

PERSPECTIVE

RESEARCHERS AT ISEAS – YUSOF ISHAK INSTITUTE ANALYSE CURRENT EVENTS

Singapore | 2 April 2019

Al-Azhar University and the Strengths of Informal Learning on Singapore Graduates

*Norshahril Saat and Nur Diyana Zait**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Majority of Singapore students majoring in Islamic studies choose the Al-Azhar University to pursue their first degree. Founded in the 10th century, the university has produced theologians all over the world.
- The university is regarded as the bearer of Sunni Islam and the centre of “moderate” Islamic teaching. However, with the recent threat of radicalism and terrorism, the quality of religious transmission in Al-Azhar has been placed under the spotlight.
- There is a view that Al-Azhar is the problem rather than the solution in tackling extremism. In Singapore, the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (Muis) recommend madrasah students to consider alternative universities in the Middle East. There has also been suggestions for a local Islamic university, the Singapore Islamic College, to be established.
- This paper examines Al-Azhar’s curriculum and concludes that Al-Azhar may not be as negative as portrayed if informal learning is distinguished from formal learning. Islamic studies students from Singapore and elsewhere can, in fact, broaden their minds to alternative perspectives to religion through informal learning provided by the university.

**Norshahril Saat is Fellow at ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute. He is the principal investigator for Ministry of Education funded Social Science Research Thematic Grant (SSRTG) project entitled “Singapore Islamic Studies Graduates: Their Role and Impact in a Plural Society”. Nur Diyana Zait is the Research Officer helping out on the project, and a graduate from Al-Azhar University.*

INTRODUCTION

Since the 2000s, enrolment into the Singapore madrasahs (Islamic religious schools) at the Primary One level has risen steadily. Presently, 400 places are available and students have to sit for a stringent qualifying test before they can be accepted. Students can choose to enter an integrated system of madrasahs, known as the joint-madrasah scheme (JMS), where they enter a madrasah at the Primary One level (age 7), and after completing Primary 6 and having taken the Primary School Leaving Examinations (PSLE at age 13), they may be channeled to one of two madrasahs which offer secondary to pre-university education. Alternatively, they can enrol in one of the three full-time madrasahs offering primary to pre-university education. Of the 400 students who drop out, some are reassigned to the national schools. In addition, not everyone who enters the madrasahs will end up as religious teachers or theologians (*asatizahs*).¹ While the percentage varies from one year to another, there are generally more madrasah graduates pursuing non-religious fields and continuing their education in polytechnics; or a local university, such as National University of Singapore (NUS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU) and Singapore University of Social Sciences (SUSS).

The majority of madrasah students wishing to pursue an Islamic studies degree choose the Al-Azhar University in Cairo (Egypt), which is regarded as the “Oxford” of Islamic studies by the Islamic world. In 2011, there were 158 Singapore students studying in Al-Azhar, but by 2014, the figure had risen to 296 students because political conditions in Egypt stabilised after the “Arab Spring”.² In 2018, there were 240 Singapore students studying across the four-year undergraduate course,³ meaning that on average, 60 Singapore students join the university per year, effectively 15 percent of the 400 who enrolled at Primary One. Al-Azhar University does not accept students from secular schools.

Observers of late have been critical of Al-Azhar education, and they argue that its mode of teaching is outmoded and overly traditional. Thus, madrasah students are encouraged to consider alternative universities in Jordan and Malaysia, the latter being the second most popular destination after Al-Azhar because of its close proximity to Singapore, cultural and language similarities, and low cost of living and fees. News that Al-Azhar graduates from other parts of the world have been part of terrorist networks have affected the university’s image⁴ and led to accusations that Al-Azhar is a source of extremism rather than a solution to it.⁵

On a positive note, the university exposes students to all schools of Islamic thought, apart from the Shafie school that is familiar to Singaporeans. Students are exposed to multiple views including those of Hanafi, Maliki, Hanbali, Zahiri, even Zaidi and Ja’fari (Shi’ite schools). We argue that Singapore students underexplore the informal learning methods – where students attend a gathering led by a scholar who teaches classical texts based on different subjects— unlike students from Indonesia and Malaysia who come more exposed to traditional learning through the option of studying in *pesantrens* and boarding schools in their countries. These informal classes can potentially benefit students, encouraging them to have critical exchange of ideas with their teachers, and expose them to alternative viewpoints, which is important for their intellectual development and which widen their responses to complex problems.

