

The Role of Educational Institutions in Reducing Extremism and Promoting Religious Tolerance in Pakistan

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Abstract

Religious extremism remains a significant challenge in Pakistan, and it is fueled by intolerance, sectarian divides and misinformation. Educational institutions hold a powerful position in shaping the beliefs, values, and attitudes of future generations. HEC recent initiative to enhance spiritual learning and to combat extremist mindsets through authentic and value driven interpretation of religion. This article examines how educational institutions play a crucial role in forming the minds and attitudes of young individuals and can act as powerful tool in countering religious extremism and promoting religious tolerance in Pakistan. One of the central highlights of the article is the Higher Education Commission's (HEC) recent initiative to introduce a two-credit-hour course titled "Fehm-ul-Quran" starting in Fall 2025 at both undergraduate and graduate levels. This course aims to instill Quranic values such as honesty, justice, tolerance, and social responsibility, aligning with national efforts to curb extremism through value-based education. The study emphasizes the importance of curriculum reform, teacher training, interfaith engagement, and active student involvement as key strategies to promote religious harmony and critical thinking.

Keywords: Educational Institution, Reforms, Religion, Extremism, Intolerance, Sectarianism

Introduction

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Religious extremism remains one of the most pressing challenges in Pakistan, often fueled by intolerance, sectarian divides, and the misuse of religious narratives. In this context, educational institutions hold immense potential to play significant role in shaping youth attitude toward peace combating extremism in society and fostering and religious tolerance especially in Pakistan where religious diversity is on peak exploitation of religion on every level even politician also manipulate religion to get their own interest.

Countering extremism ideology, national counter extremism policy 2014, focus to counter radicalization. The government of Pakistan took initiative to eliminate extremism and more recently the federal cabinet approved ah comprehensive interfaith harmony policy and strategy on religious tolerance on 12 February 2025, because of these policy, the higher education Commission (HEC) has introduced Fehm-e-Quran which is mandatory course and implement All in all Pakistan public and private university from 2025 fall semester for both Undergraduates and graduate students. Designed to instill Quranic values such as honesty, justice, tolerance, and social responsibility, this course reflects national efforts to integrate value-based education into higher learning (Javed, 2022).

This article explores how much these Islamic educational courses like Hadith and Seerah, professional ethics, Quranic teaching and Islamic studies has students to develop an understanding of peace tolerance. religious diversity and manipulation of religion. Religion and politics have a very complex relation both are in different nature in contexts have value and morality. Politics provides a stable society for human beings while religion gives a guideline on how to live in this society. In Pakistan society religion is used to manipulate the people and unfortunately, it's used to misguide people and get their own interests. With time this problem it's weekend social bonding and inflexibility among the people (Neelum & Faiza, 2024).

Researchers use both qualitative and quantitative research method including survey and questionnaires conduct among Riphah International University, Islamabad and Rawalpindi campuses, male and female students who had completed life and living courses and Islamic studies teachers from different universities regarding the upcoming Fehm-e- Quran initiative and their teaching methodology to shape student attitude the word extremism, interfaith harmony and tolerance.

In this study researcher will focus on government initiatives to eliminate extremism an intolerance in Pakistan society and how education institution is playing important role to achieve their goals. My focus institution would be Riphah

International University Islamabad. And seek to understand how these Islamic education courses help and influence student to change their perspective and knowledge about peace tolerance coexistence religious diversity and interfaith harmony.

Literature Review

Sadia Nasir in her working paper ‘Role of Education Institution in countering extremist Narrative in Pakistan’ has focused on in Pakistan education. Education institution can be foundation of counter extremism narrative building. The major question raised by the researcher is how education influences extremism and then how we can use education as a tool to create positive ideas that reduce extremism. And promote alternative values like tolerance, peace, inclusivity and critical thinking. Instead of focusing on divisions or negativity, we should promote a positive story about our society. This story should celebrate our traditions, festivals, history, languages, and ethnic groups, while also respecting the differences in religion and culture. In short, it’s about showing unity and strength through our diversity. (Sadia, 2020).

