Crafting Space for Islamic Education: Questioning Neoliberalism in Qualification Frameworks

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Abstract

This study examines the role of National Qualification Frameworks (NQFs) in validating Islamic Education (IE) within South Africa's higher education system, guided by the South African Qualifications Authority Act (SAQA, 1995). While NQFs were designed to address historical educational inequities, this research argues they align with neoliberal agendas, marginalizing traditional knowledge systems (IKS) and religious education. Using an appreciative inquiry approach (Cooperrider, 1986), the study investigates convergence and divergence in validating IE and mainstream education. Findings reveal that NQFs validate selected aspects of IE that are aligned with neoliberal frameworks, excluding spiritual and communal dimensions foundational to its holistic nature. Framed within debates on cognitive justice (Hoppers, 2021) and decolonization (Santos, 2018), this research highlights the need for inclusive frameworks that honor the intellectual and spiritual integrity of Islamic Education.

Keywords: National Qualification Framework, Islamic Education, Appreciative Inquiry, Neo-liberalism, Cognitive Justice.

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1. Introduction

Several of the most well-known and influential higher education institutions globally have their genesis in religious education. For example, for institutions such as Oxford, Harvard, Princeton, and Yale, the search for higher learning initially emerged as a seminary that centred on a Christian belief system as a foundation for all other knowledge. Similarly, in Morocco, where the first university in Africa was established, higher learning was initially focused on expanding Islamic knowledge, legal sciences, and mathematics. As the modern university reconfigured itself in parallel with the rise of secularism, religious education departments needed to fight to secure a place in higher education. The American Academy of Religion (AAR) (2020) notes that the coalescing of various global events, such as COVID-19, #BlackLivesMatter, #MeToo, environmental degradation, Islamophobia and antisemitism have highlighted the importance of offering religious studies in higher education. They argue that:

> Religion should hold a meaningful place in higher education… People need to understand the controversies over religion that have shaped their society, the living reality of the various religions that are practiced in their midst, and the history of religious traditions currently influencing billions of people around the world. People need to understand how religion has been used to promote human flourishing and how at times it has been marshalled in the service of evil: slavery, xenophobia, discrimination, and so forth. And, even in what many think of as a 'secular' society, it is important for people to understand how religion shapes politics, law, economics, and the public sphere in general. (AAR, 2020, para. 2)

This research builds on the AAR's robust defense of religious studies, advocating that the form and substance of these courses should retain their traditional essence to deliver a comprehensive and authentic educational experience. Modern education systems, often characterized by a secular, Eurocentric approach to science as critiqued by Santos (cited in Mirza, 2024), prioritize learning validation through individual achievements such as qualifications, certificates, or diplomas. The Organisation for

Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in 2006 described qualification systems as encompassing all activities leading to learning recognition, which may or may not involve qualification frameworks.

By 2021, approximately 150 countries, including South Africa, had implemented National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs), recognised for their transformative potential in education systems (Castel-Branco, 2021). The enactment of the South African Qualifications Authority Act (SAQA) in 1995 aimed primarily at redressing educational disparities created by apartheid and its precursors. However, this research argues that, in practice, the current NQF promotes a neoliberal economic agenda, potentially clashing with the goals of equitable education reform and affecting how religious education is positioned and taught in higher education.

Although there is significant research on Islamic Education within the context of South African higher education (Haron, 2016; Tayob et al., 2011), there remains a notable disconnect in integrating Islamic Education within the existing NQF. This research seeks to bridge this gap, contributing to the broader discourse on decolonisation in higher education in South Africa, especially concerning the validation of traditional and indigenous knowledge systems marginalised during colonial and apartheid eras. It explores how Islamic Education is structured within South African universities and examines the alignment of traditional Islamic Education with the validation processes of the South African National Qualification Framework (NQF), addressing the critical question: How is the validation of learning in traditional Islamic Education integrated with the NQF validation processes?