This paper argues that an Al-Azhar education is not necessarily a cause for concern if students tap on the university's resources and learning tradition. Al-Azhar graduates from neighbouring countries testify that the university can produce a progressive and contextualised ulama. This paper explicates two modes of learning offered by Al-Azhar: formal learning and informal learning. The formal learning is similar to that offered by conventional universities where students choose their courses, attend weekly lectures, and sit for exams. The problem with this lecture-exams method, however, is that students do not attend lectures consistently because until recently, attendance for lectures on Al-Azhar campus was not compulsory.⁶ Furthermore, assessment is based more on the memorization of classical texts rather than critical thinking. Finally, there are little to no course assignments except for final examinations, resulting in poor exposure to research methods and skills for the students.

THE AL-AZHAR METHODOLOGY (MANHAJ)

Established in 970, Al-Azhar incorporates “*wasatiyya*” (moderate philosophy) in its curriculum, offering courses that expose students to different schools of Islamic thought and jurisprudence. It adopts a Sunni approach and holds to the Ashari theology. One of the tenets promoted by this approach is that armed uprisings against established governments are unlawful.

According to an Al-Azhar graduate, Shaykh Usamah As-Sayyid Mahmoud, there are eight salient features in the Azhari approach.⁷ These shape the moderate Islam generally practised by Egyptian Muslims. In promoting this stance, the university has attracted students and scholars from different parts of the world, with the majority coming from Southeast Asia.

Singapore students report an emotional attachment to Egypt, located as it is in the region of the birthplace of Islam and by virtue of their interest and associations with the Golden Age of Islamic civilisation.⁸ Egypt is also the resting place of Imam Shafie (b.767– d.820), a classical jurist whose ideas resonate among Southeast Asian Muslims.⁹

Most of those interviewed appreciate Al-Azhar for the access to intellectual and spiritual gatherings which it offers, under the wings of its scholars. While physically detached from the confines of the lecture theatres in the university, these informal gatherings often supplement the university curriculum, making it part of the whole Al-Azhar experience. Informal classes do not issue degrees or certificates. Students are required to engage with traditional books written by classical jurists, and read them together with their teachers from cover to cover. Some current students whom we spoke to agree that these informal classes are equally important to the curriculum offered by the university.¹⁰

Nevertheless, Al-Azhar's moderate reputation has recently been questioned, including by Egyptians. Writer and researcher Islam Behery was critical of the university's decision to continue teaching classical texts that contain extreme elements. He was jailed for his criticisms for having “defamed” Islam.¹¹ In another example, President Fattah Al-Sisi called for Al-Azhar to reform its curriculum, in response to the continuous use of texts touching on *jihad* (holy war). The President's call was rejected by the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Ahmad Tayeb.¹² This also shows that contrary to claims that Al-Azhar academics simply obey the government, there have been disagreements with the state on matters dealing with

the university's philosophy.¹³ The continuous usage of the texts, however does not mean the scholars agree with violence. Students are asked to place ideas in their context.

FORMAL LEARNING

In a recent survey conducted on current Singaporean undergraduate students in Al-Azhar University (n=27), the majority of them are satisfied with what Al-Azhar has to offer.¹⁴ However, half of the respondents admit having difficulties understanding the lectures because they are delivered in colloquial Egyptian Arabic, different from the modern standard Arabic they learn in Singapore madrasahs. Intellectual transmission through local Arabic is unique to Al-Azhar. In contrast, universities in Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Indonesia apply standard Arabic. Despite this language barrier, over 70 per cent of Singapore students claim that they adapt well to life in Cairo.

It is also uncertain if an Al-Azhar education prepares students for modern-day needs, and for employment in the public and private sectors. While only 37 per cent of the students claim that the university's curriculum is largely based on critical thinking, the majority agrees that memorization remains the dominant mode of learning if one is to excel in examinations. While these survey percentages may be alarming to some, these respondents do not consider memorization to be part of Islam's tradition. However, to what extent is memorization key to the mastery of tradition? A cause for concern would be the practice of rote memorization and the inability to contextualise the texts and uphold the spirit of the tradition. Also, in Singapore's setting, employers need to be convinced that graduates can do well in their jobs, and have the necessary skill sets to function.

