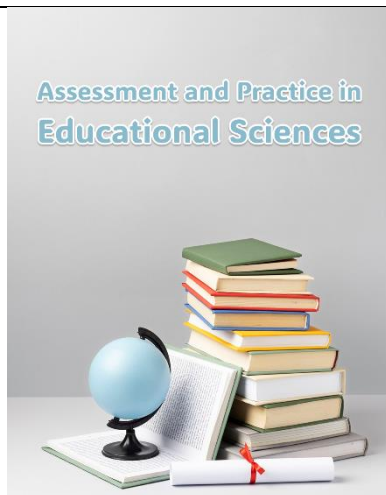




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# Identifying the Components of Instructional Quality in Islamic Studies Courses: A Qualitative Study in Universities of Iraq

## ABSTRACT

The present study aimed to identify the components of instructional quality in Islamic Studies courses in universities of Iraq. It was conducted using qualitative content analysis with an inductive approach. The research setting consisted of professors of Islamic Studies courses and directors of Islamic Studies academic departments in Iraqi universities, who were selected through criterion-based purposive sampling. The instrument used in this section was a semi-structured interview focused on identifying the indicators, components, and dimensions of improving the instructional quality of Islamic Studies courses. The interviews continued until theoretical saturation was reached with 23 participants. Qualitative content analysis was used to analyze the data in the present study. In addition, test–retest reliability, inter-coder reliability, and the content validity ratio (CVR) were used to assess the reliability and validity of the findings in this section. The findings showed that the main categories contributing to the improvement of instructional quality in Islamic Studies courses included factors related to professors, with the subcategories of scientific competencies and content design, teaching methods and active learning, feedback and classroom management, assessment and evaluation of learning, diversification of learning experiences, and strengthening students' motivation and participation; factors related to macro-level higher education policymaking, including policy coordination and standardization, macro-level monitoring and evaluation, stakeholder participation and inter-institutional collaboration, and educational management empowerment; factors related to university-level policymaking, with the subcategories of university-level coordination and internal standardization, empowerment of professors through evaluation systems, provision of infrastructure and instructional support, and interaction with the cultural–religious environment; factors related to the Islamic identity of the university, including an interactive organizational culture, value alignment with the organization, orientation toward diversity and civilizational dialogue; and factors related to the curriculum, including strengthening curriculum content through interdisciplinarity and critical thinking, as well as structural coordination and continuous curriculum improvement. These factors are considered among the elements that enhance the instructional quality of Islamic Studies courses.

**Keywords:** instructional quality, Islamic Studies courses, higher education policymaking.

## Introduction

The quality of higher education has become one of the central concerns of educational management, particularly in contexts where universities are expected not only to transmit specialized knowledge but also to shape ethical, cultural, civic, and professional capacities. In contemporary higher education systems, quality is no longer interpreted merely as the adequacy of course delivery or the efficiency of administrative procedures; rather, it is understood as a multidimensional construct involving curriculum relevance, teaching effectiveness, institutional governance, educational equity, student engagement, learning environments, evaluation mechanisms, and continuous improvement. From a management perspective, instructional quality is the outcome of interaction among human resources, organizational culture, policy frameworks, curriculum design, technological infrastructure, and stakeholder expectations. Therefore, any attempt to improve the quality of instruction must move beyond isolated pedagogical reforms and address the broader ecosystem in which teaching and learning occur. This issue becomes more significant in courses that carry cultural, ethical, and identity-forming functions, such as Islamic Studies courses in universities.

Islamic Studies courses occupy a distinctive position in higher education because they are not limited to the transfer of religious information. These courses are expected to cultivate moral reasoning, deepen students' understanding of religious and ethical concepts, strengthen cultural identity, and provide students with intellectual tools for responding to contemporary social, philosophical, and moral challenges. In Islamic universities and Muslim-majority higher education contexts, Islamic education has often been linked to the formation of human quality, meaning that education is viewed as a process through which knowledge, ethics, spirituality, responsibility, and social conduct are integrated in the development of the learner (1). This perspective gives Islamic Studies instruction a broader educational mission: it must connect doctrinal and textual knowledge with students' lived realities, contemporary questions, and future social responsibilities.

The broader question of educational purpose is fundamental to understanding quality in Islamic Studies instruction. Education is not merely an instrumental process for preparing individuals for labor markets; it is also a social, moral, and cultural process that shapes how learners interpret themselves, others, and the world. Discussions about the purpose of education emphasize that educational systems must clarify what kinds of individuals and societies they seek to cultivate, because curriculum and pedagogy are always tied to broader assumptions about human development, values, and social responsibility (2). In Islamic Studies courses, this question becomes especially important because the curriculum directly deals with moral values, religious meaning, ethical obligations, and social conduct. If such courses are delivered in a purely formal, repetitive, or disconnected manner, they may fail to achieve their intended developmental and identity-forming functions.

The quality of Islamic Studies education is also closely related to students' sense of meaning and psychological engagement. Educational experiences that lack relevance, coherence, or existential significance may contribute to disengagement, loss of motivation, and reduced wellbeing. Research on the meaning of education and student wellbeing shows that students' perception of meaning in education is a critical factor in preventing alienation and loss of educational purpose (3). This insight is highly relevant to Islamic Studies courses because these courses have the potential to provide a meaningful interpretive framework for ethical life, personal responsibility, and social participation. However, this potential can only be realized when teaching methods, curriculum content, and classroom interactions are aligned with students' intellectual needs, social experiences, and contemporary concerns.

