to be grounded in those concepts so that the issues of identity, of being a global citizen, being ethically aware of and informed about the kind of teaching they did. So, a part of it was the content knowledge about Islam but there was another part, and that was about the kinds of attitudes and perspectives that the teachers would get, and because the IoE was teaching those kinds of programmes it was felt that they had the kind of faculty we would like to have from educational point of view, what the teachers would learn (II-Senior Manager 1).

Accordingly, meetings at senior levels were organised between the IIS and IoE where much enthusiasm as well as cautions were expressed. As much as the IIS "explored" the possibilities of working with IoE, the latter too had its own reservations. However, the intentions of both institutions coincided, as it became evident from the first documentations that were presented to the curriculum committee at IoE:

> The IoE was very concerned that it did not become a normative religious programme and that they were not supporting one community's programme. They wanted to see a serious programme to understand Islam as a humanities discipline. And that was exactly our intention

31

too, which was reflected in our proposal. So, we tried hard to have two streams, we understood that the MA itself was going to be very focused in humanities, very academically rigorous but we also understood that these teachers were going to teach secondary curriculum, which would have both aspects of humanities and normative aspects (II-Senior Manager 1).

The tasks were divided between the faculty at IIS and IoE to design the modules for the MA and MTeach. The plan was that the students recruited had to have teaching experience. At IoE they had to modify their current MTeach and adjust it to STEP's needs:

At IoE we relied on our existing MTeach modules, but obviously they needed to be modified, there was a module where students had to go back to their home countries and come up with really innovative use of urban setting, so I remember people taking school trips to museums and parks and so it just translated it into another context. We needed to learn from such modules and come up with modules that addressed STEP teachers' needs (II-Senior Manager 2).

For the MA degree, the senior faculty at IIS developed the modules which had to be approved by the Senate at IoE. In addition to writing the Programme specification, the details of each module needed to be identified for approval. Thus, the IIS' faculty developed what "the modules should be like, how it would work for each term but before that we had much higher-level documentation" (II-Senior Manager 3). The modules were prepared "in line with the curriculum, depending on what curricula was going to be produced, so the introduction of STEP and the creation of the curriculum by the IIS were in parallel to a large degree" (FG-Lecturer 2). Thus, an innovative programme was born:

The whole programme in itself is innovative; there is no other programme that teaches you how to become a teacher so it gives you the pedagogical stuff as well as the content simultaneously. Because it is usually you get the content and then you get the teaching compartment so I think in that way in itself the entire programme is innovative (FG-Lecturer 2).

In addition to exposing the teacher trainees to rigorous academic standards and various methodologies of teaching and learning, they are taken to field trips to connect with cultural and civilisational aspects. They have to teach at Ismaili RECs in the UK and Europe on Saturdays as well as their home countries to implement the knowledge and skills gained.

The other innovative feature is that although the classes are taught in different physical spaces (MTeach is taught at IoE and the MA at IIS by their respective faculty), the programme as a whole is an integrated one both in philosophy of teaching and physical movements of students and faculty between these two institutions, as will be discussed later. For the overall quality assurance of both degrees the responsibility lies with the IoE, because of its degree awarding power.

4.2 From Collaboration to Innovation and from Innovation to Collaboration

All the managers and lecturers agreed that STEP did not remain static since its inception—the early collaboration led to the creation of this innovative programme and in turn the programme had to enhance collaboration at different levels to come up with further innovations and creativity. Structures were put in place to manage the programme collaboratively and effectively. For example, in addition to institutional

32

governance of the programme (strategic management by the directors of the two institutions; senior management by the dean of the faculty at IoE and head of graduate studies at IIS, operational meetings), establishing the Joint Programme Management Committee (JPMC) was crucial to deal with the management and administration of the programme and day-to-day decision making.

Additionally, the findings demonstrate that over the years collaboration in the programme expanded and consolidated, especially with different stakeholders. For example, those between the IoE/IIS and ITREBs globally for recruiting teacher candidates; the IoE/IIS and ITREB of the UK for RECs' teaching placements; and the IoE/IIS and secondary schools in London for mainstream teaching placements.