The mode of teaching Islamic studies, however, has not undergone any major changes since its establishment in the last millennium. The undergraduate grading system is exam-based with little or no assignments given to the students, leaving them with little opportunity to hone research and writing skills. Meanwhile, female and male students share the same curriculum but study on separate campuses. The issues discussed in the male and female campuses also differ. For example, different textbooks are used by male and female students in the Faculty of Islamic Law and Jurisprudence (*Syariah*). Female students studying Comparative Jurisprudence are exposed only to issues concerning females in judiciary positions such as judges in courts or muftis.¹⁵ While some may see no cause for concern that the curriculum is taught according to gender, others argue that this may further entrench patriarchy in the Islamic world. Recently, the university introduced a system with only one curriculum, using the same books, to be taught in both male and female branches.¹⁶

The lessons and values taught in Al-Azhar may generally be traditional, but they are mostly congruent with Singapore multicultural and secular values, and the students are exposed to alternative viewpoints in a cosmopolitan city where people from all over the world gather to study. A Singaporean student studying in Al-Azhar, in an interview, offered an interesting view on the practise of *hudud*, punitive Islamic laws that include punishments such as stoning, lashing, and chopping of hands:¹⁷

There are some conditions regulated in Islam [which need fulfilling] before a Muslim state can implement *hudud* laws. For example, Afghanistan attempted to apply *hudud*, but the state didn't take into consideration the

state of the people that do not have an understanding of *hudud* and the pre-conditions that need to be fulfilled before attempting to implement it; such as, a complete understanding of the basic tenets of Islam and its laws. Another example would be, if poverty still exists among the people, eradication should be a priority above implementation of *hudud*.

The student may not have understood how modern laws for criminal offences resulted from an evolution of such punitive laws—which is not unique to Islamic world—and how these modern laws reflect humanitarian and compassionate values in line with Islamic principles. Yet, he still doubts if *hudud* laws can be practised in a society that is multiracial and modernised such as Singapore. The fact that the student can foresee problems with implementing *hudud* in a majority Muslim state such as Afghanistan is interesting. This means the student also feels such laws are not in-sync with contemporary societies, such as in Singapore where Muslims form the minority.

Finally, oral exams are still carried out at the university. Students are required to sit in front of the examiners and respond verbally to questions. Quranic memorization exams are normally conducted this way. Students majoring in Islamic studies, and who intend to pursue a career as a religious teacher (*alim*) have no qualms about this mode of learning. They are clear that the community wants them to respond to issues that concerns their spiritual needs, such as the performance of rituals, their faith, and morality. The problems arise when they are required to respond to issues beyond the scope of their training, such as in psychology, counselling, and law.

INFORMAL LEARNING

In Al-Azhar, students have the option of attending study circles outside the formal curriculum. 85 per cent of Singaporean students attend these study circles, which are usually conducted by Egyptian scholars who are graduates of Al-Azhar or who are from renowned institutions in the region, to supplement the curriculum taught in the university. These study circles, known as *halaqahs* or *dars*, are mainly held in Cairo and usually takes place in the mosques—including the Al-Azhar mosque. While these circles are normally controlled and monitored by the council of Al-Azhar, there are also private gatherings outside of Al-Azhar's control. Al-Azhar students are warned against attending such gatherings outside the compounds of the Al-Azhar University and mosque for fear that they may be exposed to radical ideas. Al-Azhar scholars have publicly denounced these private classes for failing to teach in accordance with the university's methodology.¹⁸ Since the university has called for a crackdown of these unofficial gatherings, the issue of Singaporean students being radicalised through attending these informal classes is unlikely. They only study under teachers endorsed by the university.

A range of topics is discussed in these informal classes, such as: Islamic jurisprudence, faith, creed, prophetic traditions, *mantiq* (logic), and spiritual development. Some other topics are more Quran-oriented such as *qiraat* (reading methodology), exegesis, and history. Students can pick the subject of their interest and the scholars they are comfortable with. While accessible to the general population in Egypt, most of the study circle attendees are students from Southeast Asia.

