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The impact of integrating Islamic religious teaching in university programs on educational quality and alignment with Saudi Vision 2030: A systematic review (2016–2025)

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ABSTRACT

This systematic review explores the role of Islamic Religious Teaching in enhancing the quality of university education and supporting the goals of Saudi Vision 2030. It investigates two main questions: how Islamic Religious Teaching improves educational quality in university programs, and how its integration contributes to achieving national educational objectives. A comprehensive search was conducted across five academic databases for studies published between 2016 and 2025, applying strict inclusion and exclusion criteria. Six studies met the criteria and were fully reviewed and analyzed in terms of context, sample characteristics, and key findings. A consistent theme emerged, showing that Islamic Religious Teaching strengthens the quality of education and aligns with the aspirations of Saudi Vision 2030. A quality assessment tool was used to ensure the methodological rigor of the selected studies. The findings highlight the strategic role of Islamic Religious Teaching in creating a supportive learning environment and promoting a holistic and integrated educational system within Saudi universities.

1. Introduction

In 2016, the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, Mohammed bin Salman, launched Vision 2030 aimed at changing the country into a vibrant society, a strong economy, and a daring organization. This plan wants to expand the economic foundation, give power to its people, and increase involvement on a global scale. It emphasizes developing civic principles, encouraging innovation, and preparing for future jobs while aligning schooling with national goals (Nair et al., 2024). Foster creativity, and ensure future career success while striving to help students achieve higher global education results and create a curriculum compatible with the current multiplicity in KSA. It also guides education reforms in Saudi Arabia, aiming to transform the country from a wealthy state to a diverse nation with diverse resources and income (Table 1) (Alharbi and Alshammari, 2020). Saudi Arabia initiated several educational programs to achieve Vision 2030's

higher education development and strategic objectives and to develop innovative and creative talents. These priorities tend to focus on higher education (Mohiuddin et al., 2023). Saudi Vision 2030 intends to align higher education outputs with labor market requirements, aiming to make Saudi universities among the top international institutions by 2030. Six educational initiatives to be addressed by 2030: enhancing learning environments, improving curricula, transitioning to digital education, preparing students for labor market demands, developing values and core skills, and setting national development targets as outlined by Vision2030 (Albiladi, 2022; Allmnakrah and Evers, 2020). Improving the curriculum is central to Saudi Vision 2030, aiming to boost educational results and better equip students for the future. Vedder (1992) confirmed that quality education means education of good quality resulting from a well-planned and well-organized educational process. Education International (EI) describes quality education as concentrating on a student's social, emotional, mental, physical, and cognitive development, regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, or location. It prepares children for life and is influenced by information and Communication Technology. Quality education develops personality, morals, and ethics, promoting a healthy lifestyle. As mentioned by

UNESCO (2004), education quality can be conceived with two factors: cognitive development being the first aspect, and responsible citizenship value and creative emotional development, difficult to quantify and to some extent comparative across countries. Saudi Arabia is adopting strategic reforms in its education system to reduce extremist principles and encourage humanistic Islamic notions. Despite minimal backlash from conservative clerics and society, the government's approach has made education more acceptable. However, the government must continue cautiously discussing religious education reforms, as understandings of the Ulema are deeply entrenched in Saudis' citizenship and cultural legacy. The Saudi Arabian Ministry of Education introduced a course on Islamic culture in higher education, focusing on instilling Islamic ethical principles and practices in university students. The course aims to instruct students about the Holy Qur'an and the Sunnah, emphasizing moral integrity and correct belief and shaping their behavior (Alwadai and Alhaj, 2023).

Table 1: Summary of Saudi Vision 2030 (Alshuwaikhat and Mohammed, 2017)

