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MADRASAH EDUCATION MANAGEMENT IN SRI LANKA: CHALLENGES AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

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ABSTRACT

The *madrasah* education has been under study for years in South Asia. The contemporary Indian model of m*adrasah* education has been in Sri Lanka since the late 19th century. Previous studies unequivocally called for the reformation of *madrasah* education. However, none of the previous studies integrated the challenges of *madrasah* education to set the future direction and management. Hence, this study aims to explore the challenges of *madrasah* education and its future directions. The integrative literature review, conducted using the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) framework, was supplemented with a nominal group technique to explore the challenges and future directions. The theoretical framework of this study is constructed on institutional theory and Durkheimian network theory, with a focus on the joint *madrasah* system model in Singapore. Eight subject matter experts were involved in the nominal group technique. This research explored thirty challenges that *madrasah* education faces under ten domains. This study concludes that addressing these ten domains in pedagogical, organisational, and managerial foundations is essential for the future direction of *madrasah* education management in Sri Lanka.

Keywords: Madrasah education, challenges, management, Sri Lanka, Arabic college.

INTRODUCTION

Sri Lanka is an island in the Indian Ocean, varied in ethnicities and religions. Sri Lankan children enjoy free school and university education since the enactment of the Free Education Ordinance in 1947 (NEC, 2022). The school curriculum includes religious studies as a compulsory core subject from grades 01 to 11. In addition to school, formal religious education in Sri Lanka includes weekend and evening part-time arrangements for the public, while seminaries deliver religious education for priests and religious leaders (Gamage, 2019; Ramzy et al., 2022b; Rislan et al., 2025).

No centralised management exists in Sri Lanka for education outside schools. For instance, weekend schools and priesthood education are managed by individuals and community entities except for Buddhist *Previna* education (Ramzy et al., 2022a). For a long time, religious education outside of schools has been a contentious issue among education reformists (Gamage, 2019; Parliament, 2020; Wijedasa, 2019). *Madrasah* education is aimed at producing religious scholars and leaders among Sri Lankan Muslims, commonly known as Arabic Colleges locally (Jazeel, 2019; Zuhyle et al., 2020)*. Although the *madrasah* is a familiar name in South Asian countries, it is referred to by different terms in Southeast Asian nations, such as *Pondok* in Malaysia (Abidin et al., 2023) and *Pesantren* in Indonesia (Basori et al., 2023), while the same institution is known as *madrasah* in Singapore (Rahman et al., 2019).

To instil communal religious values, the *madrasah* has played a pivotal role for generations (Anuzsiya, 2004; Basheer, 2016; Tan & Abbas, 2017; Thameem & Fathima Afra, 2023). 317 registered *madrasahs* function under the Department of Muslim Religious and Cultural Affairs (DMRCA) in Sri Lanka (DMRCA, 2024). However, the necessity to improve the century-old *madrasah* education in Sri Lanka has been the subject of study for a long time (Imtiyaz, 2021; Jazeel, 2020; Mahroof, 1995; Munas & Habeebullah, 2014; Parliament, 2020; Rislan et al., 2025; Zacky, 2025).

Previous studies have focused on different aspects of *madrasah* education. For instance, Mohideen and Rasheed (2024) explored the areas of language teaching and the importance of digitalising Arabic language teaching in Sri Lanka. Thameem and Fathima Afra (2023) examined the National Shoora Council's efforts to reform and introduce a unique curriculum for *madrasah* education in Sri Lanka. Ramzy et al. (2022b) explored the intercultural competency level in *madrasah* graduates. Zuhyle et al. (2020) explained the contemporary *madrasah* education system and proposed numerous reforms, including the establishment of a *Madrasah* Accreditation Board (MAB) to manage *madrasah* education. Jazeel (2020) critique the current curriculum and proposes introducing an outcome-based curriculum in Sri Lankan *madrasah* education. Mihlar (2019) has analysed the transformation of Islam in the Sri Lankan Muslim minority context.

