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**ARTICLE**

# Learning about Islam and Muslims online: Reflections on the design and delivery of a massive open online course (MOOC) 2014–2019

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**Abstract**

This article evaluates the design, delivery, and main outcomes of Cardiff University's first "Massive Open Online Course" (MOOC) entitled "Muslims in Britain: Changes and Challenges," delivered to over 20,899 international learners between 2014 and 2019. I explore the design principles underpinning the course and offer a detailed quantitative overview of our learner-base. The paper examines the experience of course delivery, as well as providing an evaluation of the outcomes arising from the course in the short, medium and long-term. It also explores some of the distinctive aspects of learning about religion (and Islam, in particular) online as a result of our course, thereby contributing to discussion about the pedagogy of Religious Studies in the digital environment.

**KEYWORDS**

digital, engagement, impact, Islam, MOOC, Muslims, online

## 1 | INTRODUCTION: ABOUT FUTURELEARN AND CARDIFF UNIVERSITY'S FIRST MOOC

Since its establishment in 1969, the Open University has pioneered the use of audio-visual learning technology in order to make its distance-learning programmes accessible to students choosing a variety of degree courses. In view of its ethos and history, it is perhaps not surprising that it was one of the first providers in 2013 of Massive Open

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Online Courses (MOOCs) in the UK, via its FutureLearn platform. MOOCs are academic courses that enable learners to benefit from high quality research-led university teaching and learning, usually at an introductory level. The material is suitable for delivery via smartphones, tablets, and PCs, and can be accessed by learners from around the world, usually free-of-charge. The emergence of FutureLearn in the UK followed the development of similar platforms in the United States, such as “Coursera” and “edX,” and the provision of courses via these platforms by universities such as Harvard, Stanford, and the University of California at Berkeley.

A substantial body of research about MOOCs now exists that evaluate issues such as pedagogic styles, learner engagement, and the outcomes of MOOCs for institutions of higher education (Bozkurt, Akgün-Özbek, & Zawacki-Richter, 2017; Veletsianos & Shepherdson, 2016; Zawacki-Richter, Bozkurt, Alturki, & Aldraiweesh, 2018). Yet, little consideration within this literature pertains to MOOCs in the subject area of religion, let alone Islam in particular. MOOCs in religion and theology are “few and far between” (Zagano, 2016), and so is the associated research field. This paper therefore makes a unique contribution to research about MOOCs by suggesting some of the design principles that may necessarily shape online courses in a subject area that might be considered sensitive and politicized, and likely to involve learners from different cultural and religious (including non-religious) backgrounds.

Cardiff University was among the first of those universities in Britain to engage with the opportunity to deliver MOOCs. A felicitous convergence of circumstances in 2013 led to the Islam-UK Centre developing Cardiff’s first MOOC, “Muslims in Britain: changes and challenges” (MIB), first delivered in February–March 2014. Over a period of around four months, a small team of staff worked with local and national Muslim communities to develop a four-week course that introduced learners to the basics of Islamic theology and practice, and to the history and settlement of Muslims in Britain. The course was distinctive for the way in which the voices and experiences of Muslims were a key learning resource. For example, the section of the course about prayer (*salat*) in Islam was underpinned by a short video in which a Muslim doctor described the significance of prayer in her daily life and the way in which she was able to perform her prayers amid her duties in a busy hospital. The course producers wrote short articles, quizzes and self-assessment tools, and produced videos that drew upon the research produced by the Islam-UK Centre, and the network of relationships and contacts that the Centre had established, especially locally. This somewhat experimental initiative was a useful way for a very small research center to draw down considerable institutional technical and financial support, in return for providing feedback that could help to shape University policy on the development of future MOOCs. Indeed, we also contributed to FutureLearn’s own strategic development by providing feedback on the strengths and weaknesses of their platform. Our motivation for taking up the opportunity to develop a MOOC was also driven by a wish to make the extensive teaching and learning resources of the Islam-UK Centre available to a far larger audience, beyond our immediate community of Cardiff-based students.

