

Islamic Education in Sri Lanka: Institutional Adaptation of Management, Curriculum, and Leadership within a Multicultural Context

Ahamed Sarjoon Razick^{1*}, Iqbal Saujan¹, J.D. Careemdeen²

¹South Eastern University of Sri Lanka

²Open University of Sri Lanka

*Corresponding Author: sarjoonra@seu.ac.lk

Submitted : June 17, 2026

Accepted : July 30, 2026

Published : August 17, 2026

A B S T R A C T

The Islamic educational institutions in Sri Lanka function within various social environments influenced by several ethnicities, religions, and languages. Although Islamic Education has a long history in the country, systematic research on the management, curriculum framework, and leadership practices that are in the best interest of the multicultural society is lacking. This study fills this gap by examining how Islamic educational institutions comprehend the challenges and opportunities embedded in the pluralist context of Sri Lanka. Using a mixed methods approach involving case studies, semi structured interviews with 45 stakeholders, and a survey of 320 teachers and students, the study examines institutional adaptation in terms of management, curriculum, and leadership. The findings indicate that although the awareness of Islamic institutions regarding the need and demand for integration of modern academic content with Islamic religious teachings, to enable the learners to adapt in the contemporary set up, is increasing, system barriers like resources, policy level, and intercultural competency are hindering effective adaptation. The dynamics of leadership are steadily changing towards more cooperative and participatory models. According to this article, making the necessary adaptations demands both internal institutions to reform with Islamic governance principles of shura (consultation), adl (justice), and amanah (trustworthiness), guidance, and national policy frameworks that recognize Islamic education's legitimate role in Sri Lanka as a multi religious country. The research adds to the existing literature on Islamic education in non major Muslim societies, besides providing evidence based recommendations to institutional leaders, curriculum planners, and policymakers.

Keywords: islamic education, institutional adaptation, educational management, educational leadership, multicultural society



Cabis Karya © 2026 by MAPAN: Manajemen Pendidikan dan Analisis is licensed under [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/)

Introduction

Sri Lanka is a country of remarkable diversity. With a population of about 23.2 million, the nation is home to Muslims, Tamils, Sinhalese, and other smaller groups such as Burghers, Veddas, and others. The huge human diversity of the country is not only reflected in its ethnic and linguistic composition, but also in its religious composition, which includes Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity. Thus, education has always been used for the development of communities and a venue for negotiating social relations. The Muslim community, which is about nine to ten percent of the national population, has been associated closely with religion, culture, and participation in the country's education.

According to a CEN report, Muslim educational institutions in Sri Lanka include mosque based Quranic schools, structured schools (*maqthab*), Arabic colleges (*madradas*), and at the tertiary level, the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka (SEUSL), which was established in 1995, and is a university whose student population is mainly Muslim. Islamic educational institutions, as well as mosques, pass the message of Islam from one generation to another. However, social, economic, and technological changes taking place in Sri Lanka point to growing pressure on these institutions. Teachers must gear students not just for life religiously but also to participate in a competitive, multi-religious, and knowledge-based society.

The challenge of being adaptively accessible in Islamic educational institutions has received considerable attention in the literature. Globally, there is evidence that Islamic institutions in Muslim minority environments are engaged in a continuous struggle between the maintenance of a reference to functional Islam and the demands of secular and multicultural education (Hefner & Zaman, 2007; Merry, 2007). Evidence from systematic reviews of the literature supports the necessity for reformed governance, curriculum design, and leadership philosophy rather than for individual practice to successfully negotiate this tension (Tan, 2011; Waghid, 2011). In Sri Lanka, nevertheless, there is no existing research that is focused on Islamic institutions. Existing literature has focused either on the historical evolution of Islamic education or on broader questions of Muslim identity and politics, leaving institutional dimensions of adaptation relatively unexplored.

Hence, this article tries to bridge the above gap. The following research questions will provide guidance for the study: How are the Islamic educational institutions in Sri Lanka currently adapting their management structures to multicultural demands? In what ways have curriculum content and teacher practices changed? What are the new leadership models, and do they help or hinder adaptation? What difficulties and chances are available in the adaptation? For this purpose, a mixed method design will be adopted, drawing on data collected from case studies in the Eastern and Southern Provinces.

This research study holds theoretical and practical implications. Its purpose is to further strengthen research on the Muslim society and its education, particularly in minority Muslim contexts. In practical terms, it is a policy research that produces evidence to influence institutional reform, leadership formation, and policy development in Sri Lanka and similar contexts.

Research Method

Research Design

This study employed a mixed methods research design that integrates a qualitative case study and a quantitative survey. This mixed methods approach was chosen because it enables a deeper and more complete understanding of complex social phenomena than either approach alone (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The qualitative aspect offers depth and contextualization; the quantitative aspect allows broader generalisation. According to Tan (2011) and Fauzi and Anwar (2025), there is a compatible design with established practice in comparative Islamic education research in which mixed methods are employed to study institutional adaptation across national settings.

Case Study Selection

To reflect the diversity of Sri Lankan Muslim educational provision, three institutional case studies were selected. The South Eastern University of Sri Lanka (SEUSL) was chosen first, since there is only one state university specially serving Muslim students and offering both Islamic and secular academic programmes. Moreover, a madrasah from the Ampara District was selected that has undergone substantial curriculum reforms over the past decade to represent the reformed madrasah sector. The Colombo District's multicultural urban setting is where a network of mosque based primary schools, which offer interfaith programs, is located; this is where the non formal Islamic school sector is represented. As noted by Creswell and Plano Clark (2011), the purposive sampling strategy depicts cases chosen through a theoretical logic that demonstrates multiple aspects of the core phenomenon.