The teaching placement in London's schools addressed the concerns that the teacher candidates needed more exposure to teaching, because over the 5 years of the programme's existence fewer professional teachers were recruited to the programme. Although all students recruited for STEP would still have voluntary teaching experience, the lack of professional teaching experience was seen as the main challenge for them to absorb the MTeach material. However, a lecturer thought that the voluntary experience resolved some of the issues:

> Something that happened over the years was that people joined with very little professional or RECs' teaching experience, so at some stage we made it compulsory to have at least one year REC experience minimum. So, the incoherence among the students in terms of some letting us down, because "they have not got teaching experience and we are experienced", that sort of thing disappeared, we do not hear of that anymore (FG-Lecturer 1).

Another lecturer disagreed about whether there was much difference between the professional and voluntary teachers recruited for the programme, because "obviously some are more experienced, but it really doesn't matter, sometimes those with little or no professional teaching experience come up with a real gem of a statement or teaching strategy" (II-Senior Lecturer 2).

The lecturers unanimously agreed that collaboration between the lecturers had to reinvent itself too. The initiative of reinvigorating collaboration by the lecturers since 2015 is working very well. They set up an Integration Committee, where they meet and discuss how to collaborate more constructively and manage the programme in a more integrated manner. As a result, they started to deliver sessions together, observe each other's teaching, design the assessment tasks and give feedback, share reflection on the teaching and learning process, and conduct collaborative research. This brought the faculty from both institutions closer and more transparency and mutual understanding occurred. Thus, the collaborative efforts that created this innovative programme constantly need a reinvention to maintain the integrated approach to knowledge acquisition production.

4.3 Approaches to Teaching and Learning: Integrated Approach to Knowledge Acquisition and Production

With regard to approaches to knowledge and methodologies of teaching for STEP, the senior faculty and lecturers agreed, there was a lot to learn and borrow from another programme at IIS, the Graduate

33

Programme in Islamic Studies and Humanities (GPISH). It was looked at as a model, because it "encourages a perspective which is not confined to the theological and religious heritage of Islam, but seeks to explore the relationship of religious ideas to broader dimensions of society and culture" (IIS' website). However, GPISH is not a teacher training programme and therefore, the concern was that the approach chosen for STEP should be in harmony with what is eventually taught at the RECs. Consequently, for the teacher trainees the programme was not only about getting academic content knowledge but also learning how to teach it to secondary students whilst being sympathetic and empathetic to the believers' perspectives. The task was not to create clashes or confusions with the secondary school material but deliver religious education in a meaningful way:

> Our STEP candidates needed to be taught as GPISH students would be taught or as an MA programme in Islam would be taught. For me it was not about normative teaching of Islam or Ismaili tariqa (faith) [by normative they mean conventional belief] so to speak, I wanted them to be sympathetic to the belief, because I really believe that you can be academically rigorous but yet be able to talk about normative aspects of faith in a way that is sympathetic but also critical because the whole point of STEP is that it accepts that there is a normative but also if we need to look at the normative in multiple aspects, it could be the critical aspect (II-Senior Manager 1).

To the question about the possible tensions between the academic and believers' perspectives their response was that these tensions could be overcome if people think about both critically and engage with the thought processes rather than be dismissive of one or the other:

> Whenever there is the idea of normative and critical attitude there are going to be tensions because not everybody thinks that those are reconcilable and I think people who think that the critical is the only way you do things they have a tendency to dismiss the normative and then similarly people who are normative when they think about critical they think that the very important aspect of identity and history is being ignored and that these are not resolvable and I think ultimately it depends on your orientation in life, for me I do not see a conflict, I encourage people around me to reflect on these. It is a process of discovery, it is a study of human experience (II-Senior Lecturer 1).

They further reflected on medieval Muslim thinkers such as Farabi, Ibn Sina, Ibn Rushd, Abu Hatam Razi, Sijistani, Hamidudin Kirmani, Qadi Nu'man, Nasir Khusraw, Nasiriddin Tusi and others who seem to be able to create a harmony between the two adding that in our times "we seem to struggle because for many of us our reading is narrow and so it is about struggle, human life, things we need to grapple with, for me it is being part of human experience. I would not want a STEP teacher to go into class and say I have all answers". To avoid confusions and potential misunderstandings, STEP lecturers adopt various methodologies and pedagogies.

4.3.1 Innovative Methodologies and Pedagogies STEP Lecturers Use

To prepare professional STEP teachers an integrated approach to teaching religion was adopted, an approach which studies Islam from a civilizational point of view and being respectful of religious belief. For example, most interviewees agreed that when designing the Revelation, Hermeneutics, Pluralism and Practice (RHPP) module the sociological dimension of religion, understanding rituals, bringing in the study of religion and studies of the Qur'an were taken into account. It was designed in a way that the teacher trainees were grounded not just in the normative aspects but also in the academic study of religion. It allows education of teachers with critical skills, because beliefs and believers change and "if you do not produce people with critical thinking skills, then belief dies. As time changes questions change and you cannot cope with that if you do not have people with different skills set" (FG-Lecturer 4).