## 2 | DATA COLLECTION

Prior to each instance of course delivery, FutureLearn collected data from those who had enrolled. The resulting data set included information on age, gender, country of origin, motivations for doing a course, pedagogical preferences, employment status, educational levels, disabilities, areas of subject interest, prior engagement with MOOCs, intended place of learning, and so on. We were able to add our own questions to the pre-course survey, and so this was a good opportunity to find out more about the religious demographic of our learners, and to evaluate their own self-assessed prior knowledge of Islam. At the conclusion of each delivery of our MOOC, a post-course survey was distributed by FutureLearn which asked learners to report on the extent of their engagement with the material, any obstacles that frustrated their learning, their views on the structure of the course, and their perceptions about whether the information presented was too difficult or too easy, or “about right.” The post-course survey also enabled some evaluation of how, and in what ways, learners had been able to develop their knowledge in specific ways. This data was collected through quantitative survey methods but included scope for free/open response answers to particular questions if learners felt they had more to say. FutureLearn shared the data sets with the

University, thus enabling us to evaluate the course and learner engagement over the years in which the course was delivered. This data was presented to us in the form of bar charts and tables which clearly indicated percentages, meaning that much statistical and analytical work was done for us. However, in relation to free-text responses, we analyzed these by identifying recurring themes and patterns, in order to assess the strength of particular views or opinions.

Since 2014, the MOOC has been delivered annually in the Spring Semester and has reached over 20,899 learners from around the world.

Once the course was underway, the “Educator” team of core Islam-UK Centre staff supported learners by answering queries posted in the comments section, moderating discussions between learners, and signposting to further resources where relevant. We were supported by some of our postgraduate students who received training in how to act as course Moderators. This involved keeping a watchful eye on learner comments and signaling instances when one of the Educator team may need to step in to answer a query or manage a discussion thread. Because learners were based around the world, course moderation was necessarily a 24/7 undertaking in order to support those studying the MOOC in different time-zones.

**TABLE 1** Enrolment figures for the MOOC, 2014–2019

Learner numbers in 2014	6552
Learner numbers in 2015	5,824
Learner numbers in 2016	3,945
Learner numbers in 2017	3,260
Learner numbers in 2018	838
Learner numbers in 2019	479



Cardiff University

## Muslims in Britain

Develop your understanding of Muslims and their faith through an exploration of communities in Britain.

[Go to course](#)

**FIGURE 1** Course homepage on the FutureLearn platform (the image used depicts Muslim children playing in the Mughal water garden in Lister Park, Bradford, UK, © Peter Sanders)

### 3 | DESIGN PRINCIPLES AND STRUCTURE: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

The foundations of the MIB course were built upon the decade or so of interdisciplinary research undertaken at the Islam-UK Centre at Cardiff University.<sup>1</sup> Since its launch in 2005, the Centre has had a commitment to research that promotes an understanding of Islam and the lives of Muslims in Britain, with particular emphasis placed on the “lived experience” of Muslim communities (Dessing, Jeldtoft, Nielsen, & Woodhead, 2013). This is in keeping with a clear strand of research in the sociology of religion concerned with “everyday religion” (Ammerman, 2007; McGuire, 2008). This is most clearly expressed in the study of Islam via exploration of the meanings of “being a Muslim” in the contemporary world (Dessing et al., 2013). The research projects underpinning the MOOC involved a study of Islamic gardens and environmental activism in Britain (Gilliat-Ray & Bryant, 2011); the upbringing and religious nurture of Muslim children (Scourfield, Gilliat-Ray, Khan, & Otri, 2013); the work of British Muslim chaplains (Gilliat-Ray, Ali, & Pattison, 2013) and, historical research about the history of Muslims in South Wales (Gilliat-Ray & Mellor, 2010).