Jazeel (2017) explored the role of mosques in shaping Muslim education, while Razzak and Shehu (2024) unearthed the role of the Islamic revivalist movement. In the context of individual contributions to Islamic education, Jalaldeen (2016b) studied the contribution of Naleem Hajiar. Gafoordeen et al. (2013) have explored the practice of the Arabic Language. Jazeel (2019) has analysed the basic characteristics of contemporary *madrasah* traditions. The form and function of *madrasah* graduates among Sri Lankan Muslims are analysed by Mahroof (1995). The colonial influence in education during the British colonial era is unearthed by Asad (1993). The parliament sectoral committee also highlighted numerous challenges and proposed reforms in *madrasah* education in Sri Lanka (Parliament, 2020). Although previous studies have addressed some challenges of *madrasah* education, a comprehensive outlook on all the challenges and a future direction for managing *madrasah* education are still lacking. Hence, this study aimed to integrate previous studies and set the direction for managing *madrasah* education in Sri Lanka.

Theoretical Framework
The theoretical framework of this study is based on institutional theory and Durkheimian network theory, as well as the joint *madrasah* system model of Singapore. The institutional theory is established on how an institution behaves, practices, and structures internally and externally. The institutional theory is a prominent theory among

organisational theories. The foundation of institutional theory stems from the early writings of Selznick (1996) on 'institutionalisation' within an organisation. His writings focused on how an institution's formal structure is developed and how it adapts to its environment. However, Meyer and Rowan (1977) further develop institutional theory by exploring an organisation's relationship with its external environment (Katz and Kahn, 1966).

The institutional theory reconceptualises the understanding of an organisation as a system that interacts and adapts to its respective environment, which limits an organisation's ability to change (Mohd Radzi, 2014). However, Powers (2000) strengthens the institutional theory and model, including the different types of legitimacy an organisation can attain, as well as the reasons for similar organisations in the same field, such as schools. Scott (1995) further consolidated the complex strands of institutional theory and outlined a framework that incorporates the elements of institutional theory. According to him, Institutions consist of cognitive, normative, and regulative structures and activities that provide stability and meaning to social behaviours. Various transport institutions, cultures, structures, and routines of different carriers operate across multiple jurisdictions.

The legitimacy of an organisation is decided on three bases: (1) regulative, (2) normative and (3) cognitive. The regulative refers to the pillars of rules, laws and sanctions – what the country's law says is the right way. The normative pillars are social obligation, norms, and values – the right way is what society dictates, and the cognitive pillars are symbols, beliefs, and social identities – the right way exists in isolation, with no alternative ways (Scott, 1995, p. 33). According to Mohd Radzi (2014), institutional theory best explains the nature of school-based management and the motives behind organisational change, focusing on the environmental factors experienced by organisations, such as schools. The *madrasah* attains legitimacy in the same organisation through regulative, normative, and cognitive processes. Regulative legitimacy is achieved through following state government regulations, normative legitimacy is achieved through conforming to the same standards as other schools, and cognitive legitimacy is achieved by referring students to the same colleges of their faith (Powers, 2000, pp. 2). The function of the institutional framework is explained as 'tracing the emergence of distinctive forms, processes, strategies, outlooks, and competencies as they emerge from patterns of organisational interaction and adaptation. Such patterns must be understood as responses to both internal and external environments (Selznick, 1996, p. 271). The constructs of institutional theory guide the critical elements of *madrasah* education.

The theoretical framework of this study also includes Durkheimian network theory. Durkheim's study laid the foundation for network theory, based on his social principles of social solidarity (mechanical and organic solidarity) and collective consciousness, which he used to analyse networking in social contexts (Durkheim, 1984). However, Bearman (1997) further explored the role of solidarity and networks in maintaining societal structures based on Durkheimian principles. Freeman (2004) consolidated the evolution of network theory with the contribution of Durkheimian foundational principles.