The theme	Target of the vision
A vibrant society	The Umrah visitors that KSA would welcome yearly would increase from the current 8 million to 30 million.
	More than a doubling of the number of Saudi heritage sites that would be registered under UNESCO.
	Three cities that ranked among the first 100 in the world.
	Increase household expenditure on cultural and entertainment activities inside the Kingdom from its current 2.9% to 6%.
	Increase the percentage of people exercising at least once a week from 13% of the population to 40%.
	Move from 26th to 10th position in the Social Capital Index.
	Increase the average life expectancy from 74 years to 80 years.
A thriving economy	Reduce the unemployment rate from 11.6% to 7%.
	Enhance SMEs' contribution to GDP from 20% to 35%.
	Enhance women's contribution in the workforce from 22% to 30%.
	Advance the ranking from the current 19th largest economy in the world to the top 15.
	Enhance the level of localization in the oil and gas sectors from 40% to 75%.
	Grow Public Investment Fund's assets from SAR 600 billion to over SAR 7 trillion.
	To rise from our current position of 25 to the top 10 countries on the Global Competitiveness Index.
	To increase foreign direct investment from 3.8% to the international level of 5.7% of GDP.
	To raise the private sector's contribution from 40% to 65% of GDP.
	To raise our global ranking in the Logistics Performance Index from 49 to 25 and ensure the Kingdom is a regional leader.
	Increase the share of non-oil exports in non-oil GDP from 16% to 50%.
An ambitious nation	Increase non-oil income from an estimated SAR 163 billion to SAR 1 trillion.
	Improve rank in Government Effectiveness Index from 80 to 20.
	Improve our ranking in the E-Government Survey Index from 36 to among the top five in the world.
	Pumping up household savings: from 6% to 10% of total household income.
	Increase the non-profit sector's contribution to GDP from less than 1% to 5%.
	To mobilize one million volunteers a year, compared with 11,000 now

Moral behavior is essential for societal good and is learned over time. Empathy and social awareness are crucial for moral development. Islamic Studies, a subject, trains students to dedicate their actions and life to Allah and teaches discipline. It governs students' actions, decisions, and attitudes toward knowledge and life. Islamic education, also known as Religious Education, Islamic Education, or Islamic Studies, aims to promote competence in nurturing Islamic moral values for adult use.

Islamic Religious Education aims to teach students about Islamic teachings and promote tolerance, fostering good morals and character. It focuses on forming students who are faithful, pious, and noble, and guiding them in interacting with other religions. Teachers and schools play a crucial role in teaching, fostering, and shaping character and personality, ultimately transforming students into human beings with dignity.

During the last century, there were critiques thrown in the way of methodology regarding teaching and learning of Islamic Studies, particularly because of the failure to successfully respond to challenges brought by contemporary needs in this modern world. As a religion embraced by one-fifth of the world's population, there is a real need for Islamic studies to revamp its methodology and approach to ensure its continuous relevance and as a response to the demands exerted by globalization and presented by modernity (Ashaari et al., 2012).

The research questions focus on integrating Islamic courses into higher education and their alignment with Saudi Vision 2030. Islamic education encourages ethical values, critical thinking, and cultural identity for the all-round development of individuals (Hanif, 2024). It also encourages moderate interpretations that would be in tune with the call of Vision 2030 to create a more open and tolerant society (Alharbi and Alshammari, 2020). The potential of Islamic courses in improving educational quality thus needs to be explored (Junaedi et al., 2024).

The following are the research questions:

- How does the inclusion of Islamic Religious Teaching University programs improve educational quality?
- How does the integration of Islamic Religious Teaching in University programs support the goals outlined in Saudi Vision 2030?

2. Method

2.1. The search strategy

In line with PRISMA guidelines, this systematic review was carried out by extensively searching five databases: Google Scholar, Wiley, ScienceDirect, Taylor and Francis, and ProQuest.

Keywords and Boolean operators: To enhance the search for relevant studies, a combination of keywords along with Boolean operators was utilized. The same search term was applied consistently across all databases:

- ("Islamic Religious Teaching" OR "Islamic education" OR "inclusion of Islamic courses in university curricula") AND ("educational quality" OR "Saudi Vision 2030" OR "higher education reform") AND ("university programs" OR "curriculum development" OR "Islamic values").

There were no restrictions on the publication status or the length of the studies considered within the timeframe (2016–2025).