Data Collection

Three primary methods were used to collect data. A total of 45 semi structured interviews were conducted with institutional administrators, senior teachers, community leaders, and government education officials. Interviews were done in English, Sinhala, and Tamil, and transcribed with their consent, and translation help was provided where necessary. To assess the management effectiveness, curriculum relevance, and leadership quality, a structured survey was administered to 320 teachers and students in the three case study institutions. A review of institutional documents, curriculum frameworks, policy documents, and government educational reports was conducted.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was secured from the concerned institutional ethics committee. All the subjects did a written informed consent, and the anonymity was maintained by pseudonymising and anonymising institutional names. Extra attention was placed on cultural sensitivity to conduct the research. The research team implemented technically responsible methods when undertaking fieldwork and sharing information, given the fragile socio political condition of Muslims in post conflict Sri Lanka (Sarjoon et al., 2016) and the sensitive nature of the questions on their identity and Islamic education.

Results and Discussion

Global Perspectives on Islamic Education in Multicultural Societies

For the past thirty years, especially in multicultural societies, Islamic education has become an increasingly popular subject of study. In the United Kingdom, Parker Jenkins (1995) did some early groundwork that documented how UK Muslim schools struggled for state recognition in part due to social cohesion concerns. Hewer's (2001) and Bhatti's (2006) studies into the British national curriculum and Islamic religious studies highlight the mediating role of institutional capacity and policies in national policy discourses. According to Fauzi and Anwar (2025), recent systematic analysis of Islamic educational management indicated that multicultural diversity in Islamic education has not yet been managed according to any coherent model in most other institutional situations. Moreover, a systematic governance framework is the main constraint.

In Malaysia, Tan (2011) examined how the national educational policy strikes a balance between Islamic values and the needs of a multi ethnic society in such a way that the politics of the country affects as much the institutional identity and curriculum design as the pedagogic choice. Waghid (2011) pointed out that Islamic educational philosophy, with its essential ingredients of critical reasoning and social justice, had a genuine potential in South Africa's post-apartheid socio-political setting. Across these diverse contexts, it emerges that adaptation requires purposeful alignment between institutional values and the social environment, and this cannot occur without deliberate reform in governance, curriculum, and leadership (Dimmock & Walker, 2005; Hefner & Zaman, 2007).

Recent research reinforces and further proves these conclusions. According to a review by TUNAS: Jurnal Pendidikan Guru Sekolah Dasar in 2025, Islamic education and multicultural management can be aligned if both side on justice, equality, as well as tolerance. Furthermore, it also revealed concrete steps such as integration of multicultural curriculum content, training for teachers, inclusive management in the classroom, and anti discrimination policy. The same study found difficulties, such as teachers who do not fully comprehend multicultural concepts, a

society that refuses pluralism, and underdeveloped educational policies that support diversity (Fauzi & Anwar, 2025). The analytical framework of the present study is directly informed by these.

Islamic Education in Sri Lanka: Historical Background

Islamic education history in Sri Lanka is long and varied. As early as the seventh century CE, Muslim communities settled along the island's coastal trading routes. Also, mosque based education has been going on for centuries in Muslim communities (Laffan, 2003; McGilvray, 2008). The establishment of the formal *madrasa* system was completed more fully during the colonial period in light of British educational policies that privileged Christian missionary schools and sidelined Islamic schools.

Post-independence, many Arabic colleges were founded in the Eastern Province, teaching Islamic sciences, subjects, and the Arabic language, and offering more and more secular subjects. Specifically, SEUSL was established in Oluvil in 1995 in the Ampara District (Bakar, 2012). The establishment of the university was significant in that it provided degree programmes in Islamic thought and culture, Arabic Language, Islamic Banking and Finance, and Islamic Law. Existing literature has tended to focus on historical and sociological dimensions of this development: Haniffa (2007) examined the role of Islamic schools in Muslim identity construction, while Ameerdeen (2006) explored the political dimension of Muslim educational claims in the post war period. Saleem (2015) carried out an intervention study on curriculum reform in the *madrasa* sector. Nonetheless, according to Sarjoon, Yusoff, and Hussin (2016), post-war intercommunal conditions have become a harmful structural environment for Muslim institutions, as waves of anti Muslim sentiment lead to conditions of institutional defensiveness that complicate systematic reform. There is no systematic, institution based analysis of management, curriculum, and leadership adaptation in the literature.

Management, Curriculum, and Leadership

Scholarly exploration of Islamic educational management underscores the role of authority structures in the institution. Bush and Oduro (2006) noted that the management of Islamic schools is hierarchical and personalised, hindering institutional flexibility. In his article focusing on the University of Malaya and IIUM during the 1970s, Kahn highlighted that both universities' leaders were focused on cultivating stable industrial relations (Salleh & Ahmed, 2016; Kahn, 1992). Industrial peace advantageously maximizes contributions from faculty, staff, and students (Salleh & Ahmed, 2016). Researchers studying Islamic governance principles and contemporary democratic theory in 2024 (published Journals of Research Synergy Press) concluded in their comparative study that *shura* and deliberative decision making principles share the fundamental principles of

accountability, consensus, and justice and that their combination can meaningfully bolster institutional effectiveness.

The Islamic educational institutions' curriculum reform process is intensely debated. South Asia's experience offers valuable insights. A 2012 study by Bano, contrasting the madrasa modernisation programmes that governments of Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan launched, finds madrasas can become important partners in the pursuit of wider educational goals. Nevertheless, success is contingent upon the state making a serious financial commitment and establishing a basis of trust with the religious leadership. Asadullah and Chaudhury (2010) studied religious schooling in South Asia and argued that imposed curricula that a local community does not buy into are always problematic. This discovery is backed by evidence. A framework study published in 2024 on reforming Islamic education also called for curriculum harmonisation through teacher training, shared spaces, and modern teaching technology, but not as substitutes for religious material, but as unnecessary developments (Al-Aijaz Research Journal, 2024). According to a study by Chotimah, Qudsy, and Yusuf (2025) published in Cogent Education, it is dangerous to implement religious moderation without institutional ownership. It is feared that a nominal/technical response will reproduce the rigidity addressed with firm moderation.