As a result of an active commitment to the confessional and non-confessional study of Islam and Muslims, there is a distinctive spirit of inclusion underpinning the Centre's work and staffing. The MOOC aimed to reflect that by offering learners a strong sense of “welcome,” however much or little they knew about Islam at the outset. Creating this kind of learning atmosphere as part of an online course was difficult but essential if learners were to feel empowered to ask difficult questions and raise controversial issues—which they did. This emphasis on inclusion and a multiplicity of voices and perspectives reflects the qualitative methodologies that underpin the Centre's research. In this way, as well as delivering a course about Islam and Muslims, we were able to implicitly educate learners about approaches to the study of religion more broadly, and the possibility of there being multiple understandings about religious issues.

We especially welcomed the possibility of Muslims and non-Muslims learning together in the same online space. The incorporation of Muslim voices enabled us to move away from a pedagogical approach where

the learner leaves the course with a simple fact-based understanding of complex beliefs and values held by others .... [S]uch a simple or surface knowledge does not invite the learner to change his or her own understandings about the beliefs and values held by others. (Elliott, 2010, p. 5)

Our course included extensive video recordings which gave Muslim contributors an opportunity to talk about their faith, the stories in their families, and their identity as British Muslims. By enabling our learners to “meet Muslims” in this way, we were aiming to present Islam and Muslim communities at a mid-point between static “textbook” fact-based representations, and a faith community's own self-presentation. We intended this to be a liberating experience for our contributors, enabling them to be part of a wide process of shaping discourses about their tradition. But we also regarded personal stories as powerful means to initiate deep learning:

research has suggested that engaging in story is an effective means of learning about the customs and rules of other societies ... this learning process occurs as individuals experience narrative that appeals to their emotions and capacity for empathy .... (Elliott, 2010, p. 8)

Through projects conducted between 2009 and 2012, the Centre established a wide and diverse network of relationships. Our local contacts were especially important in giving us access to places (e.g. mosques) and people (“ordinary” Muslims living in Cardiff) that might feature in our course videos. For example, learners who had perhaps never visited a mosque before were given a “virtual tour” of Darul Isra, a mosque located half a mile from Cardiff University. For some learners, this was the first time they were able to see a prayer hall, the area for ritual washing (wudu), and communal spaces such as kitchens and offices. Better still, they could watch a video which demonstrated the practices of ritual washing and prayer, accompanied by an explanatory commentary and a short article.

In terms of content, Week 1 of the course introduced learners to the “basics” of Islamic belief and practice; Week 2 gave them an understanding of how and why Muslims have settled in Britain and was largely historical. Week 3 offered an exploration of the demography of Muslim communities in Britain today, giving learners a sense of ethnic, religious, cultural, linguistic diversity within a community that is often portrayed homogenously. Week 4 tackled some contemporary debates about issues such as identity, integration, and the challenge of Islamophobia. Over the years, we modified the course content, adding new articles and videos, often in response to learner feedback and questions, or the availability of new research.

Above all, we were concerned to help learners understand more about Islam from the perspective of Muslims themselves, since “religion is lived first and dogmatized second” (Arroyo, 2010, p. 46). In this way, the course took learners beyond media representations and stereotypes, to reveal the rich history of Muslim presence in Britain and the diversity of experiences. One of the first things we did when designing the course was to ask Muslims from the local Cardiff community to explain their stories of how their families came to live in the area. The result - which could be seen in a video near the middle of our course - was a collection of narratives which stretched from Mombasa to Dhaka, across England and Wales, and involved textile workers, schoolchildren, bankers and chaplains. The cumulative effect of these multiple voices was to present a challenge to any one-dimensional depiction of British Muslims: the incredible ethnic, religious and cultural diversity of the population was brought to life.

#### 4 | WHO WERE OUR LEARNERS?

When the course was being designed and developed, it was hard to know who our audience might be. However, over the years, the (voluntary) pre-course surveys revealed the broad demographic of those interested in our course. The following paragraphs offer a detailed picture of the 2015 cohort. This cohort has been chosen because after the first “run” of the course, we introduced our own more refined pre- and post-course survey questions (in addition to the standard questions asked by FutureLearn) and because the numbers enrolling on the course started to steadily (and predictably) decline after 2015. Examination of the data for the other five cohorts reveal very similar demographic patterns, suggesting that our course was attractive to a distinctive constituency of learners.

