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Covid-19: Challenges for Singapore Islamic Studies Graduates

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Two months after the first COVID-19 infection was reported in Singapore, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) urged Singaporeans living abroad, including students, to return home.
- While a majority of those studying in the US and UK immediately returned, those in Egypt and Saudi Arabia were initially reluctant to do so, and were then unable to leave because all commercial flight services were suspended. On 7 April, with assistance from the MFA and the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (Muis), 211 Singapore students from Al-Azhar University (in Cairo) did leave the country, while some remained there. Subsequently on 24 April, students studying in Saudi Arabia returned.
- The factors for the students' delayed decision to return were manifold, and included worries about monetary costs, uncertainties over the completion of their degrees, and over lockdown conditions back home.
- More generally, COVID-19 also tested graduated seniors in different ways. For example, freelancers who teach religion part time are struggling to make ends meet, following mosque closures and class suspensions. Most have taken their classes online, but there, they face stiff competition for online space in an already saturated market.
- The severely reduced job opportunities at this time may induce some Islamic Studies graduates to consider acquiring skills for work in secular sectors.

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INTRODUCTION

On 17 March 2020, Singapore's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) issued an advisory encouraging all Singaporeans studying overseas to return home.¹ The call was extended to those currently on university exchange programmes. It was made after countries affected by the COVID-19 pandemic began to shut their borders, cut airline services, and enforce lockdowns to prevent the virus from further spreading. Within a week, a large number of Singaporeans residing in the United Kingdom and United States returned home, and they were required to observe 14-day stay-home orders at hotels.² Students pursuing Islamic studies in Middle Eastern universities were also asked to return. The governments of Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia—the countries that host some 400 Singaporean students—had also begun to shut their borders and to enforce curfews.

It is believed that a majority, if not all, Singaporean students in Jordan had returned home. There are however no official reports to confirm this. There had been 178 students enrolled in Jordan universities in total: 78 in Yarmouk University and 56 in University of Jordan.³ On 7 April, 211 students studying in Al-Azhar University (Cairo) arrived in Singapore with assistance from the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (Muis) and the Singapore MFA.⁴ There were about 250 students studying in Al-Azhar University.⁵ They were flown back via a specially arranged flight. Initially, some of the students had felt that it was safe to remain in Egypt, but they changed their minds after the situation worsened. Still, not everybody returned home. Similarly, a number of students studying in the Islamic University of Madinah (IUM) decided not to return to Singapore at first, even though Saudi Arabia is also badly hit by the virus. Visits to the country have already been banned, and visas for *umrah* pilgrims (minor *hajj*) to Mecca have been suspended. Compared to other countries in the Gulf, Saudi Arabia has to date one of the highest number of infections. It was only on 24 April that 40 students studying there returned, and they came back with their dependents.⁶

Muis and Singapore's Malay/Muslim community have come forward to assist these affected students through donations and other relief measures. COVID-19 has spread to hit the Islamic teachers' sector as well: both the undergraduates and their seniors who have graduated.

This article examines the challenges facing current undergraduates and graduates of Islamic studies in the midst of the COVID-19 crisis. Focusing on students who are studying in Egypt and Saudi Arabia, it highlights their anxieties upon receiving the request to return home. Their fears included the uncertainty over whether they can eventually graduate, as well as the costs of flying home to Singapore and then back to the countries they are doing their studies once the pandemic is over. Harsh conditions enforced by the Egyptian government throughout the lockdown were also another concern.

The more pertinent issue is how COVID-19 is impacting those who have already graduated (currently considered to be the pool of *asatizah* or religious teachers). As the COVID-19 challenge affects many sectors, such as tourism, aviation, and the gig-economy, freelance religious teachers have also been badly hit by mosque closures since the middle of March, way before the government imposed a "circuit breaker" policy on 7 April. The circuit breaker measure restricts the movement of citizens within Singapore; but it is not a full lockdown since essential services such as supermarkets, wholesale and wet markets, the

food and beverage outlets, medical and pharmaceutical suppliers, transport, and telecommunications are allowed to continue functioning. Mosque closures, followed by the suspension of Friday services and classes, have forced these graduates to conduct their classes online.

The next section discusses the challenges facing Singapore Islamic studies undergraduates studying in the Middle East, especially in Egypt and Saudi Arabia. The reasons why some students were initially reluctant to return home will be discussed in the following section. The article then explicates the situation facing graduates who are already based in Singapore, and how they are coping with movement restrictions and mosque closures. It concludes by providing some recommendations to alleviate the problems faced by the Islamic studies sector.