One of the most important determinants of instructional quality is the competence of professors. In Islamic Studies education, professors are expected to possess not only mastery of religious texts and Islamic sciences but also pedagogical competence, communicative skill, analytical capacity, and the ability to engage with students' questions. Teacher competencies

in delivering quality Islamic education include subject-matter expertise, pedagogical knowledge, ethical commitment, classroom management ability, and responsiveness to learners' cognitive and affective needs (4). These competencies are particularly important in university-level Islamic Studies courses, where students often bring diverse intellectual backgrounds, critical questions, and varying degrees of religious knowledge. A professor who is scientifically competent but pedagogically weak may not be able to translate complex religious concepts into meaningful learning experiences; similarly, a professor who lacks updated knowledge may be unable to respond effectively to contemporary doubts, social issues, and interdisciplinary questions.

Teaching methods are another central component of instructional quality. Traditional lecture-based instruction may be useful for presenting foundational concepts, but it is often insufficient for developing critical understanding, reflective reasoning, and active engagement among university students. Interactive teaching methods in Islamic education have been associated with stronger student participation, deeper understanding, and more effective communication between professors and learners (5). In Islamic Studies courses, methods such as dialogue, group discussion, problem-based learning, debate, case analysis, and reflective questioning can help students connect religious teachings with contemporary ethical and social dilemmas. These approaches transform the classroom from a passive space of transmission into an active environment of inquiry, interpretation, and meaning-making.

Inquiry-based teaching is especially important in Islamic Studies because many students encounter complex religious, philosophical, and cultural questions during university life. When students are encouraged to ask questions, examine assumptions, evaluate arguments, and analyze religious issues critically, Islamic Studies instruction can contribute to the development of critical thinking rather than mere memorization. Evidence on inquiry-based teaching in Islamic Studies indicates that such methods can strengthen students' critical thinking and enhance the quality of learning (6). Therefore, improving instructional quality requires attention not only to what is taught but also to how students are invited to engage with the content. In this regard, the professor's role shifts from sole transmitter of knowledge to facilitator of disciplined inquiry and reflective understanding.

New pedagogical models can also support the quality of Islamic Studies instruction. The flipped classroom, for example, allows students to engage with basic materials before class and use classroom time for discussion, analysis, interaction, and application. Research on the Religion and Life course has shown that flipped classroom methods can improve interactive learning by increasing student preparation, participation, and engagement during class sessions (7). In the context of Islamic Studies courses, such approaches may be especially valuable because they create more space for dialogue about contemporary questions, clarification of misconceptions, and collective interpretation of ethical and religious issues. As a result, instructional quality becomes linked to the intentional design of learning experiences rather than the mere presentation of content.

Educational technology and digital transformation have added another dimension to quality in higher education. Education 4.0 emphasizes learner-centeredness, digital resources, smart learning environments, innovation, and the integration of technological tools into teaching and learning processes (8). For Islamic Studies courses, technology can support access to diverse sources, multimedia content, online discussions, digital assessment, and blended learning models. However, technology alone does not guarantee quality. Its effectiveness depends on pedagogical integration, institutional support, professor readiness, and alignment with curricular goals. Therefore, technological modernization should be understood as one component of a broader quality management system rather than as a substitute for pedagogical and organizational reform.

Evaluation and assessment constitute another major factor in instructional quality. In Islamic education, evaluation should not be limited to measuring memorization of concepts; rather, it should assess comprehension, critical reasoning, ethical reflection, application, participation, and learning progress. Learning evaluation plays an important role in improving the

quality of Islamic education because it provides feedback for students, professors, and educational managers regarding the effectiveness of instruction and the extent to which learning objectives have been achieved (9). Systematic evaluation also supports accountability and continuous improvement. When assessment results are used constructively, they can inform curriculum revision, teaching improvement, student support, and institutional decision-making.

At the organizational level, instructional quality is strongly influenced by educational management strategies. Islamic education management involves planning, organizing, implementing, monitoring, and improving educational processes in ways that align institutional goals with learning needs and religious-ethical values. Management strategies aimed at improving the quality of learning in Islamic educational institutions include curriculum development, teacher development, resource provision, supervision, and stakeholder coordination (10). These strategies indicate that quality improvement cannot be reduced to the individual efforts of professors. It also requires coherent policy, administrative support, professional development systems, and a culture of institutional responsibility for learning outcomes.

Total Quality Management provides a useful framework for understanding quality improvement in educational institutions. TQM emphasizes continuous improvement, stakeholder participation, process orientation, leadership commitment, evidence-based decision-making, and organizational culture. Studies on TQM in education show that quality improvement depends on systematic coordination among leadership, staff, teachers, students, and institutional processes (11). Similarly, research on TQM practices highlights their potential contribution to innovation by encouraging institutions to adopt participatory, evaluative, and improvement-oriented approaches (12). In the context of Islamic Studies courses, TQM principles can be applied through continuous curriculum review, systematic professor evaluation, student feedback mechanisms, interdepartmental coordination, and alignment between university policy and instructional practice.