In terms of gender, women consistently comprised around two thirds of the course membership, and this is consistent with the broad pattern of recruitment to BA degrees in Theology and Religious Studies in the UK where women form 60 percent of the student body (Guest, Song, & Sharma, 2013). In relation to age, there was a broadly even distribution across the various categories.

In relation to geographic distribution, the majority of our learners over the 6 years that the course was delivered were based in the UK (between 60% and 82%), with learners from Malaysia (3.6%) and the US (2.9%), forming the second and third largest geographically based learner groups. One third of learners were in full-time employment (34%), with the retired being another significant group (23%). Our experience concurs with Beckerlegge's impression that:

**TABLE 2** Age of those taking the MOOC

18 years or under	4.17%
18–25 years old	15.95%
26–35 years old	17.02%
36–45 years old	16.43%
46–55 years old	14.64%
56–65 years old	17.14%
66 years old or over	14.64%

wider travel, the day to day experience of students as members of a multicultural society, and the coverage of religion more generally on television continues to encourage adult learners to want to come back to an area of the curriculum that has not been served well in many British schools. (Beckerlegge, 2015, p. 3778)

The employed were concentrated in particular professions, with those working in education and teaching forming the largest group (35%). Nearly half of our learners (47%) were educated to degree level (and a further quarter to MA level).

In 2015, we asked learners the same voluntary question that first appeared in the 2001 Census in England and Wales (“What is your religion?”). Among those who answered the question (just 13% of this cohort) the table below summarizes the results:

The number of Muslim learners was notable, forming nearly one quarter of those enrolled on the course. In the pre-course survey, some Muslim learners identified their reasons for joining, such as “I want to know my religion” (despite the fact the course was more sociological, rather than theological), while another was hoping “to become a better Muslim.” We must be cautious about speculation of other motivations, but it is likely that some Muslim learners had a straightforward intention to find out simply what was being taught via an online course about their faith and tradition, perhaps with a view to “correcting” any obvious errors in the discussion forums.

Learners were asked whether they had taken a mostly or fully online course previously (including MOOCs). Responses revealed a roughly equal split between those answering “yes” (51.37%) and those answering “no” (48.63%). Among those responding “yes,” the majority (71%) had taken previous MOOCs offered either by FutureLearn, Coursera or EdX, suggesting our learners were to some extent MOOC “afficionados.” Learners were given the opportunity to indicate their motivations for enrolling on the course. The vast majority simply wanted to “learn new things.” The opportunity to give a free-response answer to this question revealed a willingness to admit very limited knowledge of Islam, a wish to go beyond media portrayals, and a commitment to improving professional practice.

I work in the health service ... this I'm hoping will help with my confidence in treating people from the Muslim community.

I have found it hard to meet and interact with Muslims. The course will I hope clarify many of the issues, and perhaps make personal contact easier in the future.

To improve my subject knowledge as a non-specialist RE [Religious Education] teacher.

Our course also attracted some “opportunistic” learners who used it as a medium for improving English-language skills, undertaking post-retirement learning, or preparing to move to the UK from overseas. Over the years, the motivations of those taking the course for professional or specific educational reasons have been of particular interest.

No religion	36.7%
Christian	36.4%
Buddhist	2.2%
Hindu	0.5%
Jewish	1.4%
Muslim	23.4%
Sikh	0.1%

**TABLE 3** “What is your religion?”

Just over a quarter (27%) of the 2015 cohort indicated that they had joined the MOOC to “add a fresh perspective to my current work.” Other motivations also emerged. New converts to Islam saw our course as a way to increase their understanding of the faith community they had joined.

Being an English woman in her 60's, who chose to be a Muslim 3 years ago, I'm extremely interested in learning how other Muslims, especially those who have always been a Muslim, interact with non-Muslims and what they feel would be a good way to interact in order to 'enlighten' people about Islam.

Several learners were involved in inter-faith activities and regarded our course as a useful means to develop their knowledge of Islam in its British context.