UNDERGRADUATES IN THE MIDDLE EAST

The exact number of students studying in the Middle East is not publicly available.⁷ Muis has assigned two student liaison officers to look into the students' needs in the region. After Egypt, Jordan has the second highest number of Singaporean students in the Middle East, followed by Saudi Arabia. In relation to the COVID-19 emergency, this article shall focus on students in Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Students in Jordan had managed to return home with ease compared to those in the other two countries.

Even before the pandemic broke out, students in Egypt had to cope with the dilapidated infrastructure on the Al-Azhar campus, the university's traditional mode of assessment, and bureaucratic administration.⁸ Singaporean students shared that there were instances where examination dates and venues were changed at the last minute. The mode of examination is also traditional, focusing more on memorization than critical thinking, and essays and written assignments were rare. They also had to make significant adjustments to meet requirements by the university's administration, which are mostly done manually instead of electronically. However, these issues by no means depreciated the quality of Islamic education transmitted by the university. Al-Azhar University continues to be the go-to centre for Islamic learning for those seeking to master classical thought and diverse opinions.

The number of students in Saudi Arabia is much smaller compared to those at Al-Azhar University. Most of them attend the Islamic University of Madinah and receive full sponsorships from the Saudi Arabian government. While critics of the university often warn that these students would be influenced by the puritan Wahhabi-Salafi ideology, the Singapore graduates and undergraduates I have interacted with do not necessarily demonstrate this trend. Attendance at lectures in IUM is compulsory, and students with a poor academic record are dismissed. Additionally, some of these students take classes at the Prophet's Mosque (Masjid Nabawi), which is the second holiest site for Muslims. This enriches their learning experience.

CHALLENGES OF RETURNING HOME

The decision by the Egyptian and Saudi Arabian governments to lock down their cities took a toll on Singaporean students. Not only have the universities shut down, so has daily life. In Egypt, the military government adopts hard-handed enforcement of the lockdown. Students can no longer attend classes and their informal learning at mosques are also affected. Schools and universities have been closed since 15 March. Four days later, the Abdel Fatah al-Sisi government suspended all flights in and out of the country. On 25 March, transport on highways was suspended.⁹ Singaporean students thus could not fly home. As mentioned, it was only with MFA's assistance that 211 students in Egypt were able to do that.¹⁰

Of those who remained, their reasons for staying put are structural rather than theological. The cost of returning home can be one of the reasons, to the extent that Muis has pledged to use money collected from the tithe (*zakat*) to help affected students purchase flight tickets.¹¹ Muis announced this commitment in response to ongoing online crowd-funding efforts by the Malay/Muslim community to help these students return.¹² On 23 March 2020, a parent and alumni support group for Al-Azhar University undergraduates, AWSALA, made a public appeal for donations to help parents with children studying in Egypt and Jordan bring them back to Singapore. The appeal was made through their Facebook page. The letter stated,

“...there are concerned parents who wish to get their children back home to Singapore, unfortunately, not all parents can afford the flight tickets. AWSALA is making an appeal to raise funds for families who are financially affected to bring their child back to Singapore.”¹³

Although Muis has come forward to assist the students' return, what is not reported is whether the assistance is in the form of partial or full subsidy of airline tickets or in the form of loans.

The Singapore government has constraints in helping these students because it has to be seen to be fair and to not show favoritism to religious studies students before students in other parts of the world also needing to return home. Moreover, enrolling into a religious studies course is an individual's choice, and is not fully subsidized by the state. Thus, the same principle needs to also apply for students studying in other universities, and parents must be prepared to bear all costs for their children's safety. The Singapore government had already assisted by chartering a special flight to bring them back. The students have to pay \$900 for economy class seats, and \$2200 for business class seats, which are lower than average prices during pre-COVID-19 situations.¹⁴

The more pressing problem for the students is whether they can resume their studies after the situation is back to normal. The university has not communicated with them about the resumption of their examinations, and for that matter, whether they can graduate. This is one reason why some of them had not wanted to travel home and decided to stay put instead.

Initially, students who are currently in Madinah did not seem to be affected by the call to return. To begin with, there is not much media coverage about their situation. An article in *Berita Harian* (Malay Daily) ran a paragraph of 106 words indicating that Singaporean

students in Saudi Arabia were resolute in their decision to stay where they are. The media reported that learning is carried on as normal via online and home-based learning.¹⁵ On 24 April, with assistance from the Singapore Embassy in Riyadh and the Singapore Consulate-General based in Jeddah, some 40 students and their dependents returned to Singapore. The students may have to defer their studies and even have their graduation delayed.

