

Institution: SOAS
Unit of Assessment: 21 Politics and International Studies
Title of case study: The Politics of Religious Education in Pakistan and Bangladesh: Promoting a Better Understanding [text removed for publication] among Policy Makers and Analysts (Matthew Nelson)
<p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>Dr Matthew Nelson's research challenges superficial accounts of the relationship between religious education and political violence in Pakistan and Bangladesh. Rooted in extensive fieldwork, in-country interviews and a careful study of religious/non-religious, elite/non-elite, primary/secondary education, as well as extracurricular religious groups targeting upwardly mobile university students, Nelson debunks numerous myths regarding the sources of 'religious extremism' in South Asia. His research shows how religious ideas and political action (both peaceful and violent) are related, underpinning advice to governments and other organisations concerned with countering Islamic radicalisation through educational reform and targeted allocations of development aid.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>Matthew Nelson is a Reader in the Department of Politics at SOAS, where he has taught since 2006, and is a founding member of the Centre for the Study of Pakistan, the Centre for Comparative Political Thought, and the Centre for the International Politics of Conflict, Rights, and Justice. Prior to joining SOAS, he held faculty positions at UC Santa Cruz, Bates College, and Yale University. Nelson's research focuses on Islam and politics in South Asia, focusing primarily on the politics of Islamic law and Islamic education, particularly in Pakistan and Bangladesh. He has spent several years conducting archival, ethnographic, and survey-based research in both countries.</p> <p>Nelson's research on education in Pakistan and Bangladesh employs innovative surveys to document 'part-time' enrolments that include both religious training in public or private-sector schools and, simultaneously, educational engagements with the religious scholars (ulema) based in local madrasas (educational institutions for the study of Islam). This approach goes well beyond the crude enrolment data used by government officials in South Asia and multilateral donors like the World Bank (outputs a, c, e, and f). He also works with university students to document the extracurricular engagements of higher-education students within globalised religious organisations like the Tablighi Jama'at and Dawat-e-Islami, both non-political Islamic movements, and Hizb-ut-Tahrir, an international Islamic movement with explicit political aspirations (outputs b and d). In Bangladesh, initial research on primary and secondary-school students [text removed for publication] (output e) led to follow-up research with university students [text removed for publication] (output b).</p> <p>Nelson's wide-ranging approach to the politics of religious education, facilitated by an extensive network of grassroots contacts, has made it possible to challenge the conventional view that religious education is particularly popular amongst the poorly educated lower classes in Bangladesh and Pakistan (outputs a, e, and f). This finding, in turn, has provided a crucial evidence base for moving away from a counter-productive blanket demonisation of madrasa-based education while, at the same time, allowing for a deeper understanding of religious education amongst elites. Such issues are explored in outputs b and d, which trace the religious activism of the educated urban middle classes and demonstrate that, within this group, the most active students are frequently drawn from those who complete degrees in non-religious subjects like business, science, and engineering.</p> <p>Nelson combines a close textual analysis of curricular content across many different types of schools with in-depth interviews (facilitated by his fluency in Urdu) to challenge prevailing assumptions in which religious-cum-political ideas are tied solely to enrolment patterns (private-school students think 'X'; madrasa-based students think 'Y'; and so on). In doing so, he shows how individuals interpret what they learn across simultaneous ('part-time') engagements with several different educational settings, drawing attention to the ways in which politically significant patterns of tolerance/intolerance regarding sectarian and doctrinal difference are produced (output a). Nelson's more flexible account of religious-cum-political ideas allows for a nuanced understanding of the specific conditions (both within and beyond particular educational institutions) that produce</p>

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religiously informed patterns of conflict and cooperation.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

- a. "Ilm and the Individual: The Production of Political Ideas in Pakistan." In *Being Muslim in South Asia*, edited by R. Jeffrey and R. Sen. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, forthcoming.
- b. "Embracing the Ummah: Student Politics beyond State Power in Pakistan." *Modern Asian Studies* 45/3 (2011): 565-96.
- c. "Dealing with Difference: Religious Education and Democracy in Pakistan." *Modern Asian Studies* 43/3 (2009): 591-618.
- d. "Religion, Politics, and the Modern University in Pakistan and Bangladesh." *NBR Project Report* (2009): 61-94.
- e. "Religious Education in Non-Religious Schools: A Comparative Study of Pakistan and Bangladesh." *Commonwealth and Comparative Politics* 46/3 (2008): 337-61.
- f. "Muslims, Markets, and the Meaning of "A Good Education" in Pakistan." *Asian Survey* 46/5 (2006): 699-720.