2. Methodology

This research adopts an appreciative inquiry approach to frame the discussion. Appreciative inquiry is a research method used to boost innovation in organisations, and where the inquiry itself becomes a catalyst for change (Cooperrider, 1986; Kletter, 2015). Through this approach, this research argues that the existing NQF in South Africa validates learning in a manner that allows for selected aspects of Islamic Education to be recognised. It validates individualised knowledge and skills-based aspects that can be demonstrated, excluding the spiritual

and communal elements which are foundational to Islamic doctrine. In other words, qualification frameworks allow for neo-liberal learning expressions for IE to be validated and formally recognised in South African higher education.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Qualification Frameworks: The Basis of Validating Learning in South African Higher Education.

Tuck (2007) defines a qualification framework as:

> [an] instrument for the development, classification, and recognition of skills, knowledge and competencies along a continuum of agreed levels. It is a way of structuring existing and new qualifications, which are defined by learning outcomes. (p. v)

In addition, a qualification framework creates a shared understanding in terms of the information it conveys to an employer about prospective workers' competencies. It also sheds light on the relationship between qualifications and allows for the articulation of pathways at various levels (Evans-Klock, 2010).

The South African Qualifications Authority Act (SAQA) of 1995 was one of the first significant pieces of legislation to be ratified into law by the inaugural post-apartheid government. SAQA provides a uniform system of standards and quality assurance so that professional skills are recognised throughout the country (Sayed & Kanjee, 2013, pp. 16-7). This means that according to the post-apartheid state, learning and knowledge are recognised to the extent that they are included in programmes that resonate with the NQF (Sayed et al., 2016). This framework provided for the establishment of the National Qualifications Authority, which is responsible for establishing the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) (2008). The NQF integrated education and training at all levels within one framework. Under the NQF amendment of the sub-framework, it consists of ten levels, divided into three broad bands of education: General Education and Training (GET), Further Education and Training (FET), and Higher Education and Training (HET). The policy provides the overarching

framework for education programmes and pathways of articulation for all qualifications up to doctoral, or NQF 10 level (Sayed et al., 2017).

The origins of the concept of a "qualification framework" are rooted in two main European education systems that have influenced the development of contemporary education systems in many countries. According to Keevy (2013, p. 2), the two education systems that influenced or gave the initial impetus to qualification frameworks are the "English competency-based model where learners are assessed according to competencies they can demonstrate and the Scottish outcomes-based approach". The International Labour Organisation (ILO) (2009, p. 1) traced the reforms that led to the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF), which began in the 1980s, stating that "[not long] after the first of the Scottish reforms, in 1987, the National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) were launched in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland". As the concept took hold in other national contexts, NQFs were developed and established and became increasingly seen by more countries as a model to structure education systems, which led to the subsequent establishment of NQFs. New Zealand is recorded as having the first officially titled "National Qualifications Framework" in 1991, followed by Australia and South Africa in 1995 (ILO, 2009). The idea from the New Zealand government was to create a seamless system of education and training for all forms of learning for state-funded programmes, but also included those which were not funded by the state (ILO, 2009).

The first generation of NQFs was developed between the 1980s and 1990s. Countries that embarked on this initiative in the first generation include South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, Ireland, the United Kingdom, and France (Keevy, 2013, p. 2). Keevy et al. (2021) trace the development of qualification frameworks as shifts of power away from religious institutions to nobility, guilds, providers of training, employers, and ultimately to national governments.

The South African NQF, as noted above, was developed in the 1990s during the transition to democracy and was expected to transform the provisions and regulations of education in the country (Keevy, 2013). Recently, a continental qualification framework has been adopted in Africa. The vision of the African Continental Qualification

Framework (ACQF), adopted by the African Union in 2022, is "to facilitate the recognition of diplomas and certificates" (Hazel et al., 2022, p. 10). "The African Union Commission, the African Union member states and the regional economic communities (REC) have developed and validate this ACQF Policy document, and pledge to jointly implement and nurture the ACQF…" "The ACQF is a comprehensive and inclusive meta-referencing qualifications framework, designed to support a holistic and systemic vision of learning, qualifications, and credentials (AU, 2022, pp. 5-12).