No restrictions were set regarding publication status or the duration of the study during the indicated period. The findings from the search were brought into RefWorks and MS Excel for evaluation and examination. As Fig. 1 depicts, review articles, case reports, theses/dissertations, and those that had no full-text online accessibility to the journal included in Google Scholar, Wiley, Science Direct, Taylor and Frances, and ProQuest.
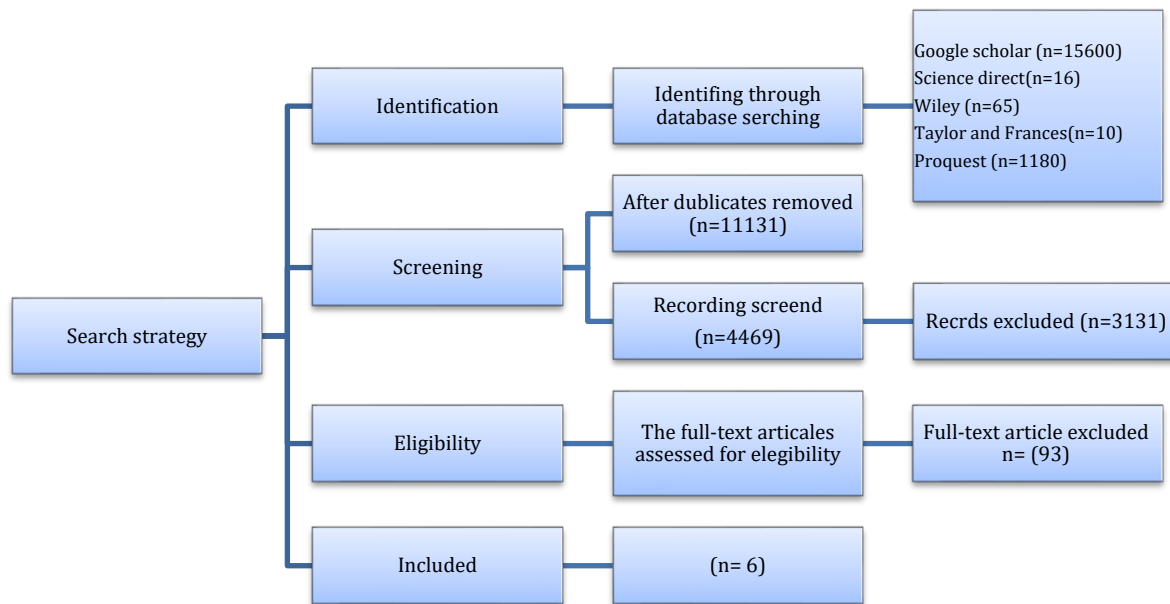

Fig. 1: Study flowchart

In an inclusion and exclusion process, screening titles and abstracts using the selection and rejection criteria shows which studies to drop or need further scanning of their whole document copies. Four individuals with independent abstraction capability have read their abstracts to minimize errors in the selection of papers as irrelevant and might have potentially valuable information. The four reviewers completely agreed on the excluded studies, indicating an effective screening process. The reviewers then scanned all the articles for applicability and compliance with the requirements.

2.2. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

To maintain significance and standards, the following standards were utilized:

- Inclusion criteria:

- Research published within peer-reviewed journals from 2016 to 2025.
- Papers composed in the English language.
- Research investigating how Islamic Religious Teaching is incorporated into university curricula and its effects on educational standards, or its connection to Saudi Vision 2030.

- Research conducted within Saudi Arabia or closely related to the higher education framework in Saudi Arabia.

- Exclusion criteria:

- Research not associated with university education (for instance, preschool, middle school, or secondary school).
- Publications that have not been peer-reviewed, like conference papers, theses, dissertations, or book sections.
- Research published before 2016, as it is prior to the start of Saudi Vision 2030.
- Research that is not accessible in full text or is in languages other than English.

2.3. Study selection

Using the keywords, 15600 studies were retrieved from the database. Inclusion standards were used to filter the search results. After excluding duplicate articles (11131 articles), the remaining 4469 articles were screened for the inclusion criteria. 3131 studies were excluded since the entire manuscript was written in a language other than English, but only the title and abstract were

available. The 1338 article's outcome moved to the next level of manuscript evaluation. 1201 were discarded because the articles did not include university programs, and another 1108 were excluded as the participants of the research did not involve the Saudi Vision. A total of 93 articles had to be discarded since the online full text was unavailable. Six articles met the inclusion and review criteria.

The selection of six studies comes from applying a strict set of inclusion and exclusion guidelines. Although this number is small, each study was chosen due to its strong methodology, its connection to the research questions, and its importance in exploring how Islamic Religious Teaching can improve educational quality and support Vision 2030 objectives.