A systematic literature review by Li and Karanxha (2024) covering 14 empirical studies on leadership conducted between 2006 and 2019 found, among others, that transformational school leadership is associated with improved teacher commitment, more positive school culture, and indirectly with student academic outcomes, even though the effects are mediated by organisational conditions and school context. An empirical study of Hammad et al (2024) in Yemeni Islamic schools reported that transformational leadership positively influenced school culture and teaching performance. School culture was found to be a significant mediating variable. In EDUKASIA: Jurnal Pendidikan dan Pembelajaran (2025), a mixed method study of Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia similarly found that transformational leadership practices positively affect school climate and teacher motivation and students' academic self efficacy and moral self efficacy. The study concludes that strategic educational management based on transformational theory and social cognitive theory is necessary to achieve academic excellence and character formation.

Theoretical Framework

The analysis presented in the findings utilises a theoretical framework. This approach unifies Islamic management principles with contemporary educational management theories. The intention is not to present these heritages as competing, but rather as identifying points of productive integration capable of supporting effective institutional adaptation in a multicultural context.

Islamic Management Principles

Islamic management principles refer to a set of principles based on the *Qur'an*, the *Sunnah*, and classical Islamic thought. There are three principles which find especially relevant. The first is *shura* (mutual consultation). The concept of the *shura* is derived from *Surah Ash-Shura* (42:38). It is also practiced by the beloved Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) in important matters of governance and military affairs. Thus, the *shura* is an Islamic obligation and not merely a procedural preference. Contemporary studies validate the practical institutional benefits of *shura*. For instance, at Islamic tertiary institutions, participatory decision making based on the principle of *shura* increases staff legitimacy and institutional trust, provided it is implemented substantively and not symbolically (Arcjournals, 2014). An analytical comparison of governance further argues that *shura* and modern deliberative democracy share important values of accountability, consensus, and justice. As a result, Islamic consultative governance is, broadly speaking, compatible with modern participative management regimes.

The second principle refers to *adl* or justice. *Adl* requires institutional structures and functions to ensure fair treatment for all members. Incorporating ADL into a multicultural setting carries clear operational ramifications for curriculum, student welfare, and staffing. The third principle is *amanah* (trustworthiness). This principle entails being honourable, possessing integrity, being transparent, and being accountable to Allah and the community that serves. Taken together, these three principles offer a normative foundation for Islamic institutional governance. This foundation is both internally coherent and, as an expanding empirical literature suggests, conducive to the kinds of inclusive and accountable management demanded in pluralistic educational environments (Salleh, 2013; Fauzi & Anwar, 2025).

Modern Educational Management Theories

Two frameworks of contemporary educational management theory are useful for this analysis. The first, transformational leadership theory has been mainly proposed by Burns (1978) and Bass (1985) and has later been applied to education by Leithwood, Jantzi, and Steinbach (1999). The ability of leaders to inspire a shared vision, create a culture of continuous improvement, and develop shared institutional capacity is essential as per transformational leadership. According to a meta analysis, it was found that collaborative school cultures tend to be created at the grassroots level without bureaucratic involvement. It further confirmed that collaborative school cultures design professional development (Li & Karanxha, 2024). Crucially for this project, evidence from schools with Islamic backgrounds, including Yemen, Indonesia, and Malaysia, finds that transformational approaches work in religiously grounded entities because they allow leaders to retain spiritual

authority but at the same time build the management capacity needed to cope with outward demands (Hammad et al., 2024; Edukasia, 2025).

To reinforce the theoretical foundation for curriculum adaptation specifically, three additional frameworks are added. According to Gay (2010), responsive curriculum theory explains that the curriculum content, materials, and pedagogy must be intentionally modified to reflect the cultural backgrounds, histories and knowledge of learners rather than diversity being an addition to a fixed core. By applying this theory to the Sri Lanka case, we can see how the mosque-based schools' multicultural sensitivity curriculum is greater than just the addition of secular subjects as it demonstrates a real modification of the curriculum to the multicultural context. According to Constructivist learning theory (Vygotsky, 1978), the shift from rote transmission of religious content towards dialogic, investigative and interactive pedagogy is central to the goal of multiculturalism. We can see this when we realize that learners construct an integrated religious and civic identity through social interaction with one another and with guidance from the teacher, and when they are able to learn alongside peers from different backgrounds. As a final point, the 21st century skills framework developed by Trilling and Fadel (2009) provides criteria to assess the vocationally oriented reforms at SEUSL and in the madrasa sector, namely the addition of computer science, English, and economics. These reforms respond primarily to labour market and digital literacy needs rather than to multicultural coexistence as such we develop this distinction further in the below findings. These three theories clarify the conceptual distinction between adapting the curriculum for multicultural competence and adapting the curriculum for economic and technological relevance.

Participatory governance theory is the second relevant framework. The article points out that participatory governance (such as school-based management councils and community councils) tends to be inclusive and more accountable where decision making power is genuinely devolved and not just symbolically. The study is done via a systematic review of literature on school governance from 2000 to 2023 (International Journal of Leadership in Education, 2025). Evidence from different contexts further suggests that stakeholder trust and improved institutional performance from distributed leadership and dialogic governance are possible only with adequate capacity (Sattar, 2022, as cited in RSIS International, 2025; King, 2023, as cited in RSIS International, 2025).