Hussain Mohi-ud-Din has focused on his work about multiple challenges which Pakistan faces because of human security as well as the local, regional and global environment. Some of these challenges increase intolerance, extremism, terrorism and militancy in both urban and rural areas. He also mentioned in his article ‘education and combating violent extremism: a case study of school’ that ethnicity sectarianism economic instability is factor implicated in Pakistan internal security collapse. Religious sectarianism and national identity division among Pakistan majority population have been key issues for the country’s society (Qadri, 2015).

In 2015 Basit mention it in ‘Countering terrorism violent appraising counter radicalization and the radicalization effort’ that in 2013 the National Assembly of Pakistan enacted a bill titled national counter terrorism authority Act, making (NACTA) National Counter Terrorism Authority as a autonomous body to coordinate national counter terrorism efforts. (Basit, 2015).

Javed, Elahi and Nawab elaborate in his article that individuals and communities were affected by radicalization. It' is increasing violence and social unrest and terrorism in society. National security threatened by radicalized people, who become isolated in society and engage in extremist activities. This also increases division in society. From several decades, extremism and radicalization become a significant

issue in Pakistan and it's posing a threat to national security. Geopolitical dynamics, regional conflict and social and political grievances are factors which contributes to increase extremism in Pakistan. (Javed *et al.* 2025)

Thomas K. Samuel elaborate in his book 'At the Crossroads: Rethinking the Role of Education in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism' that Education has described as a moral enterprise that has ability to shape the character thinking and value of people in society. Education can be used as a tool to reduce and reverse violent extremism among the youth. For this Universities and schools, I've become very important places to apply prevention measures and encounter extremism strategies. (Samuel, 2021)

Anwar Saepul in his research paper "Tolerance education through Islamic religious education in Indonesia that social conflicts are getting increase almost in every country around the world even in Indonesia. To take these social issues government of Indonesia passed law of social conflict management NO.7, 2012. This policy bases on the regulation to keep peace in society and prevent social issues. Author also focus on the importance of Islamic religious education in school and universities to bring tolerance in Indonesian society. (Anwar, 2016)

Methodology

In this study we will rely on primary and secondary data. Primary sources consist of survey and statements from the religious scholar and government representative. The resource is taken from the most current literature. This piece of work is qualitative and quantitative research in nature, and the methodology that has been used is descriptive and analytical. Different government initiatives to minimize extremism in Pakistan's society using education institution. This study will help to understand the way governments through Higher Education Commission (HEC), took initiative to start those programs on university level which minimize extremism and inflexibility in society. The data collection has been done with the help of number of books and e-books, articles by various prominent Pakistani and foreign authors, newspapers, journals, survey and questionnaires.

Discussion

Religion and politics have a very complex relation where the pivoting point is idea of power. Both are different in nature in context of values and morality. Politics provides a stable society to human beings while religion provides nurture for the spirit.

Here it is worth mentioning that religion provides moral value to perform political behaviors on certain principles too.

National Counter Extremism Policy (2014)

The national counter extremist policy (NCEP) was Pakistan's first comprehensive strategy to confront extremism and just that was not just focus on terrorism. This policy was grafted under the national counterterrorism authority (NACTA), this policy focused on following points:

- **Identifying root causes:** Its explores main causes which fuel extremism in Pakistan.
- **Propose reforms:** Propose different reforms in governance and education systems and education system covering public schools, madrasas and coordination among them and reconciliation effort and culture connectivity.
- **Shifts beyond forces:** NCEP focuses on promoting trust in the state in empowering upright governance and culture connectivity to counter extremist's descriptions. (THE EXPRESS Tribune)

Table 1: *Ncep 2014 -Education Dimension*

Policy Element	Explanation
Curriculum Reform	To avoid conflicting narratives, align school universities college and mothership
Critical Thinking	About whatever to reduce blind acceptance of extremist ideas they promote analytical skills.
Tolerance	To promote religious harmony and respect for diversity in society.
Engagement of Youth	For dialogues culture exchange and peace initiatives they involve universities students.

NCEP (2014) Vision to tackle extremism through culture governance and education implemented by HEC reforms in the universities level by integrating value base, tolerance and critical education, making university our frontline defense against extremism in Pakistan.