Attempts were made to enlarge the sample size by broadening the search methods and adding more databases. However, the stringent criteria needed to achieve the research objectives resulted in a smaller but highly focused sample. Future evaluations might consider expanding their scope to include unpublished studies or materials that haven't undergone peer review if needed.

2.4. Quality appraisal

Every study was carefully examined with standardized instruments designed for evaluating both quantitative and qualitative studies. The tool used for quantitative research was the Evaluating Tool for Quantitative Research Studies, while qualitative studies were assessed with the Review Form for Qualitative Research. Only those studies that were classified as high-quality or moderate quality were considered in the final analysis.

2.5. Data extraction and synthesis

The data collection concentrated on three primary aspects: background, objectives, and results. The background included details about the study's location, its participants, and its overall reach, giving a solid picture of the research environment. The objectives outlined the study's intentions and the questions it aimed to answer, clarifying its purpose and focus. The results portrayed the main outcomes and their relevance to the quality of education and alignment with Vision 2030, underlining the practical implications of the study. The information gathered was then thematically analyzed to uncover common themes and important insights regarding the integration of Islamic Religious Teaching into university courses, ensuring a thorough examination of the subject.

3. Results

Studies about the inclusion of Islamic courses in universities across Saudi Arabia show that this has a major impact on educational quality and aligns with the goals of Saudi Vision 2030. A detailed thematic analysis of the selected research reveals important themes that highlight the intricate roles of Islamic Religious Teaching in university programs.

3.1. Thematic analysis

• Theme 1: Leadership and motivation

Alharthi (2023) explored the different leadership approaches at Taif University and found that Islamic leadership significantly enhances the motivation of faculty members. This suggests that incorporating Islamic principles can lead to an improved learning environment by encouraging teachers' internal drive. Similarly, Bunaiyan (2019) emphasized the importance of using straightforward language in policies that promote Islamic values to reach the objectives of Vision 2030, which looks to build an active society grounded in Islamic teachings. Both studies underline the importance of leadership and policies that embody Islamic principles to nurture a motivated and engaged academic environment (Table 2).

• Theme 2: Cultural awareness and inclusivity

Almubaddel (2020) investigated how important it is for university teachers to be culturally aware and highlighted the need for ongoing professional training to use these teaching styles. By integrating Islamic principles, a friendlier learning environment can be established that reflects the growing diversity in Saudi universities. Moreover, Mirghani (2020) investigated the challenges that come from applying Western educational systems without considering Islamic cultural values. He suggested that including Islamic principles could better support Vision 2030's objective of enhancing human capital. Altogether, these points emphasize the value of inclusivity and cultural awareness in improving education quality.

• Theme 3: Alignment of national values with curriculum development

In their assessment of the National Transformation Program 2020 and Vision 2030 in Saudi Arabia, Mitchell and Alfuraih (2018) highlighted that aligning teaching methods with Islamic principles is essential for meeting the nation's educational goals. By promoting approaches that reflect Islamic values, this alignment enhances the quality of education.

Meanwhile, Alanazi (2024) provided key recommendations for the Saudi government, which aims to become one of the top 200 universities in the world by 2030, focusing on improvements in higher education, the quality of the workforce, and community involvement. Both research efforts emphasize the necessity of creating curricula that incorporate Islamic values to fulfill the ambitions outlined in Vision 2030.