That is why STEP is a distinctive program that takes a civilizational approach to the teaching of Muslim cultures and civilisations although the (non-confessional) theological and faith-based perspectives are conveyed through the teaching of history, the sacred scripture and its interpretation, philosophy and mysticism, literature and culture using contemporary methods of teaching and learning.

It emerged from the focus group interviews that methodologies informing lecturers' teaching are phenomenology, hermeneutics, ethnographic (interpretative) approach, historiography, constructivist theory, and literacy-centred or critical thinking. These methodologies enable the lecturers to support the teacher candidates to overcome certain challenges they face.

For example, the academic approach to the teaching of Muslim cultures and civilisations which requires creative and critical engagement is sometimes overwhelming and confusing for most students in the beginning. When they take the RHPP module (mentioned earlier), they are often excited to learn but also explore their own identities, asking "are we scholars or believers" or "are we teachers or researchers?" (Researcher's reflection journal). To address these issues phenomenology is used, which informs the lecturers on how to assist students to understand religious phenomenon and appreciate believers' perspectives, including their own. Constructivist theory encourages the students to develop their own world views by linking their experiences to broader humanistic and religious experiences and reflect on those.

Critical approaches are used by the lecturers cautiously; constructive and not destructive criticism is adopted in teaching and addressing some of the challenges students face. For example, sometimes, especially in their first year, students struggle with critically approaching the sacred scripture or religious authorities. In the RHPP module they are encouraged to critically engage with the scholarships about the Qur'an rather than deal with the Qur'an, because students do not have sufficient knowledge of Arabic language and are not trained in the methodologies of studying the scriptures.

For both degree programmes the lectures are largely interactive where student centred teaching strategies are used. Students are active learners in this process and participate in the lectures through questioning, discussions and analyses, and brainstorming. They learn collaboratively from each other

35

and from the lecturer during group, pair, and individual work.

They are encouraged to resolve problems or questions posed to them using different inductive teaching and learning methods (e.g., inquiry-based learning, case-based instructions, problem-based learning, project based learning, discovery learning, etc.). For example, one of the inductive teaching strategies used in the Literature of Muslim Societies module was a case-based study. Students had to read a story from "The Rose Garden' of the Persian poet, Sa'di Shirazi, and discuss in groups to resolve the seeming tensions between the medieval and modern pedagogies of teaching and upbringing of young people" (Researcher's reflection journal).

Additionally, the lecturers are mindful of students' needs, which are different in each cohort. This means constant updates of class materials as well as reflecting on what works best:

> I think also because the pedagogy in education has changed so you are not expected to just lecture to them and they do not want that, they want a lot of interaction and group work, so you have to incorporate that and make sure that you are imparting enough content to them, so I try and do a lot of that as well, because that is what they want, which means it is constant revision, because what works with one group doesn't always work with another group, and so it depends on the cohort as to what they want and how they want it done (FG-Lecturer 3).

There are some challenges lecturers face when implementing different strategies and those that students face when being taught via student centred learning. Students who join the programme have various educational background (humanities, social sciences, sciences, business, IT, etc.) and are from diverse educational structures with various teaching and learning approaches. Therefore, it is sometimes a challenge for lecturers to strike a balance between the use of different pedagogies and students' needs. To deliver the content knowledge according to students' needs, the lecturers take these various components into account when revising the modules. The module leaders also collaborate with the guest lecturers and discuss with them students' background and what methods are best to use in teaching. However, it could happen that students from sciences, business and IT or from certain contexts find the student-centred approach challenging and not accommodating to their needs.

To address these issues, lecturers use other strategies (e.g., face to face tutorials, giving them specific tasks, pairing them differently, etc.). Furthermore, collaboration between the faculties from both institutions enables them to address students' needs whether it is in terms of content delivery or pedagogies. The module leaders design the course work in such a way that it allows the students to conduct thorough research into a topic, critically review the sources, propose innovative and creative analyses, and demonstrate their knowledge of learning theories and teaching strategies.