“Interfaith harmony” and strategy on “religious tolerance” policy have passed by the federal cabinet of Pakistan on 12 February 2025 this policy made him was to build religious tolerance in Pakistan by promoting mutual understanding enhance social integration interfaith harmony tolerance among diversity and safeguarding religious freedom and bring equal possibilities for all people irrespective of their greed, religion. Gender and social economic standing. (Report, 2025) To implement this policy, government had decided to use educational institutions for religious education about tolerance, peace, harmony and religious diversity. (Nasir, 2020)

Interfaith harmony and strategy on religious tolerance policy report to mention chronic teaching regarding religious freedom and interfaith harmony.

Quranic Teachings Regarding on Interfaith Harmony Religious Freedom

The Qur'an, as the last word from Allah promotes an interfaith commonwealth, which Muslims firmly believe in. The following verses from the Qur'anic offer precise counsel on interfaith harmony and religious freedom:

- If Allah so willed, He would have made you one nation (united in religion), but His plan is to test each of you separately, in what He has given to each of you: so strive in all virtues as if you are in a race. The goal of all of you is to Allah. It is He that will show you the truth of the matters in which you used to differ [Surah Al-Ma'idah verse 48]
- And say, “The truth is from your Lord, so whoever wills – let him believe; and whoever wills – let him disbelieve” [Surah Al-Kahf 18:29]
- And do not insult those they invoke other than Allah, lest they insult Allah in enmity without knowledge. Thus, We have made pleasing to every community their deeds. Then to their Lord is their return and He will inform them about what they used to do. [Surah Al-An'am, 6:108]
- Mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise (each other)). Verily the most honored of you in the sight of Allah is (he who is) the most righteous of you. And Allah has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things). [Surah Al-Hujurat, 49.13]

Strategic Objectives and Goals

The objectives of this policy are as follows:

- **Improve Public Knowledge:**

In line with Pakistan obligation under pertinent international treaties and their declarations as well as the safeguard contained the country's constitution and legislation, raise knowledge of the religious freedom for all Pakistani citizens.

- **Ensure Interfaith Conversation:**

Establish efficient procedures for addressing and promptly resolving interfaith and intersectional concerns by starting organized interfaith discussions in cooperation with local communities, religious leaders, and district interfaith harmony committees.

- **Create Monitoring Systems:**

Worked together with the pertinent federal ministries, provincial agencies and organizations to set up procedures for keeping an eye on and dealing with publications, hate speech and incendiary content that could spark religious strife and disturb social harmony. (Report, 2025)

Situation Analysis and Challenges:

Religious minorities are an essential part of Pakistani society, which is predominantly Muslims. Further, Pakistan is the target of international criticism for religious extremism and intolerance have been connected to the political, social, or communal isolation and suffering. Throughout Pakistan history the use of religion as a political tool has been important. Religious regulations like the Hudood ordinance, blasphemy law and the idea like jihad have all been employed for political ends by a number of government and political groups. Gaining public support, destroying opponents and overcoming both internal and external impediments have all been the objectives of the theological manipulations.

In order to promote religious freedom and interfaith harmony it is imperative that an integrated policy environment, institutional coordination and operational networking be established. Reforms can promote tolerance, critical thinking and a deeper comprehension of various theological viewpoints. Education is crucial in forming cultural ideals. In curricula, the government need to be encourage religious tolerance, incorporating into school curricula lessons about tolerance, respect for all religions and knowledge of the various Islamic sects and other faiths. This would lessen the use of religion are sectarian or political end and teach students the value of harmony. (Neelum & Faiza, 2024)

Higher Education Commission (Hec) Initiatives

Pakistan’s Higher Education Commission (HEC) introduce a mandatory course which name is Fehm e Quran,it would be a practical oriented two- credit- hour. This course offer for all undergraduates and graduate programs students all over Pakistan, this program starting from the Fall 2025 semester. The aims of this course to enhance the intellectual and ethical Foundation of students and promote a inclusive understanding of Quran within the higher education system. The National Academy of higher education (NAHE) is conducting orientation workshop for all Islamic faculty members in private or public universities all over Pakistan to equip them to teach this new course. (HEC, 2025)