Organizational culture is particularly significant in Islamic higher education. A university's culture shapes expectations about teaching, learning, ethics, collaboration, accountability, and value alignment. The transformation of education quality in Islamic higher education institutions has been linked to organizational culture and integrated quality management, suggesting that quality improvement requires both structural mechanisms and shared institutional values (13). Islamic Studies courses are deeply connected to university identity; therefore, their quality depends not only on formal curriculum and teaching methods but also on whether the broader institutional environment supports ethical conduct, intellectual dialogue, cultural respect, and religious identity. An interactive organizational culture can strengthen the relevance and legitimacy of these courses by making them part of the university's lived educational mission.

Curriculum quality is another essential dimension of Islamic Studies instruction. A socially just and epistemically responsible curriculum should not reproduce static or exclusionary knowledge structures; rather, it should be developed through collective reflection on what knowledge matters, whose experiences are recognized, and how curricula can respond to social needs (14). In Islamic Studies courses, this implies that curriculum design should include not only classical religious foundations but also contemporary ethical, social, technological, and cultural issues. Topics such as digital ethics, environmental responsibility, interfaith dialogue, social justice, artificial intelligence, family transformations, and youth identity can make the curriculum more relevant to students' lives while preserving the intellectual integrity of Islamic knowledge.

Quality in education is also affected by contextual and environmental conditions. Research on educational quality in rural schools has identified multiple factors influencing quality, including teacher competence, infrastructure, learning resources, management practices, student motivation, and community conditions (15). Although the setting of the present study is university education, the underlying implication remains applicable: instructional quality emerges from the interaction of pedagogical, organizational, resource-based, and contextual factors. In addition, the physical and environmental quality of

educational institutions, including spatial conditions, infrastructure, and environmental comfort, can influence learning experiences and institutional quality (16). For Islamic Studies instruction in universities, appropriate classrooms, access to libraries, digital platforms, and supportive learning spaces can enhance both teaching effectiveness and student engagement.

The Iraqi higher education context adds further importance to the study of Islamic Studies instructional quality. Higher education in Iraq has faced persistent challenges after 2003, including institutional reconstruction, governance pressures, resource limitations, quality assurance needs, and the demand to align universities with national development and social stability (17). In such a context, Islamic Studies courses may play an important role in strengthening ethical orientation, social responsibility, cultural continuity, and constructive dialogue among students. However, the effectiveness of these courses depends on whether universities can identify and manage the factors that shape their instructional quality. Without empirical identification of these components, quality improvement efforts may remain fragmented, impressionistic, or dependent on individual initiatives rather than systematic institutional planning.

Despite the importance of Islamic Studies courses in universities, there remains a need for context-specific research that identifies the components of instructional quality from the perspective of those directly involved in teaching and managing these courses. Many discussions of quality in Islamic education emphasize broad principles such as teacher competence, curriculum relevance, evaluation, management, and organizational culture; however, the specific configuration of these components may vary across national, institutional, and cultural contexts. Iraqi universities require an empirically grounded understanding of how professors and academic managers perceive the factors that enhance the quality of Islamic Studies instruction. Such understanding can support evidence-informed policymaking, improve university-level planning, guide professional development, strengthen curriculum revision, and contribute to the development of a quality assurance model appropriate to Islamic Studies education.

Accordingly, the aim of the present study was to identify the components of instructional quality in Islamic Studies courses in universities of Iraq through a qualitative content analysis of the perspectives of professors and heads of Islamic Studies academic departments.

## Methods and Materials

In the present study, within the framework of qualitative research, qualitative content analysis with an inductive approach was used. Content analysis is a systematic and multifaceted research approach employed to study and interpret the content of various forms of communicative data, including written texts, images, videos, and audio materials. This method is designed to discover patterns, themes, latent meanings, and structures embedded in the data, and it is carried out through the processes of coding, categorizing, and analyzing information qualitatively, quantitatively, or through a mixed approach. The research setting of the present study consisted of professors of Islamic Studies courses and heads of Islamic Studies academic departments in Iraqi universities, who were selected through criterion-based purposive sampling, with the criterion being service as a professor or head of department in Islamic Studies courses. The instrument used was a semi-structured interview. In the present study, sampling continued until theoretical saturation was reached; that is, interviews continued until no new information was added to the research findings. In total, 23 professors of Islamic Studies courses and heads of Islamic Studies academic departments in Iraqi universities were interviewed, and theoretical saturation was achieved with this number. In the present research, qualitative content analysis with an inductive approach was used to analyze and answer the research question. Content analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes within data. In the present study, to assess data validity, after each interview was transcribed, its full transcript was returned to the corresponding participant so that they could examine its accuracy and correctness from their own perspective. This process, known in qualitative research as member checking,

helped the researcher ensure the fidelity of the transcript to the participant's actual experience. In cases where there was ambiguity in the meaning or expression of a concept, the researcher contacted the participant again and, through a brief conversation, obtained the correct interpretation and revised the transcript. This method not only enhanced the validity of the data but also made it possible to prevent misinterpretations or researcher bias. To calculate the reliability of the data in the present study, test–retest reliability was used. The procedure was as follows: among all interviews, three interviews were randomly selected, and each was coded twice within a short and specified time interval, between five and thirty days. The results of this coding are presented in the table below:

**Table 1. Test–Retest Reliability Calculations**

| Row   | Interviewee Code | Total Number of Codes | Number of Agreements | Test–Retest Reliability Percentage |
|-------|------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|------------------------------------|
| 1     | No. 7            | 61                    | 27                   | 0.88                               |
| 2     | No. 12           | 41                    | 18                   | 0.87                               |
| 3     | No. 2            | 31                    | 14                   | 0.90                               |
| Total | —                | 133                   | 59                   | 0.88                               |

Test–retest reliability was calculated. Given the obtained value, 88%, and considering that this level of reliability is higher than 60% (Kvale, 2008), the reliability of the coding was confirmed.

## Findings and Results

In the present study, factors related to professors were identified as one of the factors influencing the improvement of instructional quality in the courses. The subcategories of this dimension are shown in the figure below:

### Factors Related to Professors and Their Subcategories

Improving the instructional quality of Islamic Studies courses in universities is of particular importance because these courses play a key role in strengthening religious beliefs, deepening ethical values, and responding to students' intellectual and spiritual needs. One of the main categories in this regard is the role of professors and their teaching methods. One of the key factors in improving the instructional quality of Islamic Studies courses is the up-to-dateness of professors' knowledge and skills. Islamic Studies is a dynamic and evolving field that requires awareness of contemporary issues, emerging doubts and questions, and scientific and philosophical advances. Providing regular educational programs, such as specialized workshops, retraining courses, and scientific seminars, enables professors to become familiar with the latest scientific resources, teaching methods, and topics related to Islamic Studies. Selecting professors with professional competencies, especially deep specialized knowledge in the field of Islamic Studies, is another important factor in improving instructional quality. Professors who, in addition to mastery of religious texts, are also familiar with related sciences such as philosophy, theology, and social sciences are able to present Islamic Studies topics in a more comprehensive and engaging manner. Professional competencies include the ability to analyze complex religious issues, present logical arguments, and respond to students' doubts and questions. Continuous evaluation of professors' performance through scientific and systematic mechanisms plays an important role in ensuring the quality of teaching in Islamic Studies courses. These systems may include student evaluations, peer feedback, and managerial reviews. Continuous evaluation helps identify and address instructional shortcomings and ultimately leads to improved teaching quality and student learning. One of the main challenges in teaching Islamic Studies courses is establishing meaningful and effective communication with students. Professors who are able to establish warm communication, create a dialogical atmosphere, and respond to students' questions and doubts can increase students' motivation and interest in these courses. Adjusting the content of Islamic Studies courses based on students' needs, interests, and level of knowledge is one of the key factors in increasing instructional effectiveness. University students usually have intellectual diversity and different

levels of knowledge. Therefore, course content should be designed in such a way that it responds to their religious and spiritual needs while also being related to their interests and everyday challenges. The use of modern teaching methods, such as active learning, group discussion, and educational technologies, can move Islamic Studies courses away from a traditional and monotonous format and make them more engaging for students.

### **Factors Related to Macro-Level Higher Education Policymaking**

In explaining this finding, it can be stated that one of the most important factors in improving the instructional quality of Islamic Studies courses is the development of coherent curricula that are appropriate to contemporary needs. Curricula should be designed in such a way that, while preserving the principles and foundations of Islamic Studies, they address contemporary topics such as digital ethics, environmental challenges from an Islamic perspective, and common religious doubts among young people. High-quality instruction in Islamic Studies courses requires the allocation of sufficient financial and human resources. Financial resources are essential for providing educational equipment, holding retraining courses for professors, and developing digital infrastructure. In addition, recruiting specialized and motivated professors as key human resources plays an important role in improving quality. Coordination between universities and religious institutions, such as seminaries, can contribute to enriching educational content and strengthening the credibility of Islamic Studies courses. This coordination can take place through the formation of joint committees for content development, professor exchange, and the organization of scientific conferences. For example, collaboration with religious institutions to provide up-to-date content and respond to students' religious doubts can improve instructional quality. Continuous monitoring and evaluation of Islamic Studies educational programs is one of the key tools for quality assurance. This process may include periodic review of curricula, evaluation of professors' performance, and assessment of student satisfaction. The use of modern technologies in Islamic Studies education, such as online learning platforms, virtual classes, and multimedia tools, can significantly improve instructional quality. Promoting a research culture among professors and students of Islamic Studies is another factor affecting the improvement of instructional quality. Encouraging professors to conduct applied research and publish articles in the field of Islamic Studies can make educational content more up-to-date and richer. Furthermore, creating research opportunities for students, such as theses or group projects, can encourage them to engage in deeper thinking and analysis of religious issues.