We asked learners to evaluate their own prior knowledge of Islam and Muslims prior to the start of the course. The table below summarizes the findings to this question:

The picture that emerges clearly indicates that despite the preponderance of well-educated learners in our course, their self-declared levels of knowledge about Islam and Muslims in Britain prior to taking the course suggest considerable ignorance thereby confirming findings from other similar studies (BinTaleb, 2020). This is especially the case in relation to more contextualized understanding of Muslim communities in relation to their history and demography. This finding was somewhat surprising when set against the answers to a question asking learners about the extent of their personal contact with Muslims; nearly half were either frequently or continually in personal contact with Muslims. Bringing these findings together suggests that frequent or extensive engagement does not always lead to more in-depth understanding of “the other,” though may provide an impetus for wanting to remedy the situation, in this case via an online course of learning.

As part of the post-course survey, learners were asked to self-evaluate their acquisition of knowledge, enabling the course educators to ascertain the degree to which our work had “made a difference.” The table below summarizes the findings.

**TABLE 4** “How would you assess your current knowledge in these areas?”

	Not knowledgeable	Somewhat knowledgeable	Knowledgeable	Very knowledgeable	Expert	Total
Beliefs and practices of Islam	23.8%	44.6%	18.2%	11%	2.1%	842
The history of Islam in Britain	66.5%	26.99%	4.6%	1.5%	0.2%	841
The make-up of Muslim communities in Britain	59.1%	32.8%	5.3%	2.5%	0.1%	837
Contemporary issues relating to Muslims in Britain	45.7%	41.2%	9.0%	2.8%	0.4%	838

**TABLE 5** “To what extent have you had personal contact with, or experience of Muslims so far?”

Answer choices	Responses	Total
Never	6.4%	54
Rarely	19.6%	166
Occasionally	28.2%	238
Frequently	23.6%	199
All the time	22.0%	186

**TABLE 6** “To what extent would you agree with this statement: Thanks to the course I have developed my knowledge of ...”

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly agree	Total
... the beliefs and practices of Islam	2.8%	5.7%	6.8%	51.4%	33.0%	278
... the history of Islam in Britain	1.4%	1.4%	3.2%	51.0%	43.8%	278
... the make-up of Muslim communities in Britain	1.8%	5.8%	5.8%	56.5%	30.0%	276
... contemporary issues relating to Muslims in Britain	5.4%	7.1%	18.3%	42.4%	26.6%	278

Quite clearly then, our course positively improved learner knowledge and understanding, and the opportunity for learners to contribute free-text additional comments confirmed the findings of the quantitative data.

## 5 | THE EXPERIENCE OF DELIVERY

While being supported by an excellent team of learning technologists, few of those involved in the academic design of the course had been either students or producers of online programmes previously. Given this “blank slate,” we anticipated the steep learning curve that followed, especially given the content and themes of our course. Religion is “said to be the second most popular topic to feature on the World Wide Web” (Chryssides, 2007, p. 382) and so it was to be expected that our course might attract those who wanted to do more than “learn new things” which was the intention of the majority of our learners. Our course attracted a minority with clear Islamophobic tendencies, and individuals who saw the course as an opportunity for proselytism. One learner summed up these extremes thus: “I found the variety of participants fascinating, with students from all over the world, from rabid Red Necks to very pious Muslims.” Between these extremes were learners who took on the role of informal course “Moderators,” sometimes helpfully intervening to settle contentious debates. Articulate contributors of this kind eased the workload of our Moderator team, but also helped to give external validation of our material. Indeed, they enabled the introduction of issues and themes that contributed positively to the overall course experience. When it comes to the study of religion, the technology underpinning MOOCs “brings us into contact with a considerably wider range of informants and a deeper pool of data than we might otherwise expect” (Cowan, 2011, p. 463).