Table 2: Highter Education Commission (Hec) Education Reforms

Reform	Objective	Significance to Countering Extremism
Fehm-ul-Quran Course (2025)	Teach Qurani Values for example honesty, justice, social responsibility and tolerance.	Provides an authentic religious counter-narrative against extremist misuse of religion.
Life& Living, Ethics, Family Life in 21 Century, Hadees and seerah (existing courses)	Promote social responsibility and respect for diversity.	Youth understanding against extremist propaganda.
Curriculum review (Pakistan study and Islamic studies)	Update curriculum to promote interfaith understanding, pluralism and critical thinking.	Reduces sectarian biases.
Faculty development and training	Train teachers to deliver balanced, ethical education and tolerant.	Ensure educators do not unintentionally emphasize extremist ideas.

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Specialized Teacher Training

The effectiveness of the Quran course depends heavily on the capacity of educators. Institutions must invest in specialized training programs to ensure teachers convey the teachings of the Quran through the lens of peace, pluralism, and ethical responsibility.

Dr. Ubaid ur Rahman, Principal, Institute of Arabic Language, acted as a program,s resource person. The program was attended by Arabic and Islamic Studies professors, lecturer from both public and private universities in Rawalpindi and Islamabad. The program was created to improve teacher teaching strategies, content knowledge, and evaluation abilities so they could provide effective Quranic instruction at the university level. (Centreline, 2025)

Media Literacy Education

To avoid extremism in Pakistan society, HEC also started to conduct different workshop in which they focused to give media literacy education to all faculty member students and administrative staff. We live in digital age where social media is used for both combating and promoting extremism. Students should be equipped with media literacy skills to critically analyze and reject misinformation and hate speech often found on digital platforms that incite extremism.

During these workshops they also shared different websites and link which would be use to get know and video and pictures share on social media and electronic media authenticity. Like TINEYE can be use to get know whether picture is real or fake. INVID use to get know authenticity of videos. Google factcheck, Soch app and FactCheck Hub are other tool to get know about fake and real news. As a educator, students and responsible citizens have responsibility after getting any news and video, making sure about its authenticity then share.

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Government of Pakistan also adopted rules to prevent sectarian literature and hate material through several measures. Pakistan telecommunication authority and Pakistan electronic media regulatory authority also monitoring and regulating electronic complete media content to ensure no hate speech and sectarian propaganda and religious intolerance is promoted. National counterterrorism authority and Ministry of Interior also establish complaint and reporting mechanism. This mechanism responds to hate material. Government also promotes public awareness campaign and educational programs there's highlight religious tolerance and interfaith harmony to reduce the impact and spread of sectarian content. (Javed et al. 2025)

Results

This section represents the results of the data collected from 263 Students and 20 Islamic Studies teachers' participants.

Descriptive Statistics

For this studies researcher conduct survey from Riphah international university Islamabad and Rawalpindi campuses students about life and living courses which students must take throughout their degree program Through this survey participants response how life and living courses effect or helpful to change their view about people from different religion or sectarian background, promote peace, tolerance and coexistence, helped them to differentiate between authentic religious teaching and and extremist interpretations, made them more respectful towards people with different beliefs or opinions and trained to handle topics like extremism, tolerance or religious diversity.

One of the important initiatives made to accomplish this goal was to make introduction of life and living a required course for university graduates in all academic areas (graduates and undergraduates). Student gain and understanding of Islamic principles and practice via life and living, especially in the light of global world ethical dilemmas. It exposes them directly to the global moral principles and implication of Quran and Sunnah, in addition to educating them about Islamic Akhlaq in its broader context.