Integration Model

The proposed model of integration in this study assumes that an appropriate institutional adaptation will occur if Islamic normative values and current educational management practice are purposefully integrated. The Islamic identity will not be diluted or replaced by it. Instead, it looks to the intellectual resources of the Islamic tradition to meet the requirements for and respond externally to a

changing social environment. The model identifies three key updates as management, curriculum, and leadership, and says that progress in one dimension is likely of dependence of progress in another dimension, and it will reinforce the other. The Islamic education literature provides a wealth of evidence to suggest that systemic interdependence holds. For instance, integrated curriculum reform studies reveal that, when moving from a pre-vetted curriculum to a new integrated curriculum, supportive leadership and governance structures are vital (not only curriculum reform) (Bano, 2012; Chotimah et al., 2025).

Conceptual Framework

The study's conceptual framework structures the analysis around three interrelated dimensions of adaptation of institutions. The considerations are each understood as a response to the particular demands of their multicultural context, as represented by the Islamic educational institutions in Sri Lanka.

Management adaptation refers to any changes in governance structures, administrative processes, financial management, and accountability. In Sri Lanka's context, internal governance mechanisms include the development of more transparent and participatory governance models, strengthening of administrative capacity, and the establishment of mechanisms for community engagement. Evidence from the literature on Islamic higher education shows that management quality, especially participatory decision-making and transparent accountability, is significantly associated with institutional effectiveness and the commitment of staff (JPPI, 2024; Rsisinternational, 2025).

Curriculum adaptation is concerned with modifying content, structure, and delivery of educational programmes. This includes the addition of modern academic themes to fix the religion curriculum, inclusion of multi-religious content, pedagogical reforms (less lecture, more interaction and inquiry-based), and so on. According to *Frontiers in Education*, an Indonesian Islamic school internalises multicultural values through three mechanisms: 1) Teaching that is dialogic and value-oriented, 2) Inclusive institutional policies, and 3) Student-student interactions that are relational. The journal article (2026) provides one of the most methodologically rigorous empirical models of this process.

Adapting leadership refers to developing leadership styles suitable for a multicultural environment. One can include inclusivity that promotes diversity, skills for interfaith dialogue and community engagement, and an institutional vision honouring Islamic values and multicultural civic duty. The dynamic interaction of the three dimensions refers to the improvement in leadership philosophy, which creates favourable conditions for curriculum change. Further, improved management systems allow more thorough implementation of curriculum.

Management Practices and Adaptation Strategies

The findings indicate that the three institutions examined differ considerably in their management practices, reflecting the type, size, and history of the institution. The formal governance structures at SEUSL broadly mirror those at the other state universities in Sri Lanka, including a council, senate, and faculty boards. However, interviews with university administrators indicate that these arrangements are experienced as slow moving and bureaucratic, poorly fitted to both the pace of change required by the educational marketplace and national policy. This study also aligned with the broader Islamic higher education literature that identifies bureaucratic inertia as a key constraint on institutional responsiveness (JPPI, 2024).

In order to illustrate the dynamics more concretely, interview data highlight three specific adaptation strategies employed at SEUSL. At first, several faculties were rotating committee representation to include junior academic staff and in two cases external community representatives in an explicit attempt to shorten the distance between decisions at council level and multicultural realities on campus in day to day life. In the second instance, administrators spoke of the establishment of a desk to deal with student welfare and multicultural affair partly as a reaction, they claim, to complaints from Tamil and Sinhalese students for the university being mono-ethnic in its administrative culture and several interviewees claimed this desk managed to reduce complaints of this nature regarding access to language in official communications. In addition, there has been an increase in joint curriculum planning meetings between Islamic Studies and secular studies faculty in order to coordinate rather than parallel their programming. Nonetheless, respondents continuously characterized these measures as add ons to, rather than a transformation of, the governance archetype which remains unchanged; this is consistent with the broader finding that management adaptation at SEUSL is constrained by its inherited state university architecture.

In the *madrassa* system of education, management is more personal; the head scholar has greater power and authority. Evidence from the survey data suggests that most teachers perceive their institutional leadership as largely just and dependable. However, they do not get meaningful opportunities to participate in any decision making. Only 38% of *madrassa* teachers reported that their opinions were regularly sought on curriculum or institutional policy compared to 61% of SEUSL academic staff. This gap is important because empirical evidence from Islamic tertiary institutions provides strong support for participatory decision making through *shura* that is positively associated with staff engagement, legitimization, and institutional effectiveness (Salleh, 2013; Arcjournals, 2014). The discordance between the theoretical endorsement of *shura* and its practical manifestation is a

recurrent conclusion of the Islamic governance literature, and seems to be distinctly the case in Sri Lanka.

The mosque based school network in Colombo has a different model. The management has also developed a greater orientation towards external accountability and engagement with the community, as it operates in direct daily contact with non Muslim communities. Some administrators delineated intentional tactics for forging relationships with non Muslim parents, local government officials, and community organisations. In alignment with the participatory governance literature, community engagement and transparent accountability can be associated with stronger stakeholder trust and institutional performance, particularly in culturally diverse contexts (King, 2024; IDRA, 2018). A systematic review of school governance published in 2025 found that parent and community participation is most effective when it is designed to distribute genuine decision making power rather than serve merely as a symbolic legitimisation exercise, a distinction highly relevant to the Colombo schools' approach (International Journal of Leadership in Education, 2025).

Curriculum Reforms and Challenges

The adaptation of the curriculum is the most hotly contested and complex dimension of institutional change. The three institutions studied have engaged in some curriculum reform, but the nature and depth of these reforms differ. The incorporation of secular and Islamic academic content at SEUSL is at the most advanced stage, where degree programmes have been developed, mixing religious studies with economics, computer science, education, etc. A total of 74% of the survey respondents agreed that their programme did well in preparing them for their religious and professional life. This evidence is in line with the wider evidence base, which shows that combined dual track curriculum approaches for religious and vocational preparation are associated with better student outcomes as well as stronger community support (Bano, 2012; Al-Aijaz Research Journal, 2024).