Another aspect of validation is the recognition of prior learning (RPL), which has been adopted as a legitimised practice in most higher education institutions in South Africa. Recognition of prior learning occurs when accredited authorities recognise qualifications, credits, or prior learning aligned with accepted norms and standards (Chiyaba et al., 2022). RPL allows learners who have not had formal education but have gained significant experience in a specific field to receive or upgrade a qualification and is a formal acknowledgement by a recognised authority of prior learning (Chiyaba, et al., 2022). Formal recognition of learning is thus subject to processes and procedures that national, regional, or continental agencies legitimise. These agencies are not generally religious or communal.

As a concept that enhances social inclusion, equity, access to education, training, and employment, Chiyaba et al. (2022, p. 8) contend that Africa's "diversity of education systems" influences recognition of learning. "Diversity in systems" refers to how years of study and schooling may differ amongst African countries (Chiyaba et al., 2022). Diversity is not extended to religious education or IKS; neither does the ACQF explicitly refer to religious education or IKS (AU, 2022).

While qualification frameworks have grown in popularity, not everyone is convinced that they can bring about the kinds of transformation articulated in policy. For example, Morrison (2020, p. 7) contends that a failure of qualification frameworks is due to introducing measures or mechanisms integral to qualification frameworks from other countries, which do not account for the nuances of diverse contexts. The NQF in South Africa was established with the intention to promote redress and equity through the education system (DoE, 1995). However, this

system incorporates a limited understanding of the diverse nature of local cultures and religions, which are custodians of knowledge, that ought to be recognised to realise true inclusivity. Despite this, it could be argued that although qualification frameworks have not made explicit provisions for IE, the intention to redress and recognise diverse forms of informal and non-formal learning opens up space for integration into and recognition by the national education system.

The National Policy and Criteria for the Implementation of Recognition of Prior Learning (SAQA, 2019) does not explicitly refer to IE. It describes non-formal learning as "planned learning activities not explicitly designated as learning towards the achievement of a qualification or part-qualification" (SAQA, 2019, p. 6). Learning at IE institutions is recognised as part of efforts to recognise prior learning in at least one higher education institution (HEI) in South Africa, although that institution's RPL policy does not explicitly refer to either IKS or IE. Literature, policy, or procedures that describe the recognition of learning from IE institutions of higher education in African countries do not appear to be covered in existing literature. Similarly, the extent to which learning from IE institutions is recognised more widely in South Africa or elsewhere in Africa appears to be another gap in the literature.

The Department of Religion Studies (2024) at the University of Johannesburg states that prospective students with relevant qualifications from a religious seminary will be required to complete recognition of prior learning. This demonstrates two things. Firstly, IE qualifications from seminaries are not formally recognised by many institutions of higher education. By implication, to be formally recognised, learning from institutions must be validated by a higher education institution. Secondly, it demonstrates that qualification frameworks include the possibility for learning from IE to be validated. This means that although IE is recognised, it is generally not validated. In the remaining sections of the research, the basis of validation and its relation to how IE learning is formally recognised are examined.

3.2 Neoliberal Critique of Qualification Frameworks and the Implications for Validating Other Methods of Learning

Mathebula (2018) effectively summarises the case of neoliberal approaches to education when he highlights how "neoliberal state education sits uneasily with the right to education but fits easily with the ideals of competitive elitism" (p.106). Despite this, the South African government opted to pursue this approach (Christie (2006, p. 378). postulated how "the global climate of neoliberal capitalism" lead the incumbent African National Congress party (ANC) to opt for market-led economic growth as a macroeconomic strategy. The Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) strategy that was introduced in 1998 was blatantly neo-liberal (Christie 2006, p. 378). The role of unions, businesses, and the ANC pushed to create a contract with the state gearing education to incorporate skills diversification to enhance employability and engender competitiveness (Allais 2003, p. 308). The NQF format appealed to democratic and egalitarian values in trying to foster redress through recognition of prior work experience and skills, and its substance is geared towards market needs and interests (Allais 2003: p. 307). As such, the NQF was presented as a key part of the GEAR [Growth Employment and Redistribution] strategy. Both are grounded in an economic growth agenda. The NQF was expected to produce the necessary sophisticated technological labour that would undergird the development of a globally competitive economy (Fataar 2011, p. 235).

