

Amanah Institute

Phase 1: The planting of a seed

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Over the following 3 years a bold Madrassah Improvement Project was undertaken at Amanah Institute. The project whilst visionary in many ways mirrors other emerging efforts in Muslim communities around the world. This was not about replicating those noble efforts already underway locally in many other Madrassah but filling a gap in our community and reaching out to the needs of our students and their families.

The vision that guided and continues to guide Amanah Institute is about connecting students with an education in the Islamic spirit. The approach is less focused on teaching about Islam and more about preparing young people to live as observant and functionally dynamic Muslims. This has demanded that the noblest purpose of learning is made clear to students; that great thought is given to the method of teaching; and that the content of study is both relevant and in context. This vision called not for a departure in genuine tradition or the principles of Islamic education but a renewal. We know from a famous hadith, that the Prophet SAW advised us to renew our faith. In this light, we aspired to renew our madrassah approach. This intention rested on the premise that our young people deserve an education that is both reflective of the positive aspects and in some cases high standards of their school experience as well as honouring the beauty and majesty of our educational heritage.

Our vision was our compass; we believed that the purpose embedded in our vision needed to inform every aspect of the Institution. The approach that has emerged at Amanah is captured in our motto, 'education for transformation'. This called upon teachers modelling themselves and encouraging students to contemplate, reflect, self-examine and be vigilant of one's own self with respect to Allah Most High. For if our only focus is on certain external indicators, transmission can very easily overshadow transformation. We were careful to make distinction between the low level practice of rote learning and the importance of memorisation within our tradition. Further, we were aware that memorisation was always understood as being for later deeper understanding. The danger in our context is that as the majority of students are not Arabic speaking and in the absence of further learning opportunities, there is often no later for deeper understanding. The result can be students who feel shaky or ill-equipped.

The steps taken to enact the Improvement Project began with an external independent review. This is standard practice both in mainstream schools as well as corporate and business contexts but not so common in Madrassah contexts. The review revealed that the many positive aspects of Kuraby Madrassah were resting on the back of the intentions and efforts (through the grace of Allah Almighty) of great leaders and self-less people throughout the life of the Madrassah. The Madrassah historically was run as a labour of love. The limitations that were found pointed to a greater neglect, not by individuals but collectively as a community. Progress fluctuated with the efforts and presence of heroic people who inevitably come and go. The Institution however had remained fairly static, resistant to systemic improvement.

Amanah Institute 3 years later has made great strides, embracing an improvement agenda. 3 years is of course a very short period of time in the life of an educational Institution, and thus phase one of

this project can be likened to the planting of a seed. Some of the achievements and milestones include:

Procedural and Administrative:

- A duty of care agenda
- Occupational health and safety material
- An administrative management system
- Structured pick up procedures
- Job descriptions and teacher standards for Madrassah staff
- Institute policies and procedures
- Internal operational manuals
- Staff and parent handbooks
- Annual calendar

Teachers:

- Induction material/training program
- Staff handbook
- Internal staff policies and procedures
- Teaching training packages
- Prophetic pedagogy manual/Dignified Way manual
- Unit planning/term overview templates
- Quality assessment samples

Educational:

- Development and sharing of vision, mission, motto, guiding principles and education philosophy
- Development of a clear descriptor for what we expect an Amanah graduate to look like
- A clear and articulated education process
- *Ilm, amal* and *hal* dimensions (for teaching and learning/for assessing and reporting)
- Assessment aligned to *ilm, amal* and *hal* (transformation focus)
- A revised reporting method and approach
- Dignified Way - a Prophetic model for character education and behaviour management
- Transition to 3-point criteria approach underpinning the Qur'an program (proficiency + *makhārij* + *ahkām* of *tajweed*)
- Junior Quran Program – students taught in levels instead of age
- Foundations Program – honouring the importance of memorisation
- Emerging theme based integrated Islamic Studies Program
- Applied Islam – tailor made program combining sacred tradition and social sciences for Australian Muslim students.

Communication:

- Student diaries (purpose designed)
- Vibrant and active Facebook page
- Regular parent emails
- On-line newsletter
- New website
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Teaching training was exhaustive and one of the areas of concentration in the improvement project. Our teachers were exposed to cutting edge research on Prophetic teaching models, character education and behaviour management, curriculum design, assessment practices and much more. Many teachers, those active and those who have moved on express how exhilarating it was to feel like they were constantly learning and being challenged.

Another outcome of the improvement project has been the lessons learned via the piloting of ground breaking approaches such as Dignified Way. Dignified Way was developed by a Canadian educator, Omaira Alam and I. We expanded upon a contemporary framework to include the

concepts of discipline with dignity, *adab* and prophetic pedagogy and shaped this specifically for Islamic education settings including madrassahs. Dignified Way has proved successful in contributing to an ambiance that many of our stakeholders have attested to. Dignified Way is to be piloted in Islamic schools in Melbourne, Sydney, and Afghanistan with interest in the UK.

Another defining achievement was the Applied Islam program. Applied Islam was developed by Professor Mohamad Abdalla and drew upon his sustained involvement at the grass roots of community as well as his experience within his field, combining the sacred tradition with social science methods, to deliver an Islamic Studies program tailor made to the needs and expectations of young Australian Muslims. Originally piloted in Amanah, Applied Islam is now delivered in Islamic schools and community in Melbourne and Adelaide with interest in Sydney and Morocco.

By no means do we say that we have made it to the top of the proverbial mountain. There have been limitations and like many Madrassah, capacity is an ongoing and unresolved challenge. Clearly the necessary renewal in Madrassah education, both at Amanah Institute, and further afield is going to take time and community buy in. Credit must go to the Trustees at Kuraby Masjid for embarking on this project and to the sponsors who have contributed tremendously. The above milestones and achievements are the fruits of a supportive Amanah community, a committed educational team and above all, the grace of Allah Almighty. They reflect the planting of a seed and hopefully inspire further attention and commitment in the next phase at Amanah Institute. The Institute is well served under the new leadership team of Imam Ahmed Nafaa and Sister Soraya Bulbulia. They will soon be sharing with the community a number of opportunities to support the efforts of the Institute going forward. May Allah Almighty bless our educational institutions and the quality of education they deliver our young people.