Both formal and informal modes of learning rely heavily on texts. Generally, lecturers refer to books they authored when teaching in lecture-style classes on campus. By contrast, in informal classes, teachers examine books written by savant religious scholars from the past. Although texts written by Islamic scholars of the past, such as the promotion of warfare or *jihad*, are used in the curriculum, students are reminded of the context when those texts were written (i.e. back to the *manhaj*). A Singapore student shared his experience of dealing with the concept of *jihad* in one such informal classes. He was taught to understand the context in which the concept of jihad was popularised: Muslims were at war with non-Muslims, thus concepts “conquer” or “be conquered” were commonly used in the Islamic discourse. These concepts cannot be applied in today because the situation is different.¹⁹

When it comes to choosing teachers for informal learning, Singapore students rely on recommendations from their seniors—including graduates who are already back in Singapore, and current undergraduates still in Cairo. For instance, Shaykh Yaasin, a Qur’anic teacher, and Shaykh Yusry Rushdy, a *hadith* (prophetic tradition) scholar and medical surgeon, are popular among Singaporean students due to good reviews given by these seniors. At times, these scholars are invited to conduct private lectures for Singaporeans.²⁰ In some instances, Muslim bodies based in Singapore – such as SimplyIslam and Sout Ilahi – have invited Al-Azhar scholars to deliver lectures. For example, Shaykh Muhammad bin Yahya al-Ninowy, founding Director of Madina Institute based in South Africa, visited Singapore in July 2018 on invitation.²¹

CONCLUSION

Al-Azhar students can be exposed to alternative views if they are keen to go the extra mile to tap on the vast resources provided by the university. For example, a prominent scholar from Indonesia, Professor Quraish Shihab, the first PhD recipient from Southeast Asia, shared his story about how he benefitted from Al-Azhar education. He was named as one of the best Quranic exegesis in Southeast Asia and one of the most moderate figures in the country. He has been at the forefront in Sunni-Shia dialogue and been a voice of moderation in discussing issues such as anti-non-Muslim sentiments in Indonesia. We have yet to produce a Quraish Shihab equivalent in Singapore.

Students can also witness alternative viewpoints through the Al-Azhar experience. Some Singaporean students report witnessing the Sheikh of Al-Azhar, Ahmed Tayeb, meeting his townspeople both men and women after Friday prayers at his mosque and shaking hands with them. Having men and women (who do not come from the same family) shaking hands is not commonly practised among Southeast Asian Muslims today, but being in Al-Azhar exposed students to such experiences. Moreover, being in Cairo itself exposes students to interfaith and intrafaith understanding. For example, while Egyptians are largely Sunnis of Shafie school, they understand other schools of thought. They also house a sizeable Shia community (of the Dawoodi Bohra type), and are open to Sunnis and Shias conducting prayers in mosques such as the Mosque of al-Hakim (named after the sixth Fatimid caliph who was an Imam to the Ismaili Shias).

The Quraish Shihab example and the openness of Muslims in Cairo shows that Al-Azhar education is not necessary a problem. The question is how to equip madrasah students so that they can tap on the best resources available when they pursue their degrees at the

university. Generally, Singapore students in Al-Azhar are not skewed to radicalism. However, there must be greater guidance so that they do not get involved in radical movements, as well as being in the company of those who treats Western civilisation as a homogeneous entity, and rejecting every aspect of Western philosophy as deviant. Students need to be exposed to Western sciences, including social sciences and humanities, in order for them to understand the complexity of problems facing contemporary society, which cannot be solved using theological reasoning alone. Ultimately, the point of a madrasah education and the goals of education at Al-Azhar University must be clear to parents and to students who wish to be affiliated with the university.

¹ For example, Madrasah al-Maarif (all-girls school) tries to offer a balanced curriculum of “secular” and “religious” subjects. By contrast, Madrasah Aljunied emphasises religious subjects since its objective is to produce religious teachers.

² Norshahril Saat, *Tradition and Islamic Learning: Singapore Students in the Al-Azhar University* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2018).

³ Student data list provided by PERKEMAS 2018/2019.

⁴ *Liberated and Angry in Marawi*, 9 December 2017.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/sf/world/2017/12/09/liberated-and-angry-in-marawi/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.e227660c0cb6; *Prestigious Islamic school may be radicalizing Muslims*, April 14, 2015. <https://www.miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/world/article18501587.html>

⁵ BBC World Service – Heart and Soul, the Battle of Al-Azhar, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p052nsrz>

⁶ It was only in 2018 that the university started to take attendance for students.