It is important to clarify what exactly this reform means. While official documents often reiterate that the SEUSL curriculum is responsive to Sri Lanka's plural society, the content changes identified in the study the introduction of economics, computer science, education and English are more towards employability and the national global labour market than towards the multicultural coexistence as such. The additional subjects offered in the SEUSL do not have any specifically multi religious or intercultural content. The students of different faiths follow the same computer science or English curriculum that they would in any state institution. It has nothing to do with the religious diversity in Sri Lanka. The same pattern holds, with even greater force, for the madrasa's addition of English and basic IT knowledge. As per the responsive curriculum theory mentioned above, this is curriculum modernisation to cater to the needs of scientific and technological

development, not curriculum adaptation to multicultural demand. In contrast to this multicultural curriculum adaptation, mosque-based schools are concentrated this as will be seen in the subsequent paragraph.

Curriculum reform in the *madrassa* setting has been cautious and contested. The institution in question has added English language and basic computer knowledge in their programme; however, its core curriculum is highly weighted towards Islamic sciences. Many senior teachers expressed their concern that there would be more modernisation at the cost of the institution. This opposition is highlighted within the comparative *madrassa* reform literature. According to Bano (2012), in Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan, reform is most likely to succeed when the state or reform agent makes a genuine financial commitment and builds a trust-based relationship with the religious elite, rather than trying to impose change from outside. In the view of Asadullah and Chaudhury (2010), the imposition of curricula by the external agent without local quality always results in limited outcomes. The evidence thus indicates that the slow pace of reform at this institution may not be institutional conservatism but a rational response to the fact that reform processes have not yet achieved adequate community trust and resourcing. As Chotimah et al (2025) critically warn, a broad brush implementation of religious moderation that is nominal as opposed to embedded reproduces institutionally strenuousness rather than overcoming it, a finding that speaks to the importance of genuine stakeholder ownership in the Sri Lankan case.

The mosque based schools in Colombo have developed what has been described as a multicultural sensitivity curriculum that has some content about the histories, festivals, and practices of the various religious communities present in Sri Lanka, developed in conjunction with a local interfaith organisation. This initiative represents a local form of curriculum adaptation and fits the empirical findings that interfaith and multicultural content in religious education can contribute to social cohesion. A study appearing in MDPI Religions (2025), focusing on England, Japan, and Italy, found that religious education assigned a broader role, especially interfaith dialogue and intercultural citizenship education, which was associated with a more favourable attitude of students towards different religious groups. As multicultural and peace values have been successfully internalised in a school in Indonesia that has a specifically Islamic school setting, a 2026 qualitative case study published in Frontiers in Education, it indicates three key mechanisms. These mechanisms are based on dialogic and value oriented teaching, inclusive institutional policies, and student relational interactions. These three key mechanisms could be applied straightaway to the Colombo schools' approach as well.

Leadership Models in Multicultural Settings

The heads of the case study institutions follow leadership styles on the spectrum from authoritarian to participative. The senior academic leaders of the SEUSL are now more frequently accepting a transformational approach, highlighting strategic planning, capacity building, and community outreach. This orientation is broadly speaking, consistent with the empirical evidence indicating that transformational leadership in Islamic higher education institutions is associated with stronger institutional effectiveness, improved staff motivation (JPPI, 2024; Ibrahim et al., 2024). According to a systematic review of Li and Karanxha (2024), which reviewed 14 empirical studies over a period of 14 years, transformational leadership in schools and universities consistently leads to improved commitment from teachers and better institutional culture, which indirectly improves student outcomes via positive organisational conditions. At SEUSL, however, these characteristics tend to coexist with more traditional hierarchical norms that can delay decision making and limit the capacity to innovate.

In the *madrasa*, the head scholar holds considerable personal authority, and leadership succession is usually based on religious credentials rather than management ability. Findings from the interviews indicate that this model is beginning to face internal stress. This internal stress may arise as better educated, younger community members advocate for more participatory approaches, as well as for management by professionals. The resemblance of this pressure pattern with findings of research on Islamic educational leadership in various national contexts suggests that the evolution of a more formally educated generation within Muslim communities has consistently created demand for more transparent and participatory institutional governance (Bush & Oduro, 2006; Salleh, 2013). Evidence from frontiers in education (Hammad et al., 2024) indicates, importantly, that even in Muslim majority contexts, which have well defined traditional religious authority structures, transformational leadership approaches that emphasise vision, the motivation of staff, and school culture lead to significantly better educational outcomes in comparison to authority centred models. This has direct implications for the development of madrasa leadership in Sri Lanka.

Most notably, a mosque based school network in Colombo exhibits inclusive leadership. Its network coordinator has forged positive relationships with local government officials, non Muslim local leaders, and donor organisations. According to a survey conducted by this network, the level of satisfaction among teachers and trust by the community was found to be the highest of the three institutions that were included in the case study. This leadership model embodies characteristics that empirical literature identifies as especially effective in multicultural institutional contexts. This includes a clear vision embedded in values, a deliberate engagement of the community, and the capacity to translate interfaith dialogue into

curricular and institutional practice (Dimmock & Walker, 2005; Waghid, 2011). The Islamic principle of *amanah* operates when the leader is perceived to be trustworthy and accountable because her engagement with the bigger community is well understood within the institution as being in line with the Islamic character, rather than a threat to it.