Networking is a relatively new phenomenon in education compared to other fields of social sciences. The network is defined by many in the field of education, for instance, as a 'group or systems of interconnected people and organisations including schools whose aims and purposes include the improvement of learning and aspects of well-being known to affect learning' (Hadfield et al., 2006, p. 5). However, Muijs et al. (2010) dispute this definition because of its overly broad discussion of networking at the organisational level. At the same time, it is overly prescriptive, as it insists on describing all networking activities towards one particular goal. Therefore, they further developed the definition as "at least two organisations work together for a common purpose at least some of the time. Here, the organisation refers not only to the school but also to other organisations beyond schools. Once it comes to the activities of different actors of different organisations in the same network, it is defined as collaboration" (Muijs et al., 2010, p. 6).

Concerning *Madrasah* education in the Sri Lankan context, the Muslim community and the stakeholders of *Madrasah* education share common values and purposes due to their religious convictions. Hence, their social bond and collective consciousness are strengthened by their engagement in the process of reforming *Madrasah*

education, as in a mechanical society, according to Durkheim's terms. However, with the organisational development in the field of education, *Madrasah* education faces challenges similar to those faced by an organic society, with the rapid development in specialisation and interdependence of the *Madrasah* institutions.

By emphasising the relationship between increasing specialisation and interdependence, Durkheim demonstrated how solidarity and individualism can coexist. Such specialisation led to increased productivity and efficiency, as Ritzer (2008) explained, 'in societies with organic solidarity, less competition and more differentiation, allowing people to cooperate more and be supported by the same resource base. Individuality is not the opposite of close social bonds but a requirement for them' (p. 87). The application of Durkheim's social networking theory in educational institutions is explained by Muijs et al. (2010). Durkheim's concepts apply to school education in challenging environments; networking among schools becomes not only important in the traditional sense for improvement but also positively impacts the alleviation of organisational anomalies by providing integration and regulation, together with partner schools that share values and goals to face environmental challenges. The organisational anomalies lead failing schools to engage more in integration and regulation, collaborating with partner schools. Durkheimian network theory matches well in education in its emphasis on moral purpose. Moral purpose is one of the critical factors in the successful performance of an educational organisation (Harris & Lambert, 2003), such as a *madrasah* education.

The theoretical framework of this study considered the Singapore framework of the Joint *Madrasah* system – JMS. There are numerous models and frameworks for *madrasah* education worldwide where Muslims live as political and ethno-religious minorities. The Ramadan (2003) framework for religious education in Muslim minority Europe and North America, and the Traditional madrasah framework (Metcalf, 2014) of the Deobandi movement in South Asia, particularly in India. Integrated *madrasah* framework, such as Imam Hatib school in Turkey (Aşlamacı & Kaymakcan, 2017), *Pesantren* in Indonesia (Azra et al., 2007), and the Joint *Madrasah* System of Singapore (Aljunied & Ahmad, 2017). Reformist *madrasah* frameworks in Salafi-oriented Saudi Arabia and South Asian countries (Robinson, 2000), Sufi-oriented Madrasah frameworks in South Asia (Gilmartin, 1988), and state-sponsored *madrasah* frameworks in Bangladesh (Ahmad et al., 2007) are a few to mention.

The Singaporean integrated framework of the Joint *Madrasah* System (JMS) aims to produce religious scholars who can serve modern, technology-driven contexts, such as Singapore (Aljunied & Ahmad, 2017). Sri Lanka shares many commonalities with Singapore. For instance, contextually, Muslims represent less than 20% of the total population in both countries. Both countries gained political independence from the British in the mid-20th century; hence, the education system was primarily developed during the colonial rule. Buddhism remains the majority religion in both countries, and compulsory education is employed in both countries for primary school education. Most Muslims in both countries follow the *Shafi'i* school of thought. Due to these contextual similarities, this study adopted the JMS framework of Singapore as its theoretical framework.