In addition, an ideological critique of the Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (HEQSF) indicates that the theory informing it is based on a modernist neo-liberal paradigm (Moosa 2018, p. 69). The HEQSF is a sub-framework of the South African NQF, governed by a quality assurance agency that was established to oversee the higher education sector in South Africa, the Council on Higher Education (CHE). The HEQSF provides rules regulating how qualifications and their programmes are developed in the higher education sector:

> The focus of the HEQSF is to create a uniform and standard qualification framework nationally that is intended to improve access, articulation and transfer, both within and across institutions (Zawada 2020, pp.148-9).

The HEQSF, in turn, is underpinned by the Classification of Education Subject Matter (CESM) categories. "The CESM is a standardised classification system into fields of study offered at universities in South Africa, developed by the DHET" (Zawada, 2020, p. 146). The fields of study included in CESM are business, commerce, education, humanities, science, engineering, and technology (DHET, 2021). DHET (Zawada, 2020, p. 146) contends that "the accreditation, re-accreditation and the standard setting for national programme reviews are … strictly and rigidly determined by CESM". There is a clear link, according to Zawada (2020, p. 146) between the development of programmes in line with the CESM, their accreditation, and their funding. "The rigid control is enforced through accreditation power, the rationale for data collection in HEMIS, and funding mechanisms" (Zawada 2020, p. 149). To the extent that the HEQSF is rigidly determined by the CESM, the content of programme curricula is, by implication, similarly controlled (Zawada 2020, p. 149). The form of programme development is, therefore, highly bureaucratic to the extent that it sets rigid rules. This has implications for knowledge discourses, such as in IE, where spiritual or affective elements are challenging to measure, control, and define.

Before a learning programme can be taught at a South African education institution, it has to be accredited by the CHE and registered on the NQF, after which it is added to a qualification and learner register maintained by SAQA (Zawada, 2020, p. 144). Unless a programme is registered with SAQA, the DHET will not provide a subsidy to an institution for its provision (Zawada, 2020, p. 144).

RPL is aligned with existing programmes offered at most South African institutions. In other words, at higher education institutions, informal and non-formal learning must be recognised as meeting similar criteria to programmes and qualifications that have been developed in line with the HEQSF and CESM categories. To this extent, the validation of learning can only occur within the South African NQF, and as such, it serves as both an inclusionary and exclusionary mechanism for validating knowledge.

The next section discusses the validation of learning in IE. This includes a discussion about the recognition of diverse knowledge as paramount to realising decolonised higher education in South Africa.

3.3 Validating IE as a Critical Response to Decolonising Higher Education in South Africa

Al Zeera (2023) highlights in her recent book *Wholeness and Holiness in Education: An Islamic Perspective,* that IE has both intellectual and spiritual elements creating an intellectual-spiritual paradigm. This balance of the intellectual and spiritual is important "not only in the development of Islamic programs and educational systems but also in all situations, from the microcosm to the macrocosm, from the self to the universe" (Al Zeera, 2023, p.2). In addition, she notes that this balance, or wholeness, as she calls it, "helps people to operate on a wider base of knowledge by which they can see above and beyond the information provided by the senses" (Al Zeera, 2023, p. 2).