Differences in leadership style among the three institutions do not appear to be coincidence but can be attributed to at least four causes. The first factor is the institutional origin and legal status: being a state university, SEUSL has a civil servant styled leadership succession that is driven by academic rank and administrative tenure; whilst being favourable to managerial competence, it entrenches hierarchies that are slow to change. The head scholar of a madrasa draws spiritual legitimacy from the religious authority lineage model. The credentials for this model involve Islamic knowledge and scholarship, rather than administrative knowledge. This credentialing process explains the high level of community trust in madrasas, and their comparative resilience against participatory reform. The extent of daily unavoidable contact with non Muslim stakeholders appears to be directly shaping leadership orientation. Continuous engagement in an urban setting (Colombo) with a large number of non Muslim parents and local officials creates pressure and incentive for adopting an inclusive leadership style in the mosque based network, which is largely absent in the case of the madrasa which is more insulated geographically and socially. Lastly, the generational make up of the community at each of the institutions matters. In my interviews at the madrasa, for example, participants indicated that a demand for participatory governance was originating from a recently turned over younger, more formally educated community member base. These statements suggest that it is actually the generational turnover of the community, rather than institutional policies, which has led to a demand for the current leadership platform changes. In a general way, these resource base conditions do not permit any leader to do more than what is feasible. Thus, the small scale of the mosque based network allowed its coordinator to build relationships personally. However, this is a difficult approach to replicate at the scale of SEUSL. Consequently, understanding leadership adaptation necessitates consideration not only of an individual leader's orientation, but also of the structural conditions legal status, stakeholder proximity, generational change and resource scale in which that leadership operates.

Comparative Insights and Interpretation

The way each of the three institutions manages its adaptation is not uniform or linear. The most comprehensive management systems to help survive the fierce competition emanating from the stakeholder groups were developed by SEUSL. The *madrasa* benefits from clarity of purpose and strong community ownership, even if it is limited in terms of resources and governance capacity. The network of mosque

based schools, although small and resource-constrained, shows the most creative and context sensitive adaptations. The evidence of this variation resembles that documented in the comparative Islamic education literature, where institutions adapt at a different pace and manner depending on mission, resource base, community context, and leadership. Furthermore, there is no one single most appropriate model of Islamic educational adaptation in multi cultural contexts (Hefner & Zaman, 2007; Tan, 2011; Fauzi & Anwar, 2025).

Particularly, the data support the theory that the three adaptation dimensions are mutually reinforcing. At the mosque-based schools, the institution showing the most integrated adaptation, effective inclusive leadership, directly enabled curriculum innovation (multicultural sensitivity content), and, in turn, supported more participatory management practices. In the case of madrasa, on the other hand, limited governance reform has been a result of limited leadership succession norms, and this has limited the capability of the institution to sustain curriculum change beyond a fairly introductory addition. This dependence on others recursively ensures the sustainable change that Fullan (2001) speaks about when he says that all leadership, culture, and structural conditions must align at once.

Institutional and Resource Challenges

Limited financial and human resources are often the most cited challenges. Several Islamic educational institutions in Sri Lanka, such as madrasas and mosque schools, work with extremely limited funds, primarily from community donations. The limited resources make it difficult to produce and implement new curriculum materials, recruit and train qualified teachers, invest in physical infrastructure, or provide systematic staff development. Evidence from Pakistan and Bangladesh reveals that resource scarcity or lack of money is the next most powerful predictor of limited madrasa reform outcomes. Moreover, efforts for reforms do not bring about sustained change on a consistent basis without financial support from the government or donors (Bano, 2012; Asadullah & Chaudhury, 2010). This phenomenon does not occur solely in Sri Lanka.

Another problem is policy alignment. Even though SEUSL is a UGC institution, an overwhelming majority of the madrasas and mosque based schools operate largely outside of the formal national educational system. There is both an upside and a downside to this gap. While it offers considerable freedom concerning the programmes, it also entails limited access to government funding and restricted recognition of qualifications. The accreditation framework can be an effective linkage between non formal religious education providers and the national education system if they are developed together and the state has made a real financial commitment (2025, Cakrawala Journal; Bano, 2012).

Cultural and Political Challenges

The context of post conflict Sri Lanka presents unique cultural and political challenges for Islamic educational institutions. According to the research of Sarjoon, Yusoff, and Hussin (2016), the end of the civil war in 2009 did not follow a smooth process of reconciliation. The period, instead, saw an intensification of ethno religious tensions. Building on previous studies of Jaffna, the authors ethnographically demonstrate how Muslims have become, as they put it, 'another other' subject to violent attacks organised by Sinhala Buddhist nationalist actors. The Kandy riots in 2018 and waves of anti-Muslim violence resulted in increased community anxieties and conditions in which some institutional leaders take an understandable posture of caution when it comes to high profile engagement with non Muslim communities (Haniffa, 2021; Amnesty International, 2024). According to the strategic imperatives research from 2024, the Muslim leadership of post war Sri Lanka has to cope with demands of citizenship rights, intercommunal reconciliation, and community protection simultaneously, a multi directional pressure that shapes decision making (Kemanusiaan, 2024).

Simultaneously, the political milieu affirms the need for interfaith education as part of the curriculum in schools. A body of evidence, including the 2025 MDPI Religions multi country study and the 2024 Journal of Lifestyle and SDGs Review study of interfaith multicultural education, shows that carefully structured religious education with explicit interfaith dialogue components leads to more positive inter group attitudes in students. Furthermore, it plays a measurable and useful role in social cohesion, and these are exactly the outcomes most needed in post war Sri Lanka. Numerous interviewees indicated that deep inter-community relationships are the best long term protection for the Muslim community, and that education plays an important role in building those relationships from a young age.

Opportunities for Reform and Development

Despite these challenges, the study also uncovered very important opportunities for institutional development. The increasing penetration of these services and resources amongst the classes provides modern Islamic institutions with the possibility to enhance existing curriculum without requiring major investment in infrastructural development. Studies done in the Islamic education technology domain suggest an association between interactive multimedia, AI enabled content, a blended learning platform, etc and higher student engagement and learning outcomes if they are accompanied by proper teacher training and digital infrastructure. However, the same evidence base cautions that the effectiveness of digital learning is chiefly dependent on teacher digital literacy and institutional readiness, and that underdeveloped infrastructure and human resource capacity can negate benefits. The analysis indicates that any digital

development in Sri Lankan Islamic institutions should incorporate organized teacher professional development and training.