There are only six *madrasahs* in Singapore (MUIS, 2022). However, in the mid-20th century, more than fifty *madrasah*s were established. The first *madrasah* for Muslims in Singapore was established in 1912. The number of *madrasah*s proliferated to around sixty-nine in the 1950s and 1960s. However, with the introduction of state schools (known as national schools in Singapore) after independence, the number of *madrasah*s diminished rapidly to just six in the 1980s, which remains to this day (Tan & Abbas, 2017).

The challenges historically confronted by the Singapore *Madrasah* education are similar to those faced by Sri Lankan *Madrasah* education today. *Madrasah* education did not meet the individual needs and the broader societal needs in Singapore (Bakar, 2009). The curriculum, pedagogy, assessment methods, teacher training, and student development programs in the *madrasah* are inadequate and inappropriate for nurturing religious intellectuals and religious leaders (Sikand, 2005). In response to these challenges, the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (*Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura* [MUIS]) posed two significant questions to enhance *Madrasah* education. How can we develop 21st-century future *Ulama*, and what existing or new educational frameworks can address the needs of

preparing 21st-century *Ulama*? Therefore, to address these broad questions, MUIS and three selected *Madrasah* institutions formed the Joint *Madrasah* System (JMS) framework in 2007, formally established to become operational in 2008 (Aljunied & Ahmad, 2017, p. 154).

Although the Ministry of Education (MOE) in Singapore is not directly involved in *Madrasah* education, they are registered under the MOE as private schools. Furthermore, the MOE appoints the Management Committee of Madrasahs (MMC) every two years, in consultation with MUIS. MUIS is responsible for the overall development, management, and administration of *Madrasah*s in Singapore, and all *madrasahs* are under MUIS's control. The vision of *madrasah* education is to produce religious leaders and professionals who can guide the community in matters of religion (Tan & Abbas, 2017).

The construct elements of institutional theory (1) regulative legitimacy, (2) normative regulative, and (3) cognitive legitimacy (Meyer & Rowan, 1983; Selznick, 1996) are used to comprehend the influential elements. Additionally, the operational construct elements of Durkheimian network theory, namely (1) mechanical solidarity, (2) organic solidarity, and (3) collective consciousness (Durkheim & Giddens, 1972) among *madrasah* institutions are also included in the process of identifying critical elements of the m*adrasah* education in Sri Lanka.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology adopted in this research is a duplicate of the article by the same authors' earlier work (Rislan et al., 2025). However, it approached different research questions to find novel findings in critical domains of *madrasah* management, despite the previous study having been conducted to trace the establishment of *madrasah* education in Sri Lanka. This study employs an integrative literature review and nominal group techniques. Tranfield et al. (2003) explain that a literature review systematically collects and synthesises previous research. A well-conducted and effective literature review as a research method creates a firm foundation for knowledge advancement (Webster & Watson, 2002). Hence, this study applied an integrative literature review to synthesise the previous work on *Madrasah* education in Sri Lanka, as presented by Snyder (2019). This study has adopted the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework for a rigorous and transparent data selection process. The PRISMA framework provides a structured approach for identifying and screening relevant studies (Da Silva & Daly, 2024) for *madrasah* education in Sri Lanka. This selection enhances the reliability and trustworthiness of the integrative literature review process.

The study also employed the nominal group technique (NGT) to obtain the experts' opinions on the subject. The combination of findings from the integrative literature review with expert input produces robust, comprehensive, and actionable methodological triangulations (Fetters et al., 2013). The combination also mitigates the bias of relying only on either experts' opinions or the literature alone. Hence, the outcome of the research strengthens the rigour by integrating evidence-based findings with the expert's consensus.

The thematic content analysis frame is used to analyse the selected literature. The conventional content analysis technique is designed to describe a phenomenon, and it is particularly suitable when the existing literature on the subject is limited. Conventional content analysis is inductive (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Hence, this study uses PRISMA for data collection and conventional content analysis for thematic data analysis. The sources selected for this research are Web of Science, Science Direct, Scopus, Google Scholar, and the library repository of five state universities in Sri Lanka where either Islamic education or Islamic civilisation is taught, namely the University of Peradeniya, Colombo University, South Eastern University of Sri Lanka, Eastern University of Sri Lanka, and the Jaffna University of Sri Lanka. Such a diversity of sample selections is accommodated in the integrative literature review.