The main goals of life and living courses are as follows:

- To develop a balanced, dynamic, and wholesome personality of students
- To create moral Muslim professionals

- To acquaint the pupils with the core principles of Islam and the issues facing the modern world.
- Introducing students to Pakistan ideological underpinnings.
- Preparing them for a meaningful and healthy lifestyle. (riphah.edu.pk)

Life and living offer six courses which are

1. Islami studies
2. Pakistan studies
3. Basic teaching of Quran
4. Hadees and seerah
5. Professional ethics
6. family life in 21st century

Figure 1: *Students Responses About Courses Promote Peace, Tolerance and Coexistence*

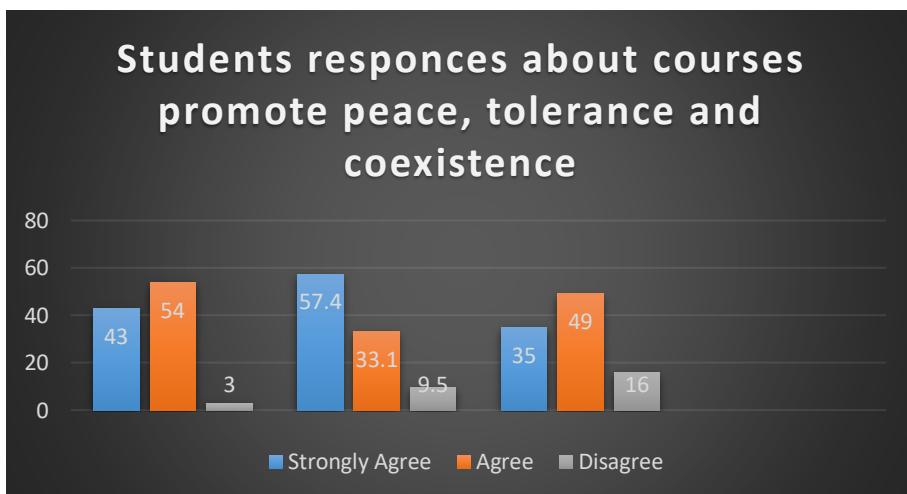


Figure 1 illustrate student response how much life and living Islamic studies courses change their behavior and perception about diversity, extremism and religious differences, 97% students believe that these courses promote tolerance, coexistence and peace, only 3% students believe course don't promote harmony in them. Survey shows almost all students of Riphah International University Islamabad campuses take life and living courses throughout their bachelor's degree.

Figure 2: *Students' Responses Regarding Their Views after Completing Islamic Teaching Courses*

To what extent have these courses changed your views about people from different religious or sectarian backgrounds?
263 responses

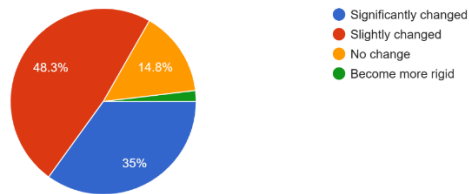


Figure 2 illustrates how much these courses change their view about people from different religion and sectarian background? 35% of students believe their view have changed about people from different religious and sectarian backgrounds, 48% students believe their view have slightly changed and for 15% students said there is no change they have noticed after taking these courses.

Figure 3: *Students' Responses on Classroom Discussions about Extremism, Religious Tolerance, and Social Conflict*

How often do your course instructors discuss issues of extremism, religious intolerance, or social conflict in class?
263 responses

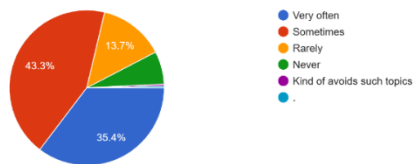


Figure 3 shows that 35% of respondents agreed that teachers often discussed issues of extremism, religious intolerance and social conflict during class. 43.3 % stated sometime teacher use these issues and 22% reported that teachers never use these issues during lectures.

Figure 4: *Subjects Promoting Respect for Different Beliefs and Opinions*

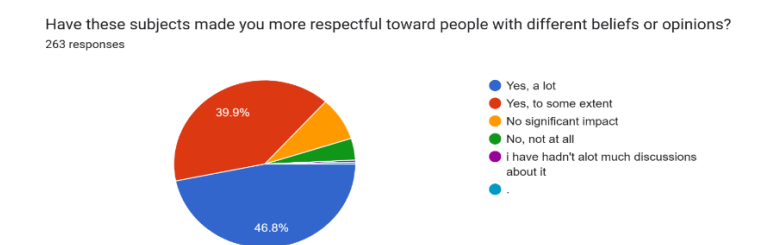


Figure 4 illustrates 47 % students said they agreed that these subjects change their view and they become more respectful towards people with different beliefs or opinions.40% respondent believe to some extent and 13 % disagreed with this.