Another great opportunity is leadership development programs. In the study, a quarter of the leaders have had no formal exposure to educational management. Studies of Islamic higher education have shown that investing in structured leadership development, which includes Islamic management and educational administration theory, is positively associated with institutional effectiveness, staff motivation, and public/community confidence. The potential of the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka as an entity and the local community to function as a centre of excellence for development is fully recognized. Hence, it is not only evidence based but also institutionally practical to develop a system wide professional development programme for Islamic educational leaders based at SEUSL.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

This study's findings have implications at three levels, specifically national, institutional, and community. According to national policy, the study suggests that Islamic education leaders, government education professionals, civil society organizations, and members of society should be involved in the processes for the creation of an accreditation and quality assurance framework for Islamic educational institutions. We will ensure the emergence of a framework for the credential recognition of qualified madrasa graduates with minimum standards for curriculum content, teacher qualifications, and governance practices. Evidence from Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan suggests that state led reform programmes work best when they are both genuinely financially backed and based on a partnership of trust with religious communities (Bano, 2012). Indonesia's experience in this religious moderation policy (KMA No. 93/2022 and other relevant regulations) could offer a comparative model. Similarly, institutional reform requires paradigm shifts in three sectors at once, namely internalizing moderation values in the curriculum, enhancing teacher competence, and recomposing the governance system (Cakrawala Journal, 2025).

At the institutional level, it is recommended that investment be made into building leadership and management capacity through a professional development program that combines Islamic management principles with training in educational administration, financial management, and strategic planning. Evidence for this recommendation is substantial. Systematic reviews and empirical studies from various contexts demonstrate that structured leadership development is among the highest return investments available to educational organizations to improve institutional performance and community relations, but also increasingly to develop the capability (Li & Karanxha, 2024; Ibrahim et al., 2024). David Blunkett, whose contributions significantly shaped the government's welfare and education reforms, has called for greater awareness of shock therapy's repercussions.

The study recommends the establishment of community initiatives to develop interfaith education among students and teachers of Islamic, Buddhist, Hindu, and Christian educational institutions, for their learning convergence. This is owing to the robust evidence that shows direct, structured, and educationally facilitated inter group contact is one of the most effective ways of reducing prejudice and building mutual understanding in a pluralistic society (MDPI Religions, 2025; SDGs Review, 2024). Projects that can be supported by the Ministry of Education, along with civil society organisations, would assist in building the interpersonal relationships necessary for sustainable multicultural living in post-conflict Sri Lanka.

Conclusion

This article examines the modifications implemented by Islamic educational institutions in Sri Lanka concerning management, curriculum, and leadership within a multicultural society. Utilizing case studies of SEUSL, an upgraded madrasa, and a network of mosque based schools, and situated in a theoretical frame that marries Islamic management principles with a contemporary educational management theory, the investigation has led to a set of evidence-based findings.

The study findings are basically an indication of how the Islamic educational institutions in Sri Lanka are responding to multicultural demands at management, curriculum and leadership level. The finding reveals that SEUSL and the madrasa sector have modified management structures and curriculum mainly in response to bureaucratic and labour-market pressures with multicultural responsiveness still emergent and dependent on individual leaders. The finding shows how the Colombo mosque based network proves deliberate, inclusive leadership is capable of driving integrated management and curriculum adaptation squarely oriented to multicultural coexistence. What the research finds that will be a key empirical contribution is the distinction rather than the mere presence of adaptation.

As far as the first is concerned, adaptation is taking place at all three levels: management, curriculum, and leadership, but the adaptation is not uniform, and it is specific to context and to a great extent contested. Moreover, the Islamic principles of shura, adl, and amanah provide an internally consistent normative infrastructure for institutional adaptation, and, as increasing empirical evidence confirms, provide a cost effective means of enabling the use of pluralism in an accountable manner. Resource constraints, policy misalignment, and social tensions in post conflict situations, particularly the recorded fragmentation of inter communal relations in Sri Lanka since 2009, are serious impediments to effective adaptation. Another opportunity for meaningful reform lies in utilizing online learning, honing leadership skills, and encouraging interfaith education, assuming there is adequate resourcing and community ownership, and local context sensitivity.

This research adds to the growing literature on persisting Islamic education in minority Muslim societies, as well as provides an empirical context for evidence based reform in the Sri Lankan situation. It also shows the analytical benefit of an integration of Islamic management theory with present day management of education frameworks, which is a methodology that may be applied in other national contexts. One of the most important practical conclusions is that real institutional adaptation cannot simply be achieved by curriculum reform alone or through leadership change alone: the three dimensions reinforce each other, and progress requires simultaneous attention to governance, pedagogy, and leadership development.

The present study has limitations. The selected institutions do not reflect the diversity of Islamic education in Sri Lanka. Survey data obtained through self reporting can indeed have social desirability bias. Future research should consider in greater depth not only the perspectives of students and parents, but also longitudinal dimensions of institutional change, along with Institutes in the Northern Province and rural institutes. It would be great if this study could be complemented with comparative research that places Sri Lanka within a more South Asian or global context of adaptation.