The following step-by-step procedure is used to systematically identify literature sources for the subject study, as proposed by Davies et al. (2013).

1. Scooping the review: The research begins by developing explicit criteria to finalise the studies used for the integrative literature review.
2. Searching for literature: The following databases are used for relevant literature. Apart from international databases, five Sri Lankan government universities were selected where Islamic education or Islamic civilisation is part of the graduate studies curriculum in Sri Lanka.
   a) Web of Science
   b) Science Direct Elsevier
   c) Scopus
   d) Google Scholar
   e) The e-repository - University of Colombo
   f) The e-repository - University of Jaffna
   g) The e-repository - University of Peradeniya
   h) The e-repository - Eastern University of Sri Lanka
   i) The i-repository - South Eastern University of Sri Lanka

The second step in the search process involved using relevant keywords for the study. This research used the keywords 'Islamic Religious education' AND '*Madrasah*' AND '*Ulama*' AND 'Sri Lanka' OR 'Sri Lankan Muslims'. However, to optimise the research findings, the search optimisation tips given on each resource platform are considered respectively.

3. Filtering the Literature: The selected literature is filtered through the application of inclusion and exclusion criteria. The following inclusion and exclusion criteria are applied to select literature. This helps to avoid unintended bias by applying precise and consistent rules when selecting the studies.
   a) Inclusion criteria
      i. The studies must be relevant to this research title.
      ii. The study employs a combination of empirical, qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods approaches.
      iii. The study is geographically related to Sri Lanka.
   b) Exclusion criteria
      i. The study was published in languages other than English.
      ii. Book reviews.
4. Synthesised the literature findings to answer the research questions

Figure 1. *Protocol For Conducting an Integrative Literature Review*
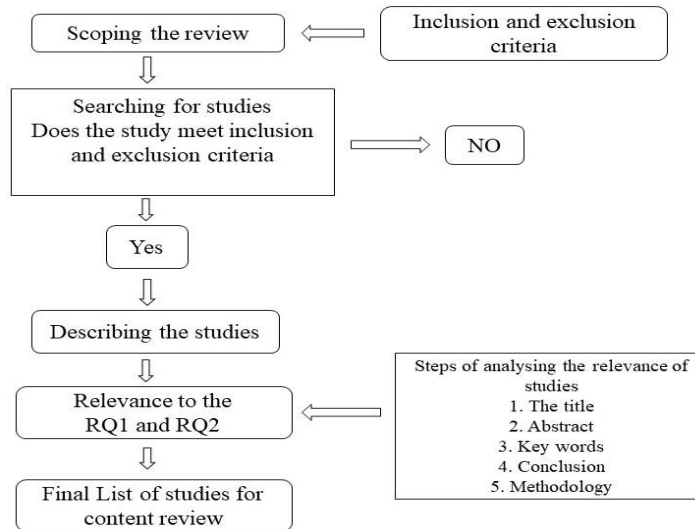
Note. The protocol is an improved version of the Literature review model of Davies et al. (2013)

Figure 1 Summarises the protocol for conducting a literature review. The findings of the literature on each platform are reported.