We received many helpful and affirming reflections from the learners after each run of the course. But a minority of learners also used the free-text “comments” space in the post-course surveys as an opportunity to tell us about aspects of the course that they found difficult. Their comments addressed issues that were equally challenging for the course team, but for different reasons. Among the minority of learners who expressed critical views, there were two predominant themes. The first centred on their view of the course as “superficial” and “lightweight.” For some, our course only “scratched the surface” and so it did not meet their learning ambitions. Within the framework of an introductory four-week course, it was frustrating that there was little we could do about this within the parameters of our relationship with FutureLearn to extend the course for future runs. The second and largest group of critical comments revolved around the presentation of Islam and Muslims itself. It was deemed by some learners to be “too rosy,” focussing only on “liberal” or “moderate” Muslims. For one learner, it was a “puff-piece promoting the friendly face of Islam,” while for another “only glossy pictures of happy Muslims [were] provided.” In light of these comments, other criticisms were predictable. Some felt that the course had failed to address sufficiently those topics that could present Islam in a more negative light, such as the internal diversity and schisms within the Islamic tradition, and issues of radicalization and terrorism carried out in the name of Islam.

As course educators we reflected deeply on these criticisms, not least because at the time they felt very personal. This was compounded by the fact we had been at pains in the production of the course to give a voice to a broad range of Muslims (mostly) local to the University, to talk about their families and their religious practices. They were not “representative” of anyone but themselves, and we did not select them through “gatekeepers” (Sanghera & Thapar-Björkert, 2008). The eventual inclusion or exclusion of Muslim contributors to our videos largely reflected straightforward pragmatic issues around availability at relatively short notice, and a willingness to speak to camera.

What became apparent is that some learners did not appreciate the underpinning phenomenological approach of the course, despite it being outlined at the beginning. Some could not grasp the fact that some contributors would inevitably talk about their personal faith and belief “as a matter of fact.” Where it was possible for us to revise the course materials for subsequent delivery of the course, we modified the phraseology along the lines of: “Muslims believe that ... XYZ.” But there were other reasons, beyond our control, that probably underpinned criticism of the course for (supposedly) only portraying “happy Muslims.”

Concurrent with, or in the months leading up to, the delivery of several iterations of the course there was an especially negative media environment generated by headlines reporting on major national and international incidents associated with Islam and Muslims. This included the departure to Syria of three teenage schoolgirls from London (BBC News, Three UK schoolgirls “travelling to Syria,” 2015); ongoing reporting of the Rochdale child sex abuse case linked to Pakistani Muslims in North West England (Tufail, 2015), the attacks in Paris of the Bataclan theater (Chrisafis, 2015), and the shooting of 12 people at the offices of the French satirical magazine, *Charlie Hebdo* (Press, 2015). Our learners were therefore “engaged in a dialectic between what they were confronted with in the media each morning and what they were learning in the MOOC which, in some cases, led to a sense of ‘disconnect’” (Timol, 2015, personal communication with author). Indeed, in the aftermath of a spate of negative headlines, some learners perhaps enrolled on our MOOC in the hope of finding some explanations ... thus misunderstanding the scope of what we were offering. In later iterations of the course we addressed this issue head on. We made it clear that our course was not concerned with issues of terrorism or violent extremism, and we directed learners specifically interested in these questions to reputable academic sources.

Our alleged presentation of a somewhat “sanitized” version of Islam that failed to explore issues with sufficient depth were not the only critical themes. There was considerable discontent that we had not addressed issues such as “non-practicing” Muslims, and some were concerned that we did not do enough to manage the intolerant views of some learners. These were in many ways predictable criticisms given the limits of an introductory course, and the fact we could not control who enrolled. However, we were not entirely lacking in scope to manage difficult learners. Over the six years that we offered the course, we asked FutureLearn to remove two individuals who continued to post intentionally offensive remarks, despite being asked (off the course site) to be more considerate of other learners.

## 6 | OUTCOMES: SHORT, MEDIUM AND LONG-TERM

“Muslims in Britain: Changes and Challenges” was the first MOOC offered by Cardiff University, and thus provided a “pilot” for the later development of other online courses hosted on the institution's own learning management system (“Learning Central”/“Blackboard”) and via FutureLearn. It was estimated that our course cost around £30,000 to develop from start to finish with staff time as the largest budget line. It is unlikely that our course led to increased recruitment to paid degree programmes as the University might have hoped and expected. However, even as a relatively expensive “loss leader” (Zagano, 2016), the softer outcomes were considerable in relation to later developments.