For example, a module leader sets the assessment task in a way that students can explore "how they will take the content into the classroom in their home context or how it connects with the curriculum", and it is set broadly so that "they can select any aspect of the curriculum that fits with what they are doing, but it is always trying to contextualise it for their home context", which in a sense is challenging for them, because "even though they have done their one year of voluntary teaching back home, they

have not thought about the content and teaching in this way, so they struggle with it" (FG-Lecturer 3). Another lecturer stated that they look at the learning outcomes to make sure that those are assessed and "the questions are usually very broad, so they do not require specific answers". Students "can take it in any direction, so long that the learning outcomes are addressed" (FG-Lecturer 1). The other lecturer revises the assessment task every year to enable the teacher trainees "to demonstrate the critical understanding of content knowledge but also how they teach that content in their RE classes" (Lecturer 4). Assessment tasks are usually shared with the colleagues for feedback and assignments are double marked by the lecturers from IIS and IoE. Hence, the revision of the modules, the assessment tasks and other activities related to the programme revolve around the teacher candidates' needs, who play an integral role in bringing the two programmes together.

4.4 Teacher Candidates' Role in Integrating the Two Programmes

The role of teacher candidates is especially important, because they actually bring the two-degree programmes together through their active participation in lectures and seminars, writing assignments, teaching at RECs, field trips, and extra-curricular activities**.** In a focus group interview, the teacher candidates stated that they are able to integrate the knowledge gained from two programmes in the forums listed above. This was one of the major factors for most of them when they applied, because in "no other university they could obtain two Master's degrees which teaches Islamic studies yet at the same time equips them with the most updated teaching and learning strategies" (Students 2, 4, 5, 7, 9). However, there are different levels of comfort amongst students when integrating the knowledge and skills gained from both degrees, especially when writing assignments. The analysis of the data demonstrates that those with professional teaching experience feel more at ease with the integration, specifically in their assignments, whereas some with little or no professional teaching experience struggle to integrate the content and teaching components. For example, a teacher trainee (with nursing background) stated that they felt "this detachment between these two programmes at the start of the programme but also to a certain degree even in the second year when they are about to complete the programme" (Student 1).

This view though immediately was challenged by others who emphasised that for this double Masters programme most of the candidates should have had professional teaching experience and able to creatively integrate the content into their MTeach or MA assignments. Therefore, because some of them did not have that background they "struggle because of it not because of 'the detachment' between two Masters". Another respondent emphasised that "although I come from non-professional background, it does not mean that the programme [MTeach] has not given me anything. I learned a great deal from it, because it is somehow adjusted to STEP needs and we are able to make sense of the two Masters" (Student 3). Some thought that the MTeach programme was more valuable for non-professionals, because "it may sound repetitive for the professional teachers, but the non-professionals find it very useful" (Students 3, 4, 5, 8).

As far as collaboration with lecturers is concerned, most students were really appreciative of working closely with tutors, especially with their supervisors for their research projects. They brought many examples of how this enabled them to design their research and prepare for the field work. Consequently, the teacher candidates are actively bridging the two programmes, yet at the same time they are reflective of the challenges they face. Thus, for the students too it was very important to make this integration and collaboration more effective. Despite these complex issues and feelings about the two Masters degrees, the MTeach was replaced with a Post Graduate Diploma in Teaching and Reflective Practice (PGDip) in 2017, as we discuss below.

4.5 Challenges the Program Faces and Measures Taken

All lecturers shared that having IIS' guest lecturers for the MA degree who may have outdated methods of teaching due to being textual scholars is a challenge. Despite module leaders conducting introductory sessions with them, it is hard for the former to change their modes of teaching. This challenge has been addressed to some extent by the IIS enrolling those lecturers into the post-graduate certificate in teaching in higher education course at King's College.

The other challenge for students as well as the faculty is the workload of this multifaceted programme. This remains an unresolved issue, due to the demand of the programme but also financial impediments. Since the teacher candidates are on full scholarship provided by IIS (covering their tuition fees, accommodation, field-trips, and monthly allowance), it is a rather expensive programme. Hence, there is a shortage of funding when it comes to the other components of the programme (e.g., recruiting more lecturers, seminar leaders, etc.).

One of the major challenges that resulted in restructuring STEP in 2017 is that the enrolment of students with professional teaching experience has decreased over the last few years. This has been perceived as an issue, especially for the delivery of the MTeach modules. After several deliberations and negotiations, the senior managers at IoE and IIS decided that the MTeach needs to be replaced with a PGDip. From September 2017 (Cohort 11) onwards, students would obtain an MA in Education (Muslim Cultures and Civilisations) and a Post Graduate Diploma in Teaching and Reflective Practice (PGDip).