Figure 5: *Teachers' Training for Addressing Extremism, Tolerance, and Religious Diversity*

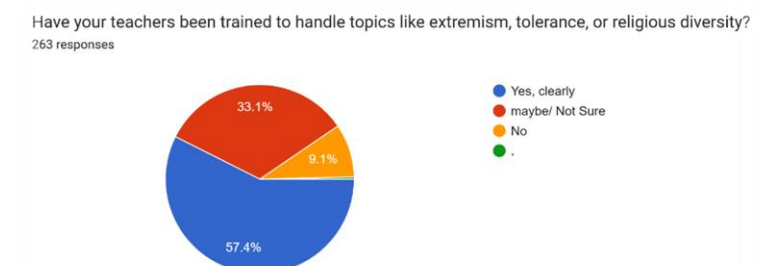


Figure 5 presents what students think about their teacher either they trained to handle topics like religious diversity and tolerance? 57 % said teachers have clarity about these concepts, 33% were unsure about teachers being trained to handle these topics. 10% said teachers are not trained to handle this.

Figure 6: *Students Participation in Any Discussion in Class Related to Intertfaith Harmony*

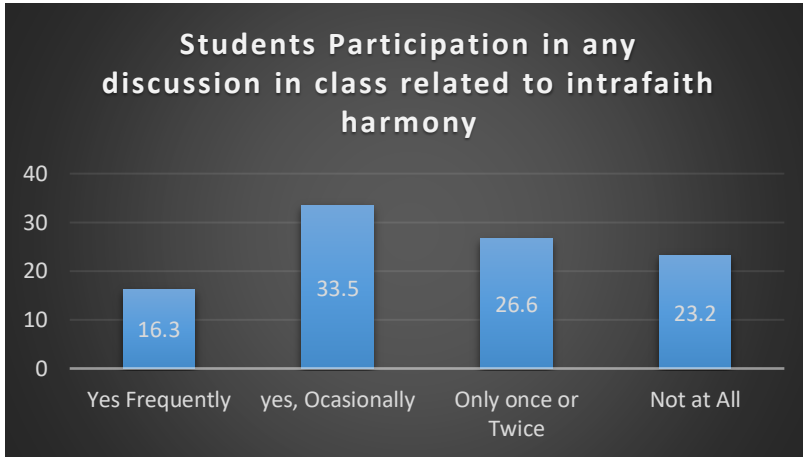


Figure 6 presents that 16% students frequently participate in any discussion in class related to interfaith harmony, 34% participated occasionally, 27% participate hardly only one time and 22 % have not participated in discussion or activities related to interfaith harmony.

The survey result so significance role in shaping these Islamic education courses such as life and living is playing significance role in shaping students mindset and give them clarity about peace, tolerance and diversity in society and interfaith harmony and supporting previous research that highlight to eliminate extremism government should focus on value base education. In this regard HEC started Fehm e Quran on Universities level would play significant role in shaping youth development and awareness about Quran and its messge because in this course students will read Quran in this way so they able to understand Quran translations. This practice minimizes exploitation and manipulation of religion in Pakistan.

In this section teacher responses showed, how much they are aware of HEC Fehm e- Quran course which started on universities level from Fall2025 semester, their training and methodology.

Figure 7: *Sampled Universities and Key Research Dimensions of Interfaith Harmony and Peace Education*