WHAT CAN THEY LEARN FROM THEIR SENIORS?

While most of the students in the Middle East have safely returned home and are observing the 14-day stay at home order in hotels, the COVID-19 crisis has also hit those who have graduated. As with people in the tourism sector, aviation industry, gig-economy, and those who provide non-essential services (especially during the circuit breaker period), religious teachers, particularly the freelancers, have also had to struggle during this crisis. The lot of the latter has so far not been highlighted.

When mosques were required to close in mid-March, a couple of weeks before the Singapore government implemented the “circuit breaker”, part-time imams lost the ability to earn additional income by leading Friday services and daily prayers. Even a full-time imam at a local mosque had come out publicly to share how his income has been badly affected. He shared that his full-time job as a mosque officer did not pay enough and that he was unable to manage without supplementary income from part-time work.¹⁶ In addition, all classes have also been suspended. Donations for mosques have also dropped, to the extent that religious teachers have moved their classes online. COVID-19 has also forced the asatizahs to embrace digital platforms to ensure sustainable incomes. The more tech-savvy ones have done so successfully compared to those who are not IT literate, the latter referring to senior graduates. Mosque funds are also being depleted; as a practice, members of the community place donations in physical boxes located in mosques. Online donations are so slow that Muis has had to rally the community to donate via a newly created online platform called ourmasjid.sg (ourmosque.sg).

Conducting classes online means that the religious teachers are competing with one another in cyber space. There is now a saturation of such religious classes. Some conduct their classes through Facebook pages administered by mosques, while others conduct them on their personal pages. The number of “likes” and page “views” alone is not indicative of how these online classes are received. Community acceptance of these classes differs and a high volume of followers is no assurance of donations.

The public has come forward to assist the group, but this is limited to donations from the Malay/Muslim community. Again, donations are spread thinly to mosques, madrasahs, religious teachers, and freelancers. Pergas (Singapore Islamic Scholars and Religious Teachers Association) has also pledged \$320 000 to help religious teachers affected by COVID-19.¹⁷ A Pergas-registered teacher can receive between \$940 to \$2200 in total for the next three to six months, and non-Pergas members are entitled to between \$700 and \$1150 for the same period.

Graduates who run travel agencies for *haji* and *umrah* services are also hit hard because of new visa restrictions put in place by the Saudi Arabia government. It is now unlikely that visas will be issued for pilgrims for the month of Ramadhan, which will be from 24 April

until 23 May. Pilgrimage during the fasting month is popular among Singapore Muslims and is a huge source of revenue for the travel agencies. The situation will be more dire if the visa suspension stretches to include the *haji* season, which falls between end July and early August. Should the Saudi Arabian government decide to proceed with the annual event, which gathers about three million Muslims, Singapore travel agencies will have to scramble to arrange the logistics for their pilgrims, given the limited preparation time.

COVID-19 has forced those in the religious sector, especially freelancers, to be innovative. Already, they have to compete with established *asatizahs* in Singapore, such as Muis officers, and teachers who already have an audience base in mosques. There is at present an online initiative called *Asatizah Youth Network*, where 27 graduates are tasked to create online content for the website *Muslim.sg*, which targets millennials. It remains doubtful how many more the network can recruit. Popular preachers from neighbouring Malaysia and Indonesia (Malay speaking ones), and global preachers such as Nouman Ali Khan, Ismail Menk, and Zakir Naik saturate the online preaching scene. Malaysian religious teachers also took their classes online after their government enforced a lockdown (movement control order) from 18 March. Singaporeans also follow their sermons because of similarities in the language (*Bahasa Melayu*) used. Some of these Malaysian teachers also conduct online Quran lessons.

In this regard, fresh graduates from Islamic universities will have to find a niche if they want to survive in the industry. Already they have been encouraged to consider other fields such as counselling, and not confine themselves to theology. However, to train a professional social worker and counsellor takes many years and resources, and professional degree programmes offered by the departments of social work in the National University of Singapore (NUS) and Singapore University of Social Sciences (SUSS) will take at least three years to complete. *Asatizahs* who wish to move into that sector must be prepared to undergo training from scratch; their first-degree had only dealt with theology, jurisprudence and the Arabic language.

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to uncertainty for Islamic studies undergraduates about whether they can complete their studies. In fact, graduates have been hit even harder, and many have suffered a reduction in incomes, and been forced onto digital platforms.