⁷ The values are as follows (1) To have a continuous and unbroken sanad (chain) with respect to narration and transmission, cognitive understanding, and spiritual purification, (2) To give care and importance to obtaining mastery of the auxiliary sciences, (3) Acquaintance with and having a comprehensive understanding of the higher objectives and purposes of the Shari’a, (4) Correct appropriation of the Holy Qur’an, i.e. using Qur’anic verses in their appropriate and proper contexts, (5) The critical importance of the affair of the Ummah (people) of Muhammad (peace be upon him), (6) To carry the concern of general guidance (i.e. guidance for all), (7) The wholeness of the elements of knowledge, (8) To derive benefit from the tradition of the Ummah, opening oneself up to it, maintaining contact with it, and building on it. Usama As-Sayyid Mahmoud Al-Azhari, *Towards a Grand Renewal: The Salient Features of the Azhari Approach*. Translated from Arabic by Kalam Research & Media, 2010.

⁸ Norshahril Saat (2018). *Tradition and Islamic Learning: Singapore Students in the Al-Azhar University*. ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute.

⁹ Imam Shafie’s mausoleum is in Cairo and often receives visitors from Southeast Asian students and tourists.

¹⁰ Focus group discussion with Singaporean students, 5 March 2019.

¹¹ *Islam and Politics Collide in Egypt as a Secular Government Attempts Islamic Reform* <https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/egypt/islam-and-politics-collide-in-egypt-as-a-secular-government-attempts-islamic-reform-1.5465230>

¹² *Egypt’s Al-Azhar University: Moderation or Dissimulation?*, January 10, 2018. <https://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/11712/egypt-al-azhar-moderation>

¹³ Timothy Winter, the dean of the Muslim College at Cambridge University who studied at Al-Azhar said, “If the Egyptian regime, seeking Western support, forces Al-Azhar to censor its curriculum yet again, Al-Azhar will be further discredited, and the Wahhabi alternatives will breed faster. *Prestigious Islamic school may be radicalizing Muslims*, April 14, 2015.

<https://www.miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/world/article18501587.html>; *Egypt deploys scholars to teach moderate Islam, but scepticism abounds*, May 31, 2015.

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-egypt-islam-azhar-special-report/special-report-egypt-deploys-scholars-to-teach-moderate-islam-but-skepticism-abounds-idUSKBN0OG07T20150531>; among many others.

¹⁴ Survey based on 27 responses from Singaporean students in Al-Azhar University since June 2018.

¹⁵ Found in a Comparative Jurisprudence textbook used in Al-Azhar University’s (for girls) Faculty of Islamic Law and Jurisprudence.

¹⁶ Focus group discussion with female Singaporean students in Al-Azhar University, 12 March 2019.

¹⁷ Focus group discussion with Singaporean Al-Azhar undergraduates, 11 July 2018.

¹⁸ Facebook post by Al-Azhar scholar, Shaykh Mustofa Redho, on 6 March 2019.

¹⁹ Focus group discussion with Singaporean Al-Azhar undergraduates, 11 July 2018.

²⁰ Based on PERKEMAS events advertised on its Facebook page.

²¹ Student data list provided by PERKEMAS 2018/2019. Besides religious knowledge, a number of students also enrol into institutions other than Al-Azhar to add value to their studies. The most popular are translation courses at the American University of Cairo and British Council Egypt. With these added skills, the graduates can explore areas of translation and interpreters in embassies and companies in the private sector as a career prospect. The number of students who have explored these pathways remains small, however.

<p><i>ISEAS Perspective</i> is published electronically by:</p> <p>ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute</p> <p>30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace Singapore 119614 Main Tel: (65) 6778 0955 Main Fax: (65) 6778 1735</p>	<p>ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute accepts no responsibility for facts presented and views expressed.</p> <p>Responsibility rests exclusively with the individual author or authors. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form without permission.</p> <p>© Copyright is held by the author or authors of each article.</p>	<p>Editorial Chairman: Choi Shing Kwok</p> <p>Editorial Advisor: Tan Chin Tiong</p> <p>Managing Editor: Ooi Kee Beng</p> <p>Editors: Malcolm Cook, Lee Poh Onn, Benjamin Loh and Ng Kah Meng</p> <p>Comments are welcome and may be sent to the author(s).</p>
--	---	--