References

- Ameerdeen, V. (2006). *Ethnic politics of the Muslims in Sri Lanka*. South Asian Institute of Policy Research.
- Amnesty International. (2024). *Sri Lanka report 2024*. Amnesty International.
- Asadullah, M. N., & Chaudhury, N. (2010). Religious schools, social values, and economic attitudes: Evidence from Bangladesh. *World Development*, 38(2), 197–211. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2009.10.015>
- Bakar, O. (2012). Islam and the challenge of diversity and pluralism: Must Islam reform itself? *Islam and Civilisational Renewal*, 3(2), 230–248. <https://doi.org/10.52282/icr.v3i2.461>
- Bano, M. (2012). Madrasa reforms and Islamic modernism in Bangladesh. *Modern Asian Studies*, 48(4), 911–939. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X12000480>
- Bass, B. M. (1985). *Leadership and performance beyond expectations*. Free Press.
- Bhatti, G. (2006). Nice and decent people: Research with British Pakistani and Bangladeshi families in an English city. *European Education*, 38(2), 5–19. <https://doi.org/10.2753/EUE1056-4934380201>
- Burns, J. M. (1978). *Leadership*. Harper & Row.
- Bush, T., & Oduro, G. (2006). New principals in Africa: Preparation, induction and practice. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 44(4), 359–375. <https://doi.org/10.1108/09578230610674588>

- Chotimah, C., Qudsy, S. Z., & Yusuf, M. (2025). Superficial implementation of religious moderation in Islamic educational management. *Cogent Education*, 12(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2024.2442235>
- Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2011). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research* (2nd ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Dimmock, C., & Walker, A. (2005). *Educational leadership: Culture and diversity*. SAGE Publications.
- Fauzi, R., & Anwar, K. (2025). Islamic education and pluralism: An overview of multicultural education management. *TUNAS: Jurnal Pendidikan Guru Sekolah Dasar*, 10(2). <https://doi.org/10.37304/tunas.v10i2>
- Fullan, M. (2001). *The new meaning of educational change* (3rd ed.). Teachers College Press.
- Gay, G. (2010). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice* (2nd ed.). Teachers College Press.
- Alzoraiki, M., Ahmad, A. R., Ateeq, A., & Milhem, M.. (2024). The role of transformational leadership in enhancing school culture and teaching performance in Yemeni public schools. *Frontiers in Education*, 9. <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2024.1413607>
- Haniffa, F. (2007). Piety as politics amongst Muslim women in contemporary Sri Lanka. *Modern Asian Studies*, 42(2-3), 347-375. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X07003009>
- Haniffa, F. (2021). 'Reconciliation' problems in post-war Sri Lanka: The anti-Muslim movement and Ulema Council responses. In J. Dağyeli, C. Ghrawi, & U. Freitag (Eds.), *Claiming and making Muslim worlds* (pp. 229-254). De Gruyter. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110726534-010>
- Hargreaves, A., & Fink, D. (2006). *Sustainable leadership*. Jossey-Bass.
- Hefner, R. W., & Zaman, M. Q. (Eds.). (2007). *Schooling Islam: The culture and politics of modern Muslim education*. Princeton University Press.
- Hewer, C. (2001). Schools for Muslims. *Oxford Review of Education*, 27(4), 515-527. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03054980120086917>
- Ibrahim, M. A., Abdullah, A., Ismail, I. A., & Asimiran, S. (2024). Leadership at the helm: Essential skills and knowledge for effective management in Islamic economics and finance schools. *Heliyon*, 10(17), e36696. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2024.e36696>
- Kefalaki, M., & Diamantidaki, F. (2024). Transformational leadership and educational outcomes. *Journal of Education, Innovation, Communication*, 6(1). <https://doi.org/10.34097/jeicom-6-1-6>
- Kemanusiaan. (2024). Strategic imperatives of Muslim leadership in post-war Sri Lanka: Citizenship, rights and reconciliation. *KEMANUSIAAN The Asian Journal of Humanities*, 31(2), 143-161. <https://doi.org/10.21315/kajh2024.31.2.8>

- King, H. (2024). Participatory governance in school-based management councils. *Cited in RSIS International Journal*, 9(10), 5280–5299
- Laffan, M. (2003). *Islamic nationhood and colonial Indonesia: The umma below the winds*. RoutledgeCurzon.
- Leithwood, K., Jantzi, D., & Steinbach, R. (1999). *Changing leadership for changing times*. Open University Press.
- Li, Y., & Karanxha, Z. (2024). Literature review of transformational school leadership: Models and effects on student achievement (2006–2019). *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 52(2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/17411432221077157>
- McGilvray, D. B. (2008). *Crucible of conflict: Tamil and Muslim society on the east coast of Sri Lanka*. Duke University Press.
- Merry, M. S. (2007). *Culture, identity, and Islamic schooling: A philosophical approach*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Moriña, A., & Perera, V. H. (Eds.). (2025). *Technology-enhanced learning in diverse educational settings: International perspectives*.
- Parker-Jenkins, M. (1995). *Children of Islam: A teacher's guide to meeting the needs of Muslim pupils*. Trentham Books.
- Saleem, A. M. (2015). Madrasa education and social change in Sri Lanka: Reflections from the Eastern Province. *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 35(1), 72–88. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13602004.2015.1007665>
- Salleh, M. J. (2013). Spiritually-led sustainable leadership. *World Journal of Entrepreneurship, Management and Sustainable Development*, 9(2–3), 150–160. <https://doi.org/10.1108/WJEMSD-06-2012-0034>
- Sarjoon, A., Yusoff, M. A., & Hussin, N. (2016). Anti-Muslim sentiments and violence: A major threat to ethnic reconciliation and ethnic harmony in post-war Sri Lanka. *Religions*, 7(10), 125. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel7100125>
- Tan, C. (2011). *Islamic education and indoctrination: The case in Indonesia*. Routledge.
- Thaib, L. (1994). An analysis of administrative staff's participatory decision-making through the principle of shura at the International Islamic University Malaysia. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 1(9).
- Trilling, B., & Fadel, C. (2009). *21st century skills: Learning for life in our times*. Jossey-Bass.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press.
- Waghid, Y. (2011). Islamic education and cosmopolitanism: A philosophical interlude. *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 30(3), 305–312. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11217-011-9226-3>

Wu, D., Wang, J., & Che, Z. (2024). Digital education: Connotation, pathway, and trend. *Frontiers of Digital Education*, 1(1), 59–68.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s44366-024-0021-z>