When "students struggle in teaching or writing assignments, it is immediately linked with most of them not being professional teachers and we conclude that the MTeach modules do not address their needs. Other factors that may be at play here are not considered" (FG-Lecturer 5). As it was discussed earlier too, the situation is much more complex than what is perceived about MTeach. Most lecturers and teacher trainees value the MTeach, especially for the non-professional candidates. The teacher trainees thought that instead of a replacement, the MTeach needed to be further modified and the renowned professors at IoE be involved in teaching it. The MTeach "could have been updated to include modules such as philosophy of religion, pedagogies of teaching abstract concepts and theories, etc." (FG-Student 1). This view was supported by other students too (Students 2, 3, 5, 8, 9).

Linked with the above is another structural challenge that the teacher trainees discussed. They questioned the fact that some MTeach tutors from the IoE, who did not have content knowledge of Islamic studies, marked their assignments. As mentioned, the IIS' lecturers organise briefing sessions, discuss the assessment tasks and criteria, and invite the IoE tutors to the MA lectures and seminars. These forums enabled the IoE colleagues to get a good grasp of the content knowledge and over the 10 years of the programme's existence, they obtained sufficient content knowledge to assess the MA assignments. Moreover, the IIS' lecturers collaborate closely with the new faculty members at the IoE and discuss with them the assessment tasks and criteria for marking. With this new PGDip degree, the entire faculty at IoE is new and it is a worry for the IIS' lecturers as well as teacher trainees. Both the IIS' and IoE's faculty need to refresh and strengthen collaboration and learn from each other continuously.

Whether or not the IoE and IIS have taken the right course of action to replace the MTeach with PGDip, is perhaps too early to judge. Further research needs to be conducted on this restructured programme to explore its achievements and areas of improvement in the future.

5. Discussion

Due to specificities of STEP, the various models discussed earlier shed light on certain elements of collaboration in the programme, yet they do not provide a unifying framework which could be utilised to examine the programme. Research findings by Goulet et al. (2003) speak to this research in terms of conducting the research as well as what the findings suggest. In this research too, the transformative power of collaboration is visible, where the lecturers and students work together, learn from one another, and influence one another's growth, despite different power dynamics. As a result, the faculty from both sides work closely to achieve the best possible results. The most prominent feature of such collaboration has been in teaching and learning but also research.

Among other models broadly categorised by Brown (2001) as the ad hoc collaboration, mergers, strategic alliances, and strategic planning between universities, STEP's experience echoes with some features of the last two. IIS and IoE-UCL too have strategic alliances and planning. This is largely related to the degree awarding power of IoE but also the quality of the programmes it offers as the findings demonstrate. Moreover, STEP too developed an identity which brought IoE and IIS together through official and non-official mechanisms to foster relationships and solve issues. Here it is both "a process and a product innovation" (Lawson, 2004).

The interagency model too seems to explain how collaboration in STEP programme is geared towards experimentation, development of organisations, and innovation and change (Slater & Ravid, 2004). At the start of the programme it looked like an experiment, even though there have been serious negotiations and discussions. There was no guarantee of its success, and hence in its nascent years of existence it was referred to as "a pilot programme". However, as collaboration became stronger, both institutions developed a stronger relationship that boosted their confidence about the programme and its

39

aims and objectives. The programme started to produce competent teachers of secondary RE in which the innovative approach to knowledge played a crucial role. As a result of an integrated approach to organisation of knowledge, the teacher trainees obtain content knowledge on religion, cultures and civilisations and simultaneously are taught about teachings strategies to deliver that content. The most updated methodologies and pedagogies are used by lecturers to enable the teacher trainees to enhance the content knowledge and teaching skills.

Furthermore, as demonstrated, the programme constantly reinvents itself and comes up with further innovation and changes. For example, the change from MTeach to PGDip is the latest experimentation and innovation in the programme. Whether or not this experimentation is appropriate due to the reservations by some lecturers and students, only time will tell.

The cyclical nature of collaboration in STEP involved the process of negotiation to create and continue the programme, to define the commitment of each institution and to execute the programme (Van de Van, 1994). The starting negotiations and dialogues as well as initial commitment and allocation of responsibilities which were fluid at the beginning were replaced by formal contracts and agreements.