### **Factors Related to University-Level Policymaking**

In explaining this finding, it can be stated that designing clear and coherent policies at the university level for standardizing the teaching of Islamic Studies courses is one of the most important factors in ensuring instructional quality. These policies should align educational objectives, course content, and teaching methods with national standards and the university's macro-level goals. Standardized policies provide a clear framework for delivering high-quality education and prevent qualitative disparities among universities. Selecting professors with scientific and pedagogical competencies and continuously evaluating them through precise systems play a key role in improving the teaching quality of Islamic Studies courses. These systems should include specific criteria for selecting professors, such as mastery of Islamic sciences, teaching skills, and the ability to respond to students' doubts and questions. Competent and evaluated professors constitute the main foundation for providing high-quality education. Continuous review and updating of Islamic Studies curricula to align them with students' needs and contemporary social issues are key factors in improving instructional quality. Curricula should be designed in such a way that they cover contemporary topics such as ethics in technology, interfaith dialogue, and social challenges from an Islamic perspective. In fact, up-to-date and relevant content increases students' motivation and makes learning more effective. Providing appropriate facilities and infrastructure, such as equipped classrooms, specialized libraries, and digital platforms, is essential for high-quality Islamic Studies education. Appropriate infrastructure improves the quality and accessibility of education. Encouraging students to participate actively through the creation of dialogical spaces and group activities is one of

the effective ways to improve the instructional quality of Islamic Studies. Activities such as group discussions, question-and-answer sessions, and practical projects can encourage students to think more deeply and interact more actively with course content. Active student participation ensures deeper understanding and greater impact of Islamic Studies courses. Establishing monitoring systems for the continuous evaluation of the quality of Islamic Studies instruction helps identify the strengths and weaknesses of educational programs. Precise monitoring makes it possible to correct shortcomings and strengthen advantages, thereby maintaining instructional quality. Collaboration with religious and cultural institutions, such as seminaries and cultural organizations, can help enrich educational content and support Islamic Studies programs. Cooperation with religious and cultural institutions increases the credibility and richness of educational content and helps strengthen the relationship between the university and the religious community.

### **Factors Related to the Islamic Identity of the University**

In explaining this finding, it can be stated that creating an environment that strengthens students' religious and cultural identity plays an important role in the success of Islamic Studies education. This can be achieved by aligning course content with the university's organizational values, such as commitment to ethics, justice, and social responsibility. This approach turns Islamic Studies education into an integral part of university culture. Students in universities come from diverse cultural backgrounds and hold different viewpoints. Accepting this diversity and creating an inclusive atmosphere in Islamic Studies classes allow students to freely express their views and feel a sense of belonging to the learning environment; this contributes to increased participation and, consequently, improved instructional quality. Promoting a culture of continuous learning through educational programs for professors and encouraging students toward self-directed learning can improve the quality of Islamic Studies education. For professors, holding training workshops on modern teaching methods or contemporary religious topics, and for students, creating opportunities such as access to online educational resources or specialized libraries, can strengthen motivation for continuous learning. This culture, by updating the knowledge and skills of professors and students, directly contributes to the improvement of instructional quality. Appropriate infrastructure, such as classrooms equipped with modern technologies, rich libraries, and suitable spaces for group activities, plays an important role in improving the learning environment. Investment in this infrastructure creates a dynamic and modern environment that motivates students to participate actively in the learning process. Positive and constructive relationships between professors and students are among the key factors in the success of Islamic Studies education.

### **Factors Related to the Curriculum of Islamic Studies Courses**

Curriculum planning and design consist of such dimensions as updating the content of Islamic Studies courses with a focus on contemporary issues and social challenges to increase their appeal; integrating Islamic Studies with other disciplines such as psychology, sociology, and technology to enrich the course curriculum; designing flexible curricula capable of adapting to social, cultural, and educational changes; designing curricula with an emphasis on active learning methods such as group discussion, project-based learning, and problem-solving; designing curricula aimed at strengthening students' critical thinking skills and their ability to analyze religious doubts and questions; creating curricula aligned with macro-level university and national frameworks; collecting feedback from students and professors, analyzing learning outcomes, and revising the curriculum. Updating the content of Islamic Studies courses with an emphasis on contemporary issues such as social justice, ethics in technology, climate change from a religious perspective, or ethical challenges in the modern world can increase the appeal of these courses for students. By linking course content to students' real concerns, this approach strengthens their motivation to learn. Integrating Islamic Studies with other disciplines such as psychology, to examine the effects of religion on mental health; sociology, to analyze the role of religion in social cohesion; or technology, to discuss ethics in artificial intelligence, can make course content richer and more multidimensional. This approach moves Islamic Studies courses away

from a one-dimensional format and helps students understand the connection between these courses and other fields of knowledge. For example, discussing stress management from a religious perspective using psychological concepts can make learning more practical and engaging. Flexible curricula that can adapt to social, cultural, and educational changes can respond to the changing needs of students and society. This flexibility is possible through periodic review of syllabi and the addition of new topics based on contemporary developments, such as the effects of globalization or cultural changes. Active learning methods, such as group discussion, project-based learning, and problem-solving, transform students from passive recipients into active participants in the learning process. Designing a curriculum that prioritizes these methods can increase students' engagement with Islamic Studies content.