IE, according to Nurbeati (2023), "ideally functions in the preparation of high-quality human resources, both in mastering science and technology and in terms of character, moral attitudes, and the appreciation and practice of religious teachings" (p. 610). This notion is echoed by Emawati (2018), who notes that IE is about developing technically skilled individuals who also possess a positive moral compass. As such, IE pertains to both academic and spiritual development. IE can be implemented through various institutional means, including through family and family traditions (Mustafa, 2024) at the mosque (Mudzakkir, 2008), at madrassah, (Nata, 2010), through *Taklim* Assembly (a gathering where people listen to lectures) (Rifa'i, 2019), through Islamic boarding schools (a common institutional type of IE in South Africa), and elsewhere where individuals develop expertise in Islamic Knowledge (Lucia, 2022). Romdhoni (2023) notes further that IE can also be transmitted via dialogues, storytelling, repetition, and recalling.

IE is described not only as transmitting knowledge and skill but also generating a specific way of being in the world, that is not only different to but separate from the wider community. The way learning and instruction at institutions of IE are validated depends on the wider qualification system in a particular country. Although Muslim schools often incorporate the national curriculum of the countries in which they operate (Niehaus, 2011, p. 15). Tayob, Niehaus and Wiesse (2011 p. 9) contend that Muslims, with respect to education, are often confronted

with "the tension between secular nation or the religious community". Even though secular subjects are offered in most Muslim schools in South Africa, the addition of IE is presumed to bring about tension that could curtail the participation of students as citizens in the nation. In a post-secular society, where religious communities are present within a secular society (Habermas, 2006 p. 15), individuals, while being religious, like all citizens, are free to express their views and engage in debate and deliberation within the public sphere.

For many Muslims, secular education occurs in isolation. The addition of Islamic studies to this sphere has prompted a quandary in the relationship between of IE, citizenship, and the public sphere. Many Muslims in South Africa are moving away from society, and this quandary is noted as a factor causing this. Before the 1994 transition to democracy in South Africa, secular and IE were at odds with each other. The first edited volume on IE in South Africa, by Haron and Mohamed (1990), addresses several related challenges faced by Muslims in relation to education in the country. They also define a phenomenon they term "duality of education" (1990, p. 4). Muslims are a minority in South Africa, and as such they are required to embark on secular education to enter the economy while at the same time furthering their knowledge of Islam if they want to be functional Muslims (Haron & Mohamed, 1990, p. 4), which is considered a tenuous duo. In the South African context, for most Muslim children, afternoon madrasah education is a supplement to secular education (Haron & Mohamed, 1990, p.13). Madrasah classes are usually held in the afternoon at mosques, independent institutions, and private homes for the purpose of teaching basic IE to children and adolescents. Haron and Mohamed (1990, p.4) term this scenario, where IE is a supplement to secular education, "duality of education". They consider this a problematic, though difficult to eliminate scenario (Haron & Mohamed, 1990, p.4). Duality of education has been described elsewhere as a bifurcation, dichotomy, and chasm (Waghid, 2009, p. 117; Tayob, Niehaus & Wiesse, 2011, p. 8; Tayob, 2009, pp. 11, 16, 19; Dangor, 2005, pp.519-523).

In her understanding of religious education, Baiasu (2018) astutely notes that:

> religious texts and experiences, or spiritual practices, such as prayer … are often reported to involve special ineffable insights, that is, a spiritual understanding that cannot be put into words by using language in customary ways. (p, 1)

As such, religious knowledge is often based on a transcendent reality. Faith in God is a fundamental premise of religious education, and some religious epistemologies, as argued by Platovnjak and Mutanen (2023), are grounded in one of three approaches. First is fideism, which suggests that evidence is not needed to support religious beliefs. Second, is the evidentialist approach, which contends that religious beliefs need to be grounded in evidence. Third, which is midway between fideism and the evidentialist, is the reformed evidentialist who notes that in some instances, evidence is required, "but, at the same, they [reformed evidentialists] accept that some religious beliefs, which might be called basic religious beliefs, need no evidence" (Dougherty and Tweedt 2015 cited in Platovnjak and Mutanen, 2023, p. 22). In this research, the case of Islamic knowledge as a form of religious education helps demonstrate how existing qualification frameworks could accommodate Islamic knowledge by adopting the reformed evidentialist approach.

