

Full Summary - “New Developments and Debates in Islamic Studies”

When referring to averages, 1 = best/most desirable response, 5 = worst/least desirable response

Dr. Marcia Hermansen led a five-day workshop titled “New Developments and Debates in Islamic Studies” at the International Islamic University Islamabad. This workshop addressed current trends in the academic study of Islam (Islamic Studies) with the purpose of acquainting Pakistani academics in related fields with theories and practices impacting the academic study of Islam, major debates in the field, innovative pedagogical strategies, and approaches from the academic study of religion. The goal was to prepare early career Pakistani faculty from diverse Pakistani universities for research publications and curriculum designs that fulfill local needs and interests while meeting international standards. The participants were invited to submit syllabi and ask questions related to issues they faced in teaching and research during the workshop. Following the workshop, Dr. Hermansen participated in five other academic engagements reaching over 800 people.

A post-program survey was distributed to participants following the end of the workshop. Many of the participants explained that Dr. Hermansen’s workshop enhanced their skills at different levels and demonstrated new ways of teachings. One participant even stated that the information “opened up a new world of research in contemporary Religious Studies.” Several other participants indicated that the workshop sparked new ideas and helped to shed misconceptions and prejudices.

Another survey was distributed six months after the end of the program. Fifteen out of twenty-two participants responded to the follow-up survey. These responses demonstrated the longer-term benefits of the program to both the direct and indirect participants. The direct participants of the program rated their satisfaction with the program highly, giving it a 1.36, and rated the program a 1.57 for how beneficial the workshop was to their academic/professional endeavors. Since the program end, seven participants have already begun working on new research projects all/partly due to the training received from the workshop. Some of the specific benefits are exemplified in the open-ended comment sections from the surveys. One perspective is listed below:

“It enabled me understand and articulate research studies in a more productive and proper way. It also introduced and familiarized me with the new trends, debates and challenges in the academic studies in Western academia and institutions. The experience was very much inspiring and thought-provoking.”

Through the responses we received, the participants from this program have shared the training they received with approximately 60 other instructors/colleagues and 420 students. This brings the program’s reach to over 500 people and will likely increase as time continues. From the individual, open-ended comments, it is clear that academic studies and courses on Islam are lacking in Pakistan, and Dr. Hermansen’s workshop served as an introduction to new academic approaches to studying Islam/other religions. Some of these approaches she shared are being incorporated into the Pakistani curriculum, as evidenced below:

“It helped me understand the need and importance of a curriculum based on objectivity, academic approach and research ethics while designing a curriculum. It also inspired and motivated me to look into academic things in a broader way.”

“I have included new modules in my course outline after this seminar. I have given my students different readings related to Islamic studies to work more in future from different dimension.”

“I have learnt a lot during the seminar under mentorship of Dr. Marcia Hermansen. She has given us new ideas of looking especially discipline of Islamic studies from new aspects when it comes to research. Keeping in view i discussed Islamophobia which was not discussed with our students before. I have given them new idea of Islamophobia and further what we can do about it.”

“I have put forward my suggestion to the departmental curriculum committee to incorporate a course on different approaches towards the study of religions. From BS to Ph.D., none of our syllabi offers a course on such approaches and perspectives. Inclusion of such a course will have a very positive impact on students' critical understanding of religions.”

The training may also continue as the scholars remain in contact with each other and Dr. Hermansen. According to the survey responses, nine scholars have been in contact with Dr. Hermansen since the program ended (not including the program follow-up in April 2019), and four of them are currently working with her to improve a research project. Any feedback from Dr. Hermansen incorporated into these research projects will yield tangible outputs from the program. Of those who have not been in contact with Dr. Hermansen, four left their email addresses to be reconnected, and AIPS staff will help put them back in contact. Additional relationships have been forged between the workshop participants, and eleven scholars shared that they had been in contact with other participants since the program end.

While only five participants of Dr. Marcia Hermansen’s “Islamic Studies” program responded to the 12-month evaluation survey, their responses showed the positive, long-term impact of the program. All five respondents described the various ways that they have shared the knowledge and information learned from the program:

“I have been able to share Law-related portion of the seminar with the students of Political Science.”

“I shared the new emerging issues in the field of theology with my students...The need is to create and develop the potential in students to cope with such problems [that were discussed in the workshop].”

“The whole workshop was delivered in a way where we can comfortably share the knowledge and information gained in the workshop.”

“I have arranged a number of seminars in different departments of my university and shared my knowledge with diverse students...In addition, we have a forum for teachers, at which I have delivered three lectures to share my knowledge with my colleagues.”

“Through my semester classes, outlines, updating new readings, and arranging two seminars with BS and MS classes.”

As participants continue to share information with students and colleagues a year after the program has ended, the workshops have proven to be sustainable. The “Islamic Studies” workshops have also provided a space for Pakistani scholars to connect, as seen in these comments:

“The whole workshop was very fruitful, and it gave us a platform, a network where we can contact the workshop participants. I have been in contact with the Pakistani scholars.”

“I joined academic groups with some of the other fellows of the workshop.”

Noticeably, this program has created a network of Pakistani scholars, and it has allowed them to collaborate outside of the workshop. The knowledge gained from the program has had an impact on participants’ professional and academic work, as well. When asked to describe the major long-term outcomes of this AIPS program, participants shared the following:

“There is a research paper related to “Pakistan Government Collection of Zakat” that I am working on under her supervision.”

“I want to apply for Fulbright Scholarship to further enhance my qualifications. Dr. Marcia Hermansen will help me in this regards.”

“I am currently writing a research paper on professional Islamophobia and its negative impact on Christian-Muslim relations.”

Overall, the “Islamic Studies” program has had a lasting impact on participants’ scholarly development and initiated, as well as maintained, an exchange of knowledge between Pakistan and the US.

These comments best reflect the original content from the participants’ surveys. However, due to variances in English language proficiency, grammatical errors and compilation purposes, direct responses have been paraphrased and/or edited for readability. Whenever possible, direct quotations were used and will be marked by quotation marks.