Figure 2. *Protocol For Literature Scooping*
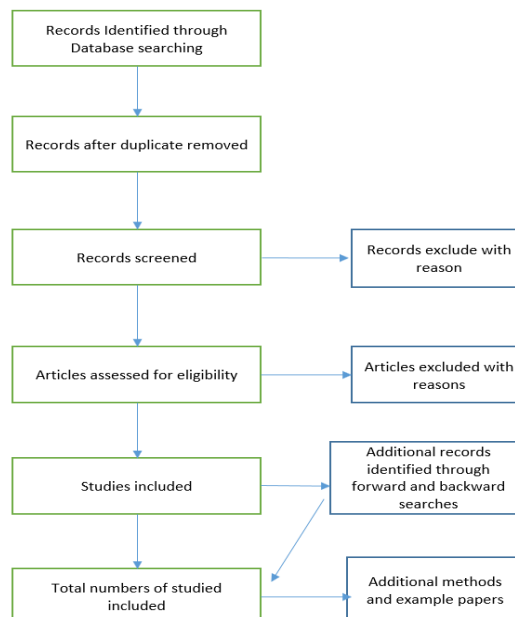
Note. Search and evaluation of literature adopted from Xiao and Watson (2019)

The protocol in Figure 2 is followed for scooping the article and the initial review. The literature review protocol was developed to ensure the validity and trustworthiness of this research. Strict adherence to the selected protocol

ensures the repeatability of the study and internal validity (Snyder, 2019; Xiao & Watson, 2019). The audit trial process was also followed to ensure the trustworthiness of this research. The audit trail is a method proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985).

The content analysis is conducted through an open coding procedure. Open coding refers to the notes and headings taken while reading the literature text (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). The codes were reviewed repeatedly to ensure that all necessary headings were included to cover all aspects of the content (Burnard, 1992; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The headings are collected on a coding sheet (Dey, 2003). Categories are generated freely after the open coding, and categories are grouped under higher-order headings (Burnard, 1992). This stage aims to reduce the number of categories by arranging similar ones into a single broader, higher-order category. The abstraction refers to formulating the general description of the research topic by generating categories. The categories were named using the characteristic content words. The process of abstraction continued as long as possible information was abstracted from the literature (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008).

The Nominal Group Technique (NGT) is arranged in advance with eight Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) who have been selected through official communication regarding the event location, date, and time. The NGT session comprises six main steps: an opening session, an idea generation session, recording ideas, a discussion on ideas, voting and prioritising the ideas, and a discussion on selected ideas based on the most voted items (Islam, 2010). The agenda of the session follows the modified NGT session, which is planned to begin with a list of challenges to *madrasah* education derived from an integrative literature review. The list of needs in higher education, prepared by Hawthorne and Sage (1975) in their study of a higher education program plan, was also used as a checklist to initiate the discussion.

The samples for the NGT session were selected using a purposive sampling strategy to ensure that the most relevant expertise was represented in the study (Merriam, 1998). The experts were invited through academic institutions, and the snowball sampling technique was used. Since the output of this phase is based on the experts' views, selecting an expert panel is essential (Parente et al., 1994; Skulmoski et al., 2007). According to Dalkey and Helmert (1963), many define experts as those who possess knowledge in a specific field. Adler and Ziglio (1996) list four criteria for identifying an expert, covering relevance, credibility, and diverse perspectives. The first criterion is knowledge and experience in the field of investigation. The second is the willingness and capacity to contribute to the research. The third is the availability to participate in the research. The final criterion is the communication skills necessary to contribute to the study. However, Attri et al. (2013) suggest that in selecting experts, it is vital to consider the research industry and academia to ensure the contextual relationship among the factors under investigation. Accordingly, this study included experts from the *madrasah* institution in the field of educational management and leadership. The following criteria are set for selecting the experts:

1. Having a minimum master's degree
2. Studied and completed the course in DMRCA-registered *Madrasah*
3. Minimum 10 years of involvement in *Madrasah* education management