Decolonisation in the context of knowledge refers to the critique of Western knowledge as the centre of all truth. To centre the Western episteme means decentring all other knowledge through processes of delegitimisation and subjugation. Although debates relating to decolonising higher education in Africa and the Global South have existed for decades (Santos, 2018; Ndlovu Gatsheni, 2018; Mbembe, 2016; Nyamnjoh, 2019), it was the Fallist movements, especially #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall in South Africa that gave the discourse impetus as a critical agenda item for postcolonial states. Crawford, Mai-Bornu & Landström (2021) highlight that decolonisation of knowledge production in higher education is necessary because of persistent asymmetries of power in the production of knowledge; some are "visible and direct", and others are "hidden and indirect" (p. 27).

HEIs are generally bestowed with immense power that allows them to direct cognition, guide evaluations, and provide directive guidance that results in actions that align with institutional frameworks (Mekoa, 2015; Mullins, 1972). As such, HEIs have the power to direct what is being taught, the way the knowledge is facilitated, and the context in which learning takes place. To pursue a decolonised higher education institution, validation and recognition of diverse knowledge and providing platforms for dissemination of these forms of knowledge[1] is critical. Hoppers (2021) highlights how non-Westen knowledge has historically been viewed as a knowledge type that was "not allowed to be" (p, 301). She argues for the recognition and validation of a "multiplicity of worlds" and that cognitive justice can only be realised if multiple ways of knowing are embraced (Hoppers, 2021, p. 310).

The relationship between IE and the call to decolonise higher education emerges from the fact that Muslim communities have been "racialised as 'Other' for over 1400 years", by the West. To understand why Islam has been cast as a global threat, it is imperative to understand the ideological foundations of Islamophobic thinking (Carr, 2021, Para, 1). As a conduit for disseminating Islamic knowledge that is authentic and that incorporates all aspects of the doctrine, both spiritual and cognitive, IE is imperative. In essence, the way IE is framed and taught at HEIs should be part of a holistic approach, and not merely selected aspects that have been scrutinised to align with prevailing notions of scientific validity. A study conducted by Haron (2014) investigated how Islam was taught in a Bachelor of Arts programme revealed that the themes selected to be taught were adapted to meet the modern needs of the university, highlighting how critical knowledge about Islam is reconfigured in secular higher education (Haron, 2014). This reconfiguration maintains the "insider/outsider binary that further frames the debates regarding the teaching and studying of Islam at these institutions in southern Africa generally and South Africa in particular" (Haron, 2014, p. 50). In addition, this reconfiguration may impact the knowledge circulating in society, including the IE future generations will receive.

1 We use Santos (2016) and Hoppers (2021) idea of knowledge as plural and multiple

4. Discussion

4.1 Decolonising How Learning is Validated is a Matter of Cognitive Justice

This research highlights how qualification frameworks may limit the validation of traditional knowledge, militating against the call to decolonise higher education as well as cognitive and social justice, which are policy imperatives for the South African post-apartheid State. Whilst it is widely agreed that things need to change for true recognition and validation to occur, reimagining the alternative proves a challenge when colonial systems have set the standard for decades.

To respond to the research question in the context of what has been highlighted, an initial suggestion is for policymakers to acquaint themselves with the knowledge they are trying to validate and engage with custodians of that knowledge. In doing so, the role of the university as community-centred institution may emerge, instead of the isolated ivory tower image that currently characterises most higher education. In addition, education policy in South Africa requires a fundamental shift from the conceptual paradigm to practice moving beyond policy rhetoric in a meaningful way.