## Factors Enhancing the Quality of Islamic Studies Instruction

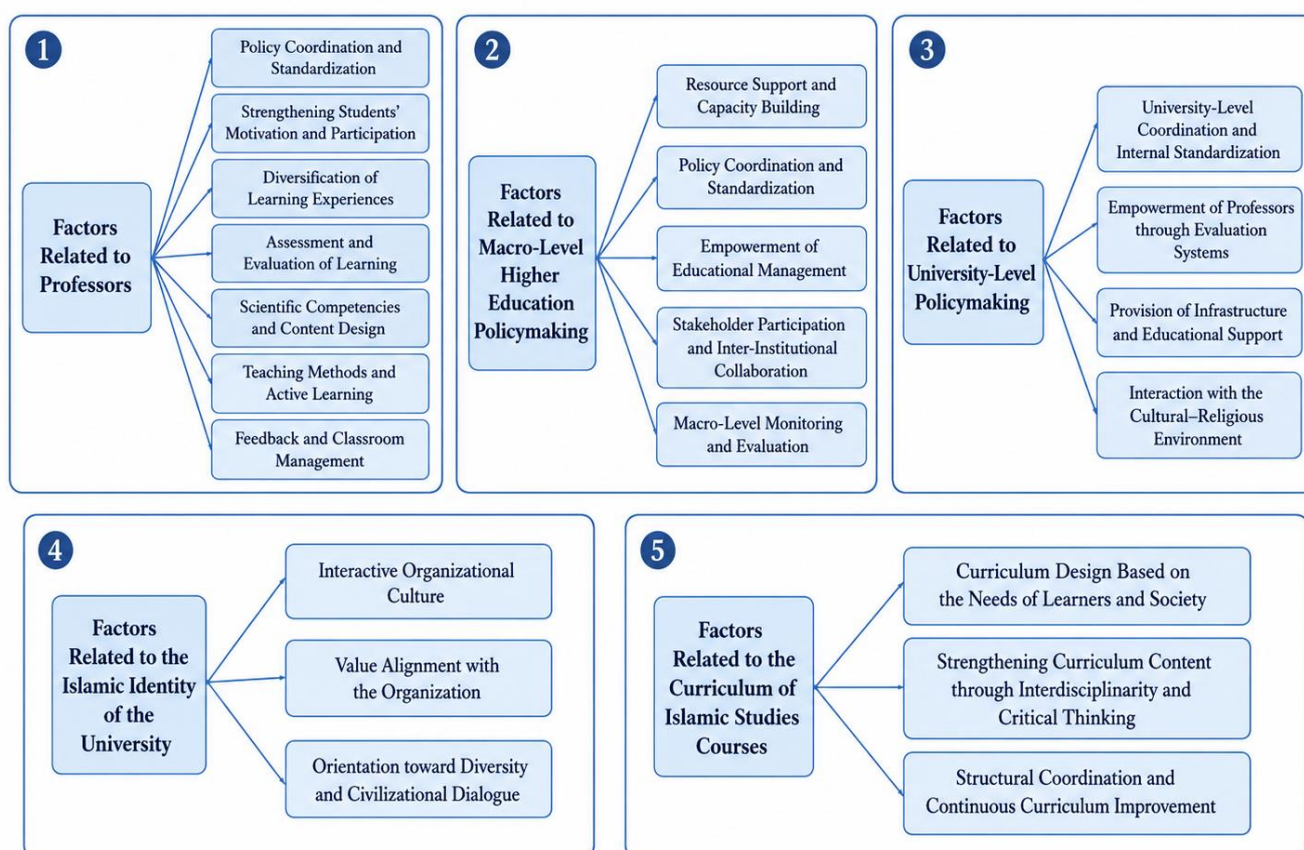


Figure 1. Conceptual Models of the Study

## Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed to identify the components of instructional quality in Islamic Studies courses in universities of Iraq. The findings showed that the improvement of instructional quality in these courses is a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by five main categories: factors related to professors, macro-level higher education policymaking, university-level policymaking, the Islamic identity of the university, and the curriculum of Islamic Studies courses. This pattern indicates that the quality of Islamic Studies instruction cannot be explained only by classroom performance or individual teaching competence; rather, it emerges from the interaction between pedagogical capability, institutional management, curriculum

relevance, organizational culture, resource provision, evaluation systems, and policy coordination. From a management perspective, this finding is important because it positions instructional quality as an integrated system requiring alignment among human, structural, cultural, and policy-related elements. Such a systemic interpretation is consistent with the logic of Total Quality Management in education, which emphasizes continuous improvement, stakeholder participation, leadership commitment, institutional coordination, and evidence-based evaluation as core mechanisms of quality enhancement (11, 12).

The first main finding of the study identified factors related to professors as one of the most important dimensions of quality improvement. This category included scientific competencies and content design, teaching methods and active learning, feedback and classroom management, assessment and evaluation of learning, diversification of learning experiences, strengthening students' motivation and participation, and policy coordination and standardization. This finding suggests that professors are not merely transmitters of Islamic knowledge but central agents in transforming religious, ethical, and cultural content into meaningful academic learning. In Islamic Studies courses, professors must possess deep knowledge of Islamic sciences, the ability to design relevant content, communicative competence, and pedagogical flexibility. This result is consistent with previous studies emphasizing that teacher competence is a fundamental determinant of quality in Islamic education, particularly because such competence combines subject-matter knowledge, teaching skill, ethical responsibility, and the ability to respond to learners' intellectual and spiritual needs (4). Similarly, the concept of Islamic education aimed at human quality stresses that instructors in Islamic universities must contribute to the holistic development of learners by integrating knowledge, morality, spirituality, and social responsibility (1).