In the short-term, we significantly extended our network of relationships with Muslims communities during the development of the course. By inviting participation via our existing networks, local Muslims were given an

opportunity to engage with the Centre's work, usually for the first time. Our network of relationships was also enhanced within Cardiff University, opening new doors to members of professional services, the University Executive Board, and the Vice-Chancellor. Thus, our profile was raised within and beyond our institution, even before we had begun to recruit learners to the course. Creating the MOOC turned out to be as much an internal public relations exercise as an external one.

During the delivery of the course, our postgraduate students were given CV-enhancing training in how to act as Moderators of online discussion forums. But there were further professional development opportunities. The Centre's Development Officer acquired a detailed understanding of copyright issues, and the costs versus benefits of using externally produced teaching and learning material. Realizing the potential expense involved led to the acquisition of equipment and a great deal of on-the-job learning about high quality video production. This investment has paid long-term dividends in relation to our capacity to record events, lectures, interviews, and so on, for uploading to our website enabling the creation of our "virtual" Islam-UK Centre. In the context of the current 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, we feel well-positioned to take on the challenge of blended learning—with an emphasis on digital delivery of our courses—and can direct our students to an extensive "bank" of prior online resources.

All of those involved in Moderation gained insights into issues of "religious literacy" and the nature of contests about religious issues as debated online. It was possible to watch the ebb and flow of conversations, and recognize that online forums can be very suitable settings for discussion of sensitive issues (Sinclair, 2013). The immediacy of a face-to-face setting can put individual students "'on the spot' and does not give them as much time to reflect or 'cool down'" (ibid: 44) in contrast to asynchronous discussion forums. Similarly, an online space can give learners with less confidence a chance to share ideas which may be regarded by some as controversial or embarrassing. By their very nature, MOOCs enable the democratization of knowledge. Learners can take on a far greater role in shaping discussion and debate, thereby "silencing the expert." The collaborative learning ethos of MOOCs is consistent with an approach in Religious Studies which recognizes the benefits of respectful engagement with the worldviews of others (QAA, 2019).

In the medium-term, our MOOC led to a new set of valuable external relationships. One of our learners worked at London Central Mosque, with her role directed toward co-ordinating visitors. When the mosque reproduced its print materials she liaised with us in order that a Zapp code could be incorporated, thus enabling smartphone users to access some of the features of our MOOC. One of our learners was a secondary school religious education (RE) teacher based in Wales. She worked with us to establish a religious education teacher "consultation panel" in a nearby high-school in 2015. There was a collective feeling that much of the material in our MOOC could be transformed into a set of teaching and learning resources for RE teachers to use with pupils at Key Stage 3 (roughly aged 11–14). The outcomes of these discussions eventually led to a research project ("MOOC2RE," 2019–2021)<sup>2</sup> that has resulted in a set of free learning resources for teachers, and a paid continuing professional development course, "Discovering Muslims in Britain: For Key Stage 3," due to launch in early 2021.<sup>3</sup> Drawing from our original MOOC, the materials and the course directly reflect some of the recommendations of the national Review of RE teaching that took place in the UK in 2018 (Chater, 2020; Tharani, 2018). The Review notes the importance of multidisciplinary approaches to the subject and opportunities for pupils to appreciate the way in which religion and worldviews affect "behaviour, institutions and forms of expression" (Tharani, 2018, p. 6). The social scientifically-orientated course we have developed as a result of our MOOC has done this precisely.