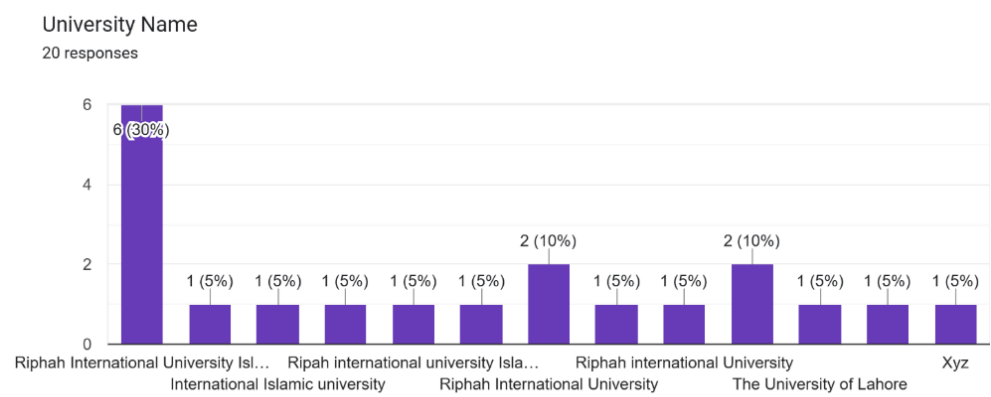


Figure 7 shows the Universities name where researchers collected data, covering various aspects related to tolerance interfaith dialogue curriculum content peace extracurricular activities and awareness of the Higher Education Commission (HEC) understanding of Quran family Quran course. The total number of responses teacher responses is 20 for each question.

Figure 8: *Teachers' responses on Interfaith Dialogue, Peace Education, and Religious Tolerance Practices*

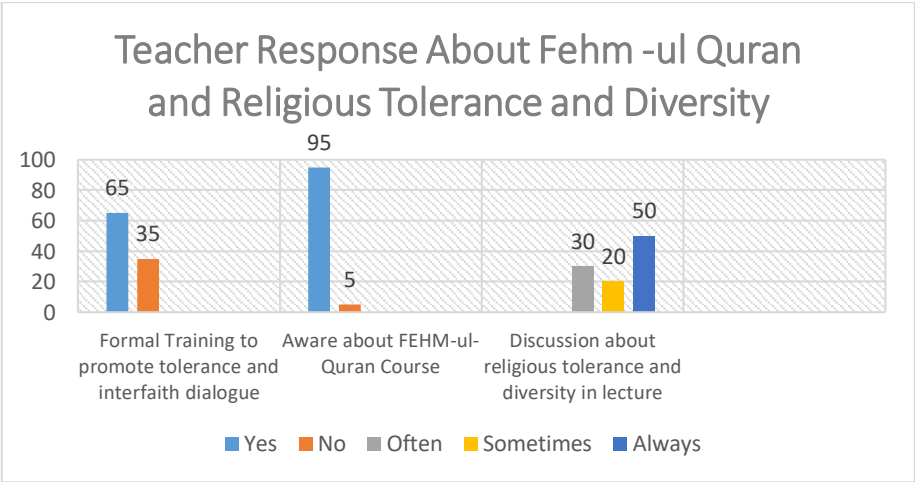


Figure 8 illustrate that university teacher of Islamic studies responses about formal training to promote tolerance peace and interfaith dialogues, awareness about formal Quran course and I did teacher discuss religious tolerance diversity in peace in their lecture. Data shows 65 teacher got formal training to promote peace tolerance and interfaith dialogues 35 percent of teachers didn't get such kind of formal training. Data also shows 95% Islamic studies teacher aware about new initiative to start Fehm-ul Quran course on university level. These tables also illustrate that that 50% of teachers always include discussion on religious tolerance, peace and diversity in society in the lecture.

Figure 9: *Teachers' Perceptions of Curriculum in Promoting Religious Tolerance and Interfaith Harmony*

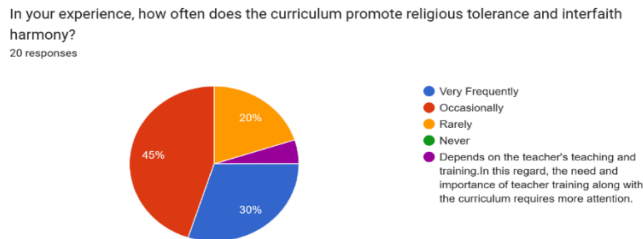


Figure 9 illustrates what teacher think about how much curriculum promote religious tolerance and interfaith harmony according to this survey 30% teacher believe that curriculum promote interfaith harmony and religious tolerance, 45% responses at it's occasionally promote peace and tolerance, 20% feel the curriculum rarely promote these aspects and 5 % Teacher response it's dependent on the teacher's teaching and training in this regard the need and importance of teacher training along with the curriculum require more attention.