The finding related to teaching methods and active learning also confirms that the quality of Islamic Studies instruction depends heavily on the pedagogical methods used in the classroom. Traditional lecture-based approaches may be insufficient when students face complex contemporary questions about religion, ethics, technology, identity, and society. The results of the present study show that active learning, group discussion, inquiry, feedback, and classroom interaction are essential to making Islamic Studies courses intellectually engaging and educationally effective. This finding aligns with evidence showing that interactive teaching methods in Islamic education strengthen students' participation, deepen learning, and improve the relationship between teacher and learner (5). It is also supported by research indicating that inquiry-based teaching can promote critical thinking in Islamic Studies by encouraging students to analyze religious concepts, evaluate arguments, and engage actively with questions and doubts (6). Furthermore, the emphasis on diversification of learning experiences is consistent with findings on the flipped classroom in the Religion and Life course, where interactive learning improved through student preparation, classroom dialogue, and active participation (7).

Another important result was the identification of assessment and evaluation of learning as a subcomponent of professor-related factors. This indicates that improving quality requires reliable mechanisms for evaluating student learning beyond memorization and formal examinations. In Islamic Studies courses, evaluation should assess conceptual understanding, ethical reasoning, analytical ability, classroom participation, and the capacity to apply Islamic concepts to contemporary problems. This finding is in line with literature emphasizing the important role of learning evaluation in improving the quality of Islamic education. Evaluation provides feedback to students and instructors, identifies weaknesses in learning processes, and supports continuous improvement in instructional design (9). Therefore, assessment in Islamic Studies should be formative, developmental, and aligned with course objectives, rather than limited to summative tests of factual knowledge.

The second main category identified in this study was factors related to macro-level higher education policymaking, including resource support and capacity building, policy coordination and standardization, empowerment of educational management, stakeholder participation and inter-institutional collaboration, and macro-level monitoring and evaluation. This finding shows that the quality of Islamic Studies courses depends not only on professors and curricula but also on national and

sectoral policies governing higher education. Macro-level policymaking provides the framework through which standards are defined, resources are distributed, institutional responsibilities are clarified, and quality assurance mechanisms are implemented. This result is consistent with studies indicating that educational quality is affected by a range of contextual and managerial factors, including infrastructure, teacher availability, leadership, resources, and community or stakeholder conditions (15). In the Iraqi context, where higher education has experienced significant institutional challenges after 2003, macro-level coordination and policy clarity are especially important for rebuilding quality assurance, strengthening governance, and improving educational outcomes (17).

The emphasis on resource support and capacity building also has strong support in previous research. High-quality education requires financial, human, technological, and physical resources, and Islamic Studies courses are no exception. The findings suggest that improving these courses requires investment in professor development, teaching resources, digital platforms, libraries, and supportive educational environments. Studies on the physical and environmental quality of educational institutions show that learning environments and institutional infrastructure can influence educational quality and student experience (16). At the same time, the emergence of Education 4.0 in higher education demonstrates that modern instructional quality increasingly depends on digital learning tools, technological integration, learner-centered environments, and innovative educational models (8). Thus, for Islamic Studies courses, macro-level policies should not treat these courses as merely traditional or textual subjects; rather, they should support modernization in content delivery, digital access, instructional technology, and learning environments.

The third main category was factors related to university-level policymaking. This category included university-level coordination and internal standardization, empowerment of professors through evaluation systems, provision of infrastructure and educational support, and interaction with the cultural–religious environment. This finding demonstrates that universities themselves have a decisive role in translating macro-level policies into effective instructional practices. Even when national standards exist, quality may remain weak if universities do not develop internal policies, support professors, provide infrastructure, monitor teaching, and coordinate Islamic Studies courses with institutional values and student needs. This finding corresponds with research on Islamic education management strategies, which highlights curriculum planning, teacher development, supervision, resource management, and institutional coordination as essential strategies for improving learning quality (10). It also aligns with integrated quality management approaches in Islamic higher education, where institutional systems, organizational culture, and managerial commitment are needed to transform educational quality (13).

University-level policymaking is also closely linked to professor empowerment. The findings showed that evaluation systems should not be understood only as mechanisms of control, but as tools for professional development, instructional improvement, and quality assurance. Continuous professor evaluation can identify training needs, improve classroom performance, and strengthen accountability. However, such systems must be fair, transparent, and developmental in orientation. This interpretation aligns with the broader principles of Total Quality Management, where evaluation is used for continuous improvement rather than punitive inspection (11). In Islamic Studies courses, professor empowerment may include workshops on active learning, interdisciplinary content design, responding to religious doubts, educational technology, classroom dialogue, and assessment methods. Such empowerment can help professors adapt Islamic Studies instruction to contemporary academic and social contexts.

The fourth main finding concerned factors related to the Islamic identity of the university, including interactive organizational culture, value alignment with the organization, and orientation toward diversity and civilizational dialogue. This finding indicates that the quality of Islamic Studies instruction depends on the cultural and identity environment of the university. Islamic Studies courses are more effective when they are not isolated from the broader mission of the institution,

but are integrated into the ethical, cultural, and educational identity of the university. This result is supported by studies showing that organizational culture and integrated quality management are key drivers of educational quality transformation in Islamic higher education institutions (13). When organizational culture supports ethical commitment, dialogue, respect, responsibility, and academic engagement, Islamic Studies courses can become more meaningful and influential for students.