Regarding the number of experts, Islam (2010) states that for a practical NGT session, seven to ten participants are necessary, with knowledge of the subject issue and diverse backgrounds. Abdullah and Islam (2011) reiterate the exact numbers, adding a note on the reasons for the diverse backgrounds. According to them, experts from diverse backgrounds could visualise the subject from different angles and contribute ideas. However, Thor (1987) suggested avoiding people who tend to evaluate others' opinions rather than generate their own ideas. In his previous research, Dewitt (2010) selected five experts: three subject matter experts and two technical experts. Ridhuan (2014) selected eight experts for his research: six subject matter experts and two technical experts. Hence, this study will comprise eight experts: six represent *madrasah* education, and the remaining two represent education management. The potential limitations of sample selection bias were offset by the triangulation of the findings with PRISMA, and the use of a pre-set, clear guidance and protocol for the NGT session. This study obtained ethical

committee approval from the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Malaya, reference UM.TNC2/UMREC_3678. Hence, NGT participants were given informed consent forms with details of the study, the voluntary nature of their involvement, strict confidentiality and their right to withdraw any time without reason or consequences.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The literature review process yielded different numbers of articles from different sources. Web of Science initially revealed 71, after the language exclusion reduced the number to 67, and open access further reduced it to 23. After thoroughly reading the title, abstract and conclusion of all selected works, only two were selected as relevant to this study. ScienceDirect Elsevier yielded 36 articles after applying exclusion criteria, including book reviews and encyclopaedias; 24 articles were finalised. Through further reading of the title, abstract, and conclusions, none of the article was found to be relevant to this study. Twenty-five articles were shortlisted through Scopus, and all articles were further studied; two of them were finalised as relevant to this study. Four hundred forty-five articles showed up in Google Scholar. Through the application of exclusion criteria based on demographics, 283 articles were shortlisted for further study. Since no further options were available to shortlist, all 283 articles were studied, and seven of them were found to be relevant to this study. In late, two more articles were added through the reference, and one was removed due to duplication from another source. No articles were found in the University of Jaffna and Eastern University. 3229 articles found in Peradeniya University after filtration; only five articles shortlisted. It was found that the term 'Sri Lanka' yielded the highest number of articles. However, after studying further, none of the articles were selected.

Table 1. *Summary of Selected Works of Literature from Different Sources for Integrative Literature Review*

Nu	Source of literature	Number of Literature appeared	Number of literature selected for further study	Disqualified due to duplication from other sources	Literature added through reading the reference list and the authors	Final numbers of literature selected for review
1	Web of Science	71	3	1	0	2
2	Science Direct - Elsevier	36	0	0	0	0
3	Scopus	25	1	0	0	1
4	Google Scholar	445	7	1	3	9
5	E-repository University of Colombo	708	1	0	0	1
6	E-repository University of Jaffna	0	0	0	0	0

7	E-repository University of Peradeniya	3229	0	0	0	0
8	E-repository Eastern University of Sri Lanka	0	0	0	0	0
9	I-repository South Eastern University of Sri Lanka	37	5	2	0	3

Note: Adapted from Rislan, M., Abdullah, Z. B., & Ramzy, M. I. (2025). Tracing the Origins and Development of Madrasah Education in Sri Lanka. Jurnal Pendidikan Islam, 11(1), 133-146

Table 1 reveals the number of literature selected from different sources. Seven hundred and eight articles were listed in the University of Colombo e-repository, and one article was selected after further study. Thirty-seven studies were listed at South Eastern University, 18 were shortlisted, and two were removed due to duplication from other sources. An additional article was added from the reference list to reach 17.

Table 1. *Details of Literature Selected for Integrative Literature Review*

	Author/Authors	Year	Title
1	Ramzy, M.I Alshighaybi, M.S and Rislan, M	2022	Measuring the Level of Intercultural Competence (IC) among *Madrasah* Leaders in Sri Lanka
2	Sanyal, U.	2021	South Asian Islamic Education in the Pre-colonial, Colonial, and Postcolonial Periods
3	Rifai, S	2021	A Brief Survey on the Development of Education among the Sri Lankan Muslim Community Between 1948-2000
4	S. Zuhyle, F. Ruzaik and M. Hakeem	2020	A study on the Contemporary *Madrasah* Education System in Sri Lanka
5	Jazeel, MIM	2020	Application of Outcome-Based Curriculum in Religious Studies: The Case of *Madrasah*s in Sri Lanka
6	Jazeel, MIM	2019	An Analysis of the History of *Madrasah* Tradition in Sri Lanka and Its Basic Characteristics
7	Rameez, A	2019	Second minority in Sri Lanka: Genesis and current crisis
8	Mihlar, F	2019	Religious change in a minority context: transforming Islam in Sri Lanka
9	Jazeel, MIM	2017	The Mosque Programme of Education in Sri Lanka: An Analysis