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Since 2011-12, Pakistan has catapulted to the top of DFID's global funding priorities, and the lion's share of DFID's increased funding for Pakistan will focus on education (with particular reference to the Punjab).

In January 2013, Nelson was invited to appear as a witness before the parliamentary select committee for international development to comment on DFID's planned increase in investment in Pakistan (1, below). During his examination, Nelson raised a number of points based on his research, noting that: (a) there is no proven direct link between improved primary-education-for-all and counter-radicalisation, and (b) Punjab-focused funding (n.b. Punjab is Pakistan's richest province and the provincial stronghold of Pakistan's Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif) may tie DFID too closely to the provincial inequalities that have bedevilled Pakistani politics for decades. Nelson also challenged the common misconception that religious education in Pakistan is confined to madrasas. Nelson's testimony was referred to at length in the International Development Committee's Report on Pakistan of April 2013 (2).

After his appearance, Nelson was contacted to offer follow-up comments for the committee. This led to the suggestion that, in the context his own research on Pakistan's education sector, Nelson might gather material concerning patterns of fraud in Pakistan's public-sector examinations — patterns that threatened to reduce the impact of DFID's overall investment (expected to total well over £1 billion). Nelson visited Pakistan to conduct this research, following which he produced a report that was submitted to the International Development Select Committee in June 2013 (3).

Nelson's follow-up report was cited by Malcolm Bruce MP during the debate (4). Specifically, Bruce commented on Nelson's finding that, while 'appointing teachers on merit' is a sound objective, 'merit' is 'for sale' in Pakistan (via bogus exam scores) and is, in fact, being bought on a large scale. Alan Duncan, Minister of State for International Development, commented that he appreciated Bruce's comments on merit and standards overall, and offered assurance that DFID would be working with Pakistani authorities to reduce corruption in education.

Nelson's research also informed a FCO study on religious networks and non-religious educational institutions in Bangladesh in 2009. This study expanded Nelson's contribution (output d) to a 2009 National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR) report, 'Islamic Education in Bangladesh and Pakistan: Trends in Tertiary Institutions', focusing on the student wings of mainstream political parties like Bangladesh's Jama'at-e-Islami as well as student ties to international religious-cum-political

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movements like Hizb-ut-Tahrir (5). Nelson documented a trend towards the political ‘domestication’ of international religious activism — a trend in which, over time, political mobilisation focusing on international issues (e.g. criticism of India, the US or the UK) became less important than political mobilisation focused on pressing domestic issues (e.g. unemployment and corruption).

As noted above, this policy-relevant research [text removed for publication], focusing on the political activism of university students, grew out of earlier research on religious education in primary and secondary schools across both Bangladesh and Pakistan. This initial phase of research was published in output e.

Nelson’s findings regarding education in Pakistan, in particular, have been widely disseminated amongst [text removed for publication] policy makers and practitioners in the US, most notably through his engagement with the US-based National Bureau of Asian Research. NBR’s independent research is disseminated through briefings, conferences, Congressional testimony, email forums and international collaborations with other institutions. [text removed for publication].

Nelson’s research has featured prominently in private briefings on the politics of Islam in Pakistan for [text removed for publication] officials based in Britain, Ireland, Germany, France, Sweden, and Bangladesh. In 2013, he presented on the relationship between Islam and politics in Pakistan at a ‘Pakistan Briefing’ for the [text removed for publication] Swedish Ambassador (hosted by SOAS). In 2012, he conducted a similar briefing for the Irish Ambassador to Pakistan, Iran, and Turkey (also hosted by SOAS), and, every year since 2008, he has participated in SOAS’ ‘Political Islam’ programme attended by governmental, journalistic, corporate, NGO, and diplomatic participants. He also lectures for the ‘Afghanistan after 2014’ programme that SOAS provides for the British Ministry of Defence.