The subjugation of IKS was a key mechanism of colonialism that sought to reject and delegitimise knowledge that did not centre the Western episteme in and through the production of knowledge. As such, (re)-centring traditional knowledge systems including IKS, is paramount in the pursuit of decolonising higher education and society. Pihama and Lee-Morgan (2019) argue that:

> education was both a target and tool of colonialism, destroying and diminishing the validity and legitimacy of Indigenous education, while simultaneously replacing and reshaping it with an 'education' complicit with the colonial endeavour. (p.19)

This negation of traditional knowledge systems has resulted in psychological scars on indigenous communities for generations. (Re)-centring traditional knowledge systems are, thus, paramount in the pursuit of decolonising education and society.

With the rise of Islamophobia, the way IE is taught is critical to dispel disinformation. Kabel (2014), speaking about Islam and Islamophobia, highlights how prevailing systems are positioned in a way that legitimate neocolonialism to maintain matrices of power. In addition, Grosfoguel (2012 cited in Kabel, 2014) astutely notes how legitimised systems are characterised by their "Westernized/ Christianized modern/colonial capitalist/patriarchal" tendencies, resulting in "fundamentally racist and culturally chauvinistic dimensions of the new world system" (p. 61). This has detrimental implications for the manner in which knowledge is (re)-produced in higher education institutions, as these institutions are in most cases an extension of the political economy.

Recognition of diverse knowledge is a matter of cognitive justice, and as such, this discussion draws on the work of de Sousa Santos (2016) and Hoppers (2021). In his book, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice against Epistemicide*, de Sousa Santos (2016) argues that "there is no global justice without cognitive justice" … and that "diversity should be valorized" (p. 8). In addition, he suggests that to overcome this violence, an epistemological break away from the Western-centric tradition is necessary. By doing so, knowledge production can be reimagined and become truly emancipatory. In a similar vein, Hoppers (2021) highlights how IKS were a knowledge type "not allowed to be" (p.301). She argues for recognising and validating a "multiplicity of worlds", and that cognitive justice can only be realised if multiple ways of knowing are embraced (Hoppers, 2021, p. 310).

In agreement with Al Zeera, this research posits that recognition of IE by NQFs must include both spiritual and academic elements, and as such, it is essential that IE, as with all forms of religious knowledge, should be taught in its entirety to prevent portraying a limited or reductionist view of the religion. In the era of widespread media misinformation and disinformation, this has become an issue of social justice.

This is not to say that IE's spiritual and academic elements are not contested (Mirza, 2024). As such, what must be taught should not be the purview of academics in higher education. Community engagement should be used to ascertain what must be included as part

of IE, and what can or should be excluded, and on what basis. This means involving communities in messy engagements of curricula and pedagogy. What would no doubt be an unwieldy and time-consuming endeavour, nevertheless it would be naïve to think that cognitive and social justice could be achieved overnight.

5. Conclusion

This research aimed to contribute to unravelling the "colonial matrix of power" (Mirza, 2024, p. 16) by examining the relationship between validating learning in IE and qualification frameworks in the context of South Africa. This research examined how learning is validated in the context of qualification frameworks, demonstrating that national agencies and higher education institutions are portrayed as the supreme mechanisms for validation. This research showed that qualification frameworks are also neoliberal instruments that validate learning in the service of market requirements for workers by recognising individual learning required for specific career pathways. The validation of learning in IE was also discussed, illustrating that this validation often results in a chasm or duality. It was also posited that when IE is validated through prevailing qualification frameworks, it results in a watered-down, reductionist and limited view of Islamic discourse, often excluding fundamental elements of the tradition. This has negative implications for how Islam and IE are understood, which could contribute to prevailing disinformation. It also highlighted how the remnants of colonialism and apartheid remain a significant feature of teaching, learning, and the pursuit of knowledge in South African higher education.

6. Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

This appreciative inquiry, based on existing research in South Africa, which is characterised by a lack of empirical data, could be construed as a limitation of this research. As such, this research proposes that the discourse would benefit from more extensive empirically driven research to highlight aspects of convergence and divergence in the Islamic Studies curricula offered at the various higher education institutions in South Africa, but also elsewhere in Africa and internationally. In addition, investigating this phenomenon in other religions would also yield interesting and important insights.

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