Table 2: The summary of the selected studies

Reference	Aims	Results
Alanazi (2024)	Providing strategic recommendations for the Saudi Arabian government to achieve the top 200 global universities by 2030, focusing on enhancing higher education, creating a quality workforce, and fostering a vibrant society.	The government of Saudi Arabia is encouraging high-quality research, building university reputation, and increasing transparency. Media attention and marketing are essential for promoting institutions' reputation, encouraging international students and faculty, and investing in equal opportunities for women in academia.
Alharthi (2023)	Exploring leadership styles and their impact on faculty members' motivation in the context of Islamic higher education at Taif University.	The current perceived leadership styles by the Taif University faculty members are Islamic, transformational, transactional, and passive avoidant. Islamic leadership had the most effect on the motivation of employees and intrinsic motivation among faculty members. Leaders at Taif University have attained high steps toward the 2030 vision educational goals, and an Islamic environment enhances faculty motivation if the principles of true Islamic leadership are followed.
Almubaddel (2020)	This study examines the concept of culturally responsive teaching among university faculty and its extent of cultural responsiveness.	The perception that Saudi Arabia is monocultural and monolingual; the need for professional development; the state of academic freedom; the relevancy of the curriculum; the impact of technology, mass media, and social media; and the trivialization and celebration of culture. This research provides the Saudi Ministry of Education and educators with data about the likelihood of and requirement for culturally responsive teaching to be implemented in teacher preparation programs and professional development. This creates a better learning environment for the growing diversity.
Mirghani (2020)	Focusing on human capital investment. This plan includes reforms in primary and secondary education to prepare students for higher education and the workplace. However, factors like cultural dimensions, learning profiles, English language proficiency gaps, and borrowing educational models from the West may hinder successful implementation.	The KSA faces challenges in investing in human capital for successful results due to borrowing Western educational models from private schools and universities, low performance benchmarking, and cultural dimensions such as power distance and individualism, which negatively impact student learning.
Bunaiyan (2019)	Analyzing educational policies in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, learning from Bahrain's system, and applying lessons.	There is a need for clarity and specificity of policy language, especially regarding the infusion of Islamic values and principles, more emphasis on language instruction in its entirety, and stringent guidelines on integrating the application of feedback and support for instructors within the Saudi Arabian educational system
Mitchell and Alfuraih (2018)	Focusing on the Saudi Arabian National Transformation Program 2020 and Saudi Vision 2030 through document analysis to identify associated curriculum orientations in these documents, to establish what, and how, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia seeks to achieve, and how it envisages achieving such aspirations through education development.	The analysis indicated that the goals and aspirations of the Kingdom have increasingly become better articulated, focusing on ensuring that alignment between national education goals and economic development is well aligned, while the practices are consistent with Islamic values.

3.2. Comparative examination

An analysis of the chosen research reveals both similarities and differences in their findings. Alharthi (2023) and Bunaiyan (2019) both underlined the importance of leadership and adherence to Islamic principles, but they focus on different aspects—faculty motivation and the specifics of policy, respectively. In a similar vein, Almubaddel (2020) and Mirghani (2020) explored cultural awareness; however, Almubaddel (2020) highlighted professional development, while Mirghani (2020) focused on the difficulties of applying Western educational frameworks without considering Islamic cultural contexts.

Moreover, both Mitchell and Alfuraih (2018) and Alanazi (2024) examined how educational methods should reflect national principles, yet they tackle this concern from different angles—emphasizing curriculum development and strategic recommendations, respectively. These distinctions enhance the understanding of the various factors at play in integrating Islamic Religious Teaching within university curricula and how it impacts education quality and Vision 2030.

In conclusion, the selected studies illustrate that the incorporation of Islamic courses in university programs may improve educational quality and further the goals outlined in Saudi Vision 2030. However, a deeper examination of themes and a comparative method reveals complex factors such as motivation, cultural sensitivity, and curriculum alignment that must be considered to fully realize these benefits.

4. Discussions

Incorporating Islamic courses into university programs in Saudi Arabia has proven to enhance the quality of education and support the goals outlined in Saudi Vision 2030. Research shows that the integration of Islamic values creates a more inclusive and effective learning environment, motivates faculty members, and aligns teaching strategies with the nation's beliefs. For instance, Alharthi (2023) noted that the Islamic leadership styles implemented at Taif University significantly increased faculty enthusiasm; therefore, this addition can have a favorable impact on educational settings. Additionally, Almubaddel (2020) emphasized the importance of culturally relevant teaching in Saudi higher education; thus, including Islamic values can enhance the inclusivity and effectiveness of the educational experience.

Furthermore, basing education on Islamic principles helps achieve the country's educational goals, resulting in improved quality. According to Mitchell and Alfuraih (2018), aligning education with Islamic principles raises its standards, as educational strategies will be consistent with these values. This alignment also contributes to fulfilling Vision 2030 by nurturing a society that mirrors Islamic teachings. Bunaiyan (2019) highlighted the necessity for well-defined plans to integrate these values, which

support Vision 2030's aim of building a vibrant community rooted in Islamic ideals.

4.1. Challenges in implementing Islamic education reforms

Despite these promising benefits, there are several challenges to implementing reforms in Islamic education in Saudi Arabia. A key issue is the resistance to change, particularly from conservative groups who may perceive these reforms as a danger to traditional Islamic teachings. The government needs to navigate this opposition carefully to gain broader acceptance of the reforms. Another important challenge is the lack of adequate resources, such as funding, modern curricula, and teachers who can effectively integrate Islamic values into contemporary educational practices.