There is plenty that undergraduates can learn from their seniors. It may be that many have already established themselves in the online preaching world, and the Malay/Muslim community have also come forward to assist them, one has to ask how many more Islamic studies graduates the industry can absorb. The religious studies sector will have to ask hard questions such as whether the supply of graduates is more than what the market can support.

While one solution is to encourage fresh graduates to learn new skills, which means undergoing full, and not-partial, training, it is also an opportunity for reflection on Islamic education in general. Most certainly, more time needs to be invested on career guidance for *madrasah* students before they step into a university programme. Those who have just completed their pre-university diplomas or certificates must decide whether or not they want to pursue a career as religious teachers. If not, they might be better placed in non-Islamic

studies courses and degree programmes such as social sciences, humanities, languages, engineering, and sciences. COVID-19 has forced the Malay/Muslim community to ask these hard questions and think about allocating resources effectively.

¹ See Ministry of Foreign Affairs Singapore (MFA), “Advisory for Singaporean Students Studying Overseas,” 17 March 2020, https://www.mfa.gov.sg/Newsroom/Press-Statements-Transcripts-and-Photos/2020/03/170320_Advisory-for-Singaporean-Students-Studying-Overseas

² Chew Hui Min, “Returning Singapore residents from UK, US to serve stay-home notices at hotels,” CNA, 24 March 2020, https://www.mfa.gov.sg/Newsroom/Press-Statements-Transcripts-and-Photos/2020/03/170320_Advisory-for-Singaporean-Students-Studying-Overseas

³ Nurulkhasanah Agost, “400 pelajar S’pura di Mesir, Jordan tejejas penutupan university; pengajian terjejas,” Berita Mediacorp, 19 March 2020, <https://berita.mediacorp.sg/mobilem/eksklusif/corona-outbreak/400-pelajar-s-pura-di-mesir-jordan-terjejas-penutupan-universiti/4418426.html>

⁴ In total, 224 Singaporeans returned from Egypt. See CNA, “COVID-19: 224 Singapore residents repatriated from Egypt,” 8 April 2020, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/covid-19-singapore-egypt-coronavirus-repatriation-12620126>

⁵ Nurulkhasanah Agost, “400 pelajar S’pura di Mesir, Jordan tejejas penutupan university; pengajian terjejas,” Berita Mediacorp, 19 March 2020, <https://berita.mediacorp.sg/mobilem/eksklusif/corona-outbreak/400-pelajar-s-pura-di-mesir-jordan-terjejas-penutupan-universiti/4418426.html>

⁶ Cheryl Tan, “Coronavirus: 85 Singapore residents evacuated from Arabia as country suspends all commercial flights,” Straits Times, 24 April 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/coronavirus-85-singapore-residents-evacuated-from-saudi-arabia-as-country-suspends-all>

⁷ The author met some of these students in Cairo during fieldwork in March 2019.

⁸ Norshahril Saat, *Tradition and Islamic Learning: Singapore Students in the Al-Azhar University* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2018)

⁹ The Arab Weekly, “Lockdown tightened in Egypt but concern mounts over safety of army officers,” 29 March 2020, <https://theArabweekly.com/lockdown-tightened-egypt-concern-mounts-over-safety-army-officers>

¹⁰ This episode is a repeat of the 2013 political crisis caused by a military coup led by Abdel Fatah El-Sisi which ended the democratically elected Islamist-government of Mohamed Morsi. Students then were also asked to return home.

¹¹ The zakat is an obligatory tax paid by Muslims.

¹² Berita Harian, “Muis guna dana zakat bantu pelajar S’pura di luar negara pulang,” 30 March 2020. <https://www.beritaharian.sg/setempat/muis-guna-dana-zakat-bantu-pelajar-spura-di-luar-negara-pulang>

¹³ AWSALA, Help Us With Their Journey,” 23 March 2020, AWSALA Facebook page. <https://www.facebook.com/AWSALA/photos/rpp.543300505681511/3146887355322800/?type=3&theater>

¹⁴ The figures are quoted on the Perkemas Facebook page.

¹⁵ Berita Harian, “Walau Badai Melanda, pelajar SG di Madinah kuatkan semangat,” 5 April 2020.

¹⁶ Zulaiqah Abdul Rahim, “Terima Dugaan hilang sebahagian mata pencarian,” *Berita Harian*, 15 April 2020

¹⁷ Berita Harian, Pakej #320 000 Pergas bantu asatizah terjejas Covid-19, <https://www.beritaharian.sg/setempat/pakej-320000-pergas-bagi-bantu-asatizah-terjejas-covid-19>

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