Figure 10: *Interfaith Activities under Curricular and Co-Curricular Programs*

Are co-curricular or extra-curricular activities (like interfaith dialogues or seminars) organized in your institution to promote religious harmony?
20 responses

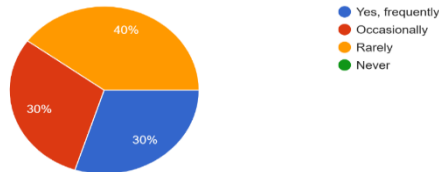


Figure 10 illustrates teacher responses about how frequently their institute organize interfaith dialogues or seminar under curriculum or extra curriculum activities, responsive shows 60% teacher report that their organization organized interfaith dialogues and seminar to promote religious harmony and tolerance and 40% teachers said that there is no such kind of activities organized in their institution.

Conclusion

Extremism has remained a serious challenge for Pakistan for the past two decades. The rise of intolerance in society has not only harmed the country's internal peace but also damaged its international image. Incidents of sectarian violence, hate speech, and discrimination have created divisions within communities, making it harder to build a culture of harmony. One major factor behind this situation is the misuse of religion by extremist groups, which exploit emotional sentiments of the youth. Educational institutions play a key role here because universities and colleges are directly connected with the younger generation. If students are not guided properly, extremist ideologies can find space in their minds. Research shows that intolerance at the societal level leads to polarization, violence, and weak democratic values. For Pakistan, where religion is a central part of social life, the challenge is to present authentic teachings of Islam beliefs that prioritize peace, tolerance, and respect for diversity. The government has also recognized this challenge. In 2014, Pakistan introduced the National Action Plan after the tragic APS Peshawar attack. One of its important points was the regulation of madrassahs and curriculum reforms to counter hate material. NAP also stressed the role of media and education in discouraging extremism. However, the implementation of these policies has been inconsistent. While security operations reduced militant violence, the ideological battle against extremism still needs more attention, especially in the education sector. HEC's

initiatives like Fehm-ul-Quran and Life & Living courses are an attempt to fill this gap by promoting an academic understanding of Islam and citizenship values. Still, challenges remain, such as lack of trained teachers, political influence, and resistance from conservative groups. This shows that reducing extremism in Pakistan is not only a security issue but also an educational and cultural challenge. A more holistic and long-term approach is required, where universities act as centers of peacebuilding and critical thinking. Effecting implementation of Fehm e Quran course have potential to eliminate intolerance and train future generation to embrace peaceful coexistence in Pakistan. The survey result suggests that Islamic religious education has a positive and meaningful impact on students. The area on which we have to focus that is teachers training to discuss these topics like peace, tolerance, religious diversity and critical thinking about extremism in class and organize dialogues and seminars about interfaith harmony and religious diversity in Pakistan.

Recommendations

1. Encourage students to lead awareness campaigns, debates, research, and community outreach programs focused on religious tolerance, social justice, and peaceful coexistence. This course will encourage critical reflection and strengthen ethical grounding because its focus on Quranic values like compassion, social equity, justice and civic responsibilities within modern context. Thematic and contextual Quranic studies emphasize analytical thinking rather than routine memorization.
2. Establish centers within institutions that provide counseling, character-building guidance, and support for students dealing with ideological confusion or exposure to radical content.
3. We should focus on research and policy development and promote academic research on religious tolerance, historical pluralism in Islamic tradition, and the psychological roots of extremism to inform future education policies.
4. Universities should organize interfaith seminars, discussion forums, and academic exchanges to promote mutual understanding between different religious and sectarian communities.
5. HEC should conduct extensive training program for teachers about curriculum reform, interfaith engagement so teachers play their role properly to train students to give Islamic knowledge about peace, tolerance, religious diversity and harmony. Our survey cleared this thing that teachers occasionally discuss these topics in class. 40% of teachers said that there is no interfaith dialogues and seminars to promote religious harmony and

tolerance of activities organized in their institution. Active student participation are essential strategies to nurture inclusivity, strengthen social cohesion, and build a peaceful society.

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