Additionally, achieving a balance between traditional aspects and modern educational needs poses another difficulty. As Mirghani (2020) pointed out, employing Western educational models without considering Islamic cultural dimensions can hinder successful implementation. Therefore, a balanced approach is crucial to attain desired outcomes while including Islamic courses and embracing positive aspects of Western education systems.

4.2. Comparison with other countries

Examining how Saudi Arabia's strategy differs from that of other nations highlights both unique methods and common challenges. For instance, Malaysia has similarly incorporated Islamic education into its higher learning system, utilizing a dual-track system that offers Islamic studies alongside secular subjects. This strategy intends to produce graduates versed in both religious and secular knowledge, thus fostering a well-rounded education.

In a comparable way, Indonesia, the country with the largest Muslim population globally, integrates Islamic values into its national curriculum while allowing adjustments for local cultural traditions. This flexibility helps minimize resistance and encourages broader acceptance of the educational framework (Ashaari et al., 2012). Turkey follows a distinct route in its education system by making Islamic studies optional, with a more considerable emphasis on history and culture rather than religious practices. This approach reflects Turkey's specific historical context and its effort to balance secular principles with religious traditions (Hanif, 2024).

Saudi Arabia could learn from these examples by creating an integration strategy that is more flexible, honors local variations, and combines traditional practices with modern educational needs. Engaging different parties, such as religious figures, educators, and policymakers, in the reform efforts can aid in reducing opposition and enhancing the effectiveness of changes in Islamic education. By addressing these challenges and adopting insights from other countries, Saudi Arabia can enhance its educational reforms and better align them with the aspirations of Vision 2030.

5. Conclusion

Six papers were selected for this systematic review based on our inclusion and exclusion criteria. The mean age of the sample of students in the chosen study was university. Meanwhile, making the quality richer and in accordance with the Saudi Vision 2030. These would also involve the inclusion of Islamic values within the educational setup that could involve value-oriented, inclusive, and competitive at the international level. Key recommendations include framing a national plan for integrating Islamic culture into education, training specialized teachers for the same, and clarity in the educational policy regarding the infusion of Islamic values. With these measures in place, Saudi Arabia will be well on the path to assuring quality in higher education and achieving the ambitious goals outlined in Vision 2030.

6. Implications

The integration of Islamic courses into Saudi university programs has several important implications, both for the educational landscape and for the wider ambitions of Saudi Vision 2030.

- Quality improvement in education: The Islamic element in the higher education curriculum will make university education more holistic in nature. This will help students develop critical thinking develop ethical reasoning, and cultural awareness, and raise the quality of education.
- Alignment to the objectives of Vision 2030: Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 aimed at economic diversification away from dependency on oil through creating a knowledge society. Incorporation of Islamic education into this perspective helps achieve such a vision in which modernization is pegged on the cultural and religious beliefs and hence furthers social cohesiveness and national identity. This makes the attainment of the strategic objectives of Vision 2030 easier.
- Policy implementation and curriculum development: Integration at this level requires an in-depth review and development of the curriculum in such a way that Islamic values are appropriately integrated within disciplines. This shall involve educational policy framers, curriculum developers, and religious scholars in drafting a unified education framework befitting Islamic values yet meeting the demands for modern-day education standards.
- Teachers/professional developmental training: Teachers contribute a great deal to this integration process. Therefore, special training programs are required for their proper arming with skills and knowledge regarding interlinking Islamic values

with modern practice in education. The reason for these professional development training programs is to facilitate the attainment of goals set by Vision 2030 in a very friendly learning environment.

- Challenges and considerations: While there are several benefits associated with integration, there are also challenges that include resistance to change, a requirement for adequate resources, and the need to balance between traditional values and modern demands for education. These best practices involve strategic planning, stakeholder involvement, and continuous evaluation for the successful implementation of integrated Islamic education within university programs.
- The integration of Islamic courses into Saudi university programs will go a long way in enhancing educational quality to support the strategic objectives of Saudi Vision 2030. This is because such value-based and inclusive education will eventually contribute to building a knowledgeable, ethically grounded society in Saudi Arabia to meet the challenges of the future.

Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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