Longer-term, it remains to be seen whether the paid professional development course might yield for Cardiff University something of a return on investment from the original MOOC. Irrespective of any financial outcome, our collaboration with FutureLearn and the degree to which they were able to produce course analytics has given us a vast quantitative and qualitative dataset. This paper reflects only a small volume of the information we have been able to mine. However, what the University may be more interested in beyond immediate financial gain, is the capacity of our MOOC and its outcomes to generate an "Impact Case Study" for national audit of research held every 6 years, namely the Research Excellence Framework (REF).<sup>4</sup> There is a good story to be told about the way in which

we have used our academic research to reach new audiences via new media, and contribute to professional development beyond academia in a way that demonstrates the public value of investment in research. We also feel confident that our work has enabled us to fulfill our mission statement as a research centre, namely, “promoting the study of Islam and the lives of Muslims in Britain.”

## 7 | CONCLUSION

Irrespective of any soft outcomes of benefit to our institution, the most gratifying outcome of our development of a MOOC about Islam and Muslims was the degree to which individual learners shared stories of personal transformation as a result of the course: “it really made me stop and think about my feelings towards Muslims, both positive and negative”. The extent of this appreciation was a reassurance that our initiative matched the national Quality Assurance Agency “benchmarks” for Theology and Religious Studies in higher education in the UK:

The nature of theology and religious studies means that studying the subject may have a profound impact on the student's life and outlook. The experience of studying this subject may contribute to a student's personal development, transforming horizons by engaging with cultures and societies other than her or his own, whether ancient or modern. It may foster a lifelong quest for wisdom, respect for one's own integrity and that of others, self-examination in terms of the beliefs, values and practices adopted for one's own life, a better understanding of religion's role in geopolitical conflict and, not least, the challenging of prejudices. (QAA, 2019, p. 7)

Just as some learners saw our course as a springboard for taking their learning about Islam forward in other ways in the future, so too our MOOC provided a small research centre with the confidence and ambition to extend its reach to a wider international audience via new technologies. This is still “work in progress,” but as we face an academic year that will be almost entirely shaped by online delivery of teaching and learning, we are hopefully well-equipped to provide a rigorous, thought-provoking, and personally enriching experience for our students. With the likely future increase in online learning in all subject areas, there is clear scope for more systematic research about MOOCs in particular disciplines and on specific topics in order to isolate the experiences and outcomes which may be discipline-specific. Such research efforts could helpfully map the way in which course providers/educators are sharing good practice (or not) in terms of pedagogical approaches, potentially stimulating the development of online teaching and learning practice within the discipline as a whole.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author is grateful to a wide range of individuals who not only made the production of our MOOC possible, but also contributed to the process of moderation over many years. This includes the learning technology and professional services educational support staff in Cardiff University, the postgraduate students and staff of the Islam-UK Centre at Cardiff University (with particular mention of Abdul-Azim Ahmed and Riyaz Timol), and helpful conversations with Dr Carina Girvan in the Cardiff School of Social Sciences. Particular thanks goes to Mark Bryant (Development Officer, Islam-UK Centre) who played a central role in the initial production of the course, and its subsequent management. Thanks are also due to all those Muslims in Cardiff (and some further afield) who contributed to the course videos. I also acknowledge Mobeen Butt for use of material arising from the “Muslim Museum Initiative,” Peter Sanders for the photograph in Figure 1, and Atallah Fitzgibbon and Rehanah Sadiq (Reflections Network) for their personal contributions and use of RN materials.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> For details of past and current research projects see: <http://sites.cardiff.ac.uk/islamukcentre/research/>, 2.9.20.
- <sup>2</sup> See project website: <http://sites.cardiff.ac.uk/islamukcentre/research/muslims-in-britain-mooc2re/>, accessed 2.9.20.
- <sup>3</sup> See course website: <https://www.cardiff.ac.uk/professional-development/available-training/short-courses/muslims-in-britain>, accessed 2.9.20.
- <sup>4</sup> For more information about the UK 'REF' see: <https://www.ref.ac.uk/>, accessed 2.9.20.

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**How to cite this article:** Gilliat-Ray S. Learning about Islam and Muslims online: Reflections on the design and delivery of a massive open online course (MOOC) 2014–2019. *Teach Theol Relig.* 2020;1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1111/teth.12568>