Nelson’s contribution to international discussion and debate concerning religion and education in Pakistan and Bangladesh is evidenced by frequent citations in official reports, blogs and websites. Output f, for example, was cited in Pakistan’s independent Institute of Social and Policy Sciences report on private-sector education (2010) (6); in the Norwegian Peacebuilding Institute Resource Centre’s (NOREF) report on madrasas (an independent foundation aimed at strengthening peacebuilding policy and practice) (2011) (7); and in a joint public opinion study by the WorldPublicOpinion.org and the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) (2008) – in its opinion poll, conducted in Pakistan, the study used questions originally posed by Nelson in output f (8).

Nelson’s work on madrasa education in Pakistan is also mentioned in a blog on the Foreign Policy Association website, a US non-profit organisation that aims to increase global awareness and understanding on foreign policy issues (9). The post commented that ‘[Nelson’s] research [findings] and the questions they raise should serve as a study syllabus for anyone interested in the development of pluralism in Pakistan’.

Nelson has also been cited regarding education and broader issues in Pakistan in *The Guardian* (10), *Times Higher Education* (11), *Voice of America* website (12), Pakistan’s English language newspaper *Daily Times* (13), and *Let Us Build Pakistan* blog (14).

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

1. Nelson appearance in front of parliamentary Select Committee:
<http://www.parliamentlive.tv/Main/Player.aspx?meetingId=12291> [Most recently accessed 23.11.13].
2. International Development Committee, Tenth Report, 2012-13:
<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201213/cmselect/cmintdev/725/725.pdf> [Most recently accessed 23.11.13].
3. Commons Select Committee on education and taxation in Pakistan:
<http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons->

- [select/international-development-committee/news/pakistan-2nd-oral-evidence-session/](#)
[Most recently accessed 23.11.13].
4. Report debated by Select Committee, July 2013 (Nelson's work cited by Malcolm Bruce MP): <http://www.theyworkforyou.com/whall/?id=2013-07-04a.338.0> [Most recently accessed 23.11.13].
 5. National Bureau of Asian Research Project Report:
http://www.nbr.org/publications/specialreport/pdf/Preview/PR09_IslamEd.pdf [Most recently accessed 23.11.13].
 6. Nelson cited in Pakistan Institute of Social Policy Sciences 2010 report on private education: <http://i-saps.org/Publications/Private%20Sector%20Education%20Report-I-SAPS.pdf> [Most recently accessed 23.11.13].
 7. Nelson cited in the Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre report on Pakistan's madrasas in 2011:
http://www.peacebuilding.no/var/ezflow_site/storage/original/application/d6f77e0632a20fc1ae1ad65041acdc7.pdf [Most recently accessed 23.11.13].
 8. Nelson cited in the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) report 2008:
http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/pdf/jan08/Pakistan_Jan08_rpt.pdf [Most recently accessed 23.11.13].
 9. Nelson cited on the Foreign Policy Association website:
<http://foreignpolicyblogs.com/2011/05/30/lessons-from-talk-on-religious-education-and-pluralism-in-pakistan-at-the-wilson-center/> [Most recently accessed 23.11.13].
 10. Nelson cited in *The Guardian* on tax and aid to Pakistan:
<http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2013/apr/04/pakistan-recoup-taxes-aid-mps> [Most recently accessed 23.11.13].
 11. Nelson cited in *Times Higher Education* article on academia in Pakistan:
<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/news/waging-intellectual-war-on-repression-and-class-divides/417006.article> [Most recently accessed 23.11.13].
 12. Nelson cited on the *Voice of America* website: <http://www.voanews.com/content/us-moves-to-restore-pakistan-relationship-139806043/152331.html> [Most recently accessed 23.11.13].
 13. Nelson cited in Pakistan's *Daily Times*:
http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2008%5C03%5C31%5Cstory_31-3-2008_pg7_23 [Most recently accessed 23.11.13].
 14. Nelson cited on the *Let Us Build Pakistan* blog: <http://lubpak.com/archives/42012> [Most recently accessed 23.11.13].