The finding on diversity and civilizational dialogue is also significant. University students often differ in cultural background, worldview, level of religiosity, and intellectual orientation. Therefore, quality Islamic Studies instruction should create an inclusive space where students can ask questions, express concerns, and engage in respectful dialogue. This finding is consistent with the view that education should contribute to meaning, wellbeing, and the prevention of alienation among students (3). It also corresponds with contemporary discussions of educational purpose, which argue that education must clarify its moral and social aims and support learners' development as reflective members of society (2). In this sense, Islamic Studies courses can contribute to students' sense of purpose and belonging when they are taught through dialogue, relevance, and respect rather than through rigid or purely formal instruction.

The fifth main category was factors related to the curriculum of Islamic Studies courses. This category included curriculum design based on the needs of learners and society, strengthening curriculum content through interdisciplinarity and critical thinking, and structural coordination and continuous curriculum improvement. This result indicates that curriculum relevance is central to the perceived quality of Islamic Studies instruction. A curriculum that does not address contemporary ethical, social, technological, and cultural issues may fail to engage university students. Conversely, a curriculum that connects Islamic knowledge with real-life problems, current debates, and interdisciplinary perspectives can increase motivation and deepen learning. This finding aligns with the argument that socially just curricula are created collectively and must respond to questions of knowledge, relevance, and epistemic responsibility (14). In Islamic Studies courses, this requires balancing foundational religious content with contemporary issues such as digital ethics, environmental responsibility, artificial intelligence, interfaith dialogue, social justice, and identity formation.

The emphasis on interdisciplinarity and critical thinking is especially important. Islamic Studies curricula should not be limited to isolated doctrinal instruction; they should help students understand the relationship between Islamic concepts and other fields such as psychology, sociology, management, technology, environmental studies, and ethics. This finding is supported by research on Education 4.0, which emphasizes interdisciplinary, technology-enhanced, and learner-centered approaches in higher education (8). It is also aligned with inquiry-based approaches that strengthen students' critical thinking in Islamic Studies (6). Accordingly, curriculum improvement should be continuous and evidence-informed, using student feedback, professor input, learning outcomes, and social developments to revise content and instructional strategies. The findings therefore suggest that quality improvement in Islamic Studies requires a dynamic curriculum management process rather than a static syllabus structure.

Overall, the findings of the present study show that improving the quality of Islamic Studies instruction in Iraqi universities requires an integrated model involving professor competence, active learning, systematic evaluation, macro-level policy support, university-level coordination, Islamic organizational identity, and curriculum renewal. These components are mutually reinforcing. Competent professors require supportive policies and professional development systems; effective curricula require institutional coordination and continuous evaluation; active learning requires appropriate infrastructure and classroom culture; and Islamic identity requires organizational commitment to dialogue, ethics, and diversity. Therefore, the quality of Islamic Studies courses should be managed as a comprehensive educational system rather than treated as the responsibility of individual instructors alone.

The present study had several limitations. First, the study was qualitative and based on the perspectives of professors of Islamic Studies courses and heads of Islamic Studies academic departments; therefore, the findings reflect the perceptions and experiences of these participants and should not be generalized statistically to all universities. Second, although theoretical saturation was achieved, the number of participants was limited, and the inclusion of other groups such as students, curriculum planners, policymakers, and quality assurance officers could have provided a broader understanding of instructional quality. Third, the study relied on semi-structured interviews, and although credibility procedures were used, participants' responses may have been influenced by personal experiences, institutional conditions, or social desirability. Finally, the study focused on universities in Iraq, and the specific cultural, religious, administrative, and higher education context of the country may limit the direct transferability of the findings to other national contexts.

Future studies should examine the components identified in this study using quantitative or mixed-methods designs in order to test the relationships among professor-related factors, curriculum quality, institutional policy, Islamic identity, and students' learning outcomes. Researchers may also develop and validate a measurement scale for assessing the instructional quality of Islamic Studies courses based on the categories and subcategories identified in this study. Comparative studies between different universities, regions, or countries could clarify how institutional culture and higher education governance affect the quality of Islamic Studies instruction. In addition, future research should include students' perspectives, because students are the direct recipients of instruction and can provide valuable insights into motivation, engagement, relevance of content, classroom interaction, and perceived learning effectiveness.

University administrators and educational policymakers should use the findings of this study to design a comprehensive quality improvement framework for Islamic Studies courses. This framework should include systematic professional development for professors, regular review and updating of curricula, active learning strategies, fair and developmental evaluation systems, improved infrastructure, and stronger coordination between university policies and macro-level higher education standards. Islamic Studies departments should create mechanisms for collecting student feedback, supporting interdisciplinary teaching, integrating contemporary issues into course content, and strengthening dialogical classroom environments. In practice, quality improvement should be treated as a continuous institutional process that requires collaboration among professors, department heads, university managers, policymakers, religious and cultural institutions, and students.

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### **Authors' Contributions**

All authors equally contributed to this study.

### **Declaration of Interest**

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

### **Ethical Considerations**

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

## Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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