As far as the challenges are concerned, some have been addressed successfully, while others to do with the workload and structural issues seem to persist. For instance, replacing MTeach with PGDip should have resolved the challenges of teacher trainees with no professional teaching background. However, informal conversations with the current teacher trainees (Cohort 11) demonstrate that the prolonged days of teaching at secular schools are not beneficial for most of them. For example, the non-native speakers find teaching in English challenging and sometimes the teacher trainees might be asked to teach subjects not related to their qualifications. This creating excessive anxiety and stress for the teacher trainees.

Moreover, sometimes the power dynamics between the two institutions during collaboration creates barriers rather than resolving them. As we have seen, the teacher trainees thought that if MTeach was adjusted more to the need of the programme, both degree programme could still work in harmony. However, this did not materialise even though it was proposed to the two institutions by a senior professor involved in the programme.

This demonstrates not only the restraining environment of the two institutions and their resistance to change and failure "to realise the radical nature of current historical change" (Sardar & Henzell-Thomas, 2017, p. 6), but also both institutions have become reluctant to meaningfully address important questions to do with power relationships between the collaborating institutions, the nature of education and its philosophy from the stand point of both institutions, and how to come to a mutual understanding.

As far as the IIS is concerned, its teacher trainees are not "customers" but rather are future educators and leaders. The IIS provides full time scholarship for the teacher trainees as well as pays their tuition fee to the IoE. As opposed to consumerist approach of higher educational institutions, IIS' approach to teaching and learning is broadly humanistic and culture and civilisation oriented. Although the IoE is

40

aware of these conceptions and its own renowned professors (Ronald Barnett, Peter Scott, David Watson, etc.) promote education which enhances cultures and civilisations, it nevertheless is caught up in the race for joint ventures and becoming part of larger network of corporations and businesses. The merger of IoE and UCL itself perhaps was partly an attempt to attract larger investments from the multinational corporations. This has implications for STEP and its possible further restructuring or even relocation to a different institution.

While this paper was in the process of publication, further changes happened in STEP, where a new institution, the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) joined this collaborative venture and from 2019 the MA degree will be granted by SOAS. Moreover, not very constructive structural changes were introduced into the teaching body of STEP—IIS in autumn of 2018 where the number of lecturers was reduced. This demonstrates the increased managerialism at the institution and making decisions dictated by the market economy. This restructuring therefore is contradictory to the vision and philosophy of STEP discussed throughout this paper and its students not being "consumers" as mentioned earlier.

6. Research Limitations and Recommendation for Further Research

This small-scale study focused on collaboration between the two institutions and how they jointly manage a collaborative programme like STEP. The time and scope limitations therefore did not allow the researcher to focus on areas that perhaps needed to be given more attention. That is why we recommend them as research topics to be explored further. One of the important topic in need of exploration, is the power dynamics between the two institutions, for instance, how the degree awarding power of IoE influences the collaboration between lecturers, especially when they design the assessment tasks and assess students' assignments.

Another important aspect of the programme that needs further research is the philosophy, epistemology and methodology of knowledge acquisition and production in this collaborative programme. How far can we expand the boundaries and create more scope for incorporating alternative epistemologies and teaching and learning methods or alternative paradigms (Sardar & Henzell-Thomas, 2017)? In order for the programme to become more integrated and relevant to the needs of the communities it serves, there is a need to critically reflect on medieval epistemologies and methods of teaching and learning and juxtapose them with modern epistemologies and methods of teaching and learning to see the commonalities and points of departure. The reason for this is that much of religious education among Muslims in general and Ismaili Muslims in particular is textual as well as visual and artistic that takes place outside formal schooling/institutions (e.g., places of worship, ziyaras—pilgrimages, religious festivals, etc.). This will allow for more creativity in teaching and learning and possibly coming up with a new paradigm and approach to knowledge.

7. Conclusion

It can be concluded that the research questions were answered and that this unique programme was created to address the young Ismaili Muslims' need for having a broader humanistic, civilizational and normative religious education taught by professional teachers. It became necessary for the IIS to liaise with the IoE for collaboration and setting up STEP. It is an innovative programme with a distinctive approach to knowledge production and acquisition where teacher trainees simultaneously learn about Muslim cultures and civilisations and methodologies of teaching. Despite numerous challenges the programme is successful and reinvigorates collaboration between the two institutions leading to more innovation and creativity. It is hoped that STEP's experience and achievements will be useful for Muslims and other faith communities that may struggle with how best to teach RE to their young generations.

Acknowledgements

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