10	Jalaldeen M.S.M,	2016	Contribution of Islamic revivalist movements of Sri Lanka on education development: a compare study with Buddhist and Hindu revivalist movements
11	Jalaldeen M.S.M,	2016	Contribution of Naleem Hajiyar (Sri Lanka) and B.S.Abdurrahman (Tamilnadu) for the development of Muslim education of their countries - a comparative study
12	Gafoordeen, Nagoor Arifin, Zamri Bakar, and Kasheh Abu	2013	Brief study on practices of Arabic language in Sri Lanka
13	Ricci, R	2010	Islamic Literary Networks in South and Southeast Asia
14	Anuzsiya, S	2004	Development of education of Muslims during the Portuguese, Dutch and British rule in Sri Lanka
15	Mahroof. M	1995	The *Ulama* in Sri Lanka 1800-1990; form and function
16	M.N.M. Kamil Asad	1993	Muslim education in Sri Lanka: the British colonial period
17	Mahroof. M	1988	A Millennium of *Madrasah* Education in Sri Lanka

Note: Adapted from Rislan, M., Abdullah, Z. B., & Ramzy, M. I. (2025). Tracing the Origins and Development of Madrasah Education in Sri Lanka. Jurnal Pendidikan Islam, 11(1), 133-146

Table 2 shows the seventeen pieces of literature selected in this study. Three of them used a mixed-methods research methodology, while 14 used qualitative research. The reform of madrasah education has been studied since the second half of the 20th century. As stated by Mahroof (1995): 'When the Department of *Madrasa* and Cultural Affairs was established in 1981, most educated Muslim public opined that the time was ripe for an assessment of the religious configuration in the country. One particular factor which attracted attention was the number of *Madrasa*s in existence. The Department of Muslim Religious and Cultural Affairs established a National Committee on *Madrasa* education' (p.49). Hence, attention to reforming madrasah education among Sri Lankan Muslims has been ongoing for a long time. Through the thematic analysis, the following challenges were identified.

Absence of a Centralised Regulatory Authority
The Ministry of Education does not manage *Madrasah* education in Sri Lanka. Until the establishment of the Muslim Religious and Cultural Affairs Department in 1981, the Ministry of Education funded select*ed madrasahs*. As stated by Ramzy et al. (2022b) 'Though religious education goes hand in hand with the conventional government education system, except for *Privena* education, no centralised regulatory authority exists in Sri Lanka' (p.2). This is one of the phenomenal challenges highlighted in the literature.

Low-Level Intercultural Education of Other Faiths in the Madrasah
Understanding and basic knowledge of other faiths are essential in a multi-ethnic and multi-religious environment for promoting ethnic harmony and social well-being. However, the *madrasah* lacks multicultural classrooms and other facilities, including a curriculum and student exchange programs, to develop intercultural competence among its students (Ramzy et al., 2022b, p. 17).

The Highest Number of Desultory Madrasahs
"The Muslim professionals engaged in the field of education in Sri Lanka opine that the number of *madrasah* should be reduced while increasing the quality" (Zuhyle et al., 2020, p. 3).

Lack of Career Prospects

As there is no career ladder in *Madrasah* education, graduates are left with little hope, as noted in the literature. As explained by Zuhyle et al. (2020), 'In addition to the quality of education, the career prospects of the graduating student are also a growing challenge for *Madrasa* education' (p.3).

Poor Quality of Madrasah Curriculum

The quality of the *Madrasah* curriculum, "It is thus crucial to modernise the *Madrasa*s in Sri Lanka with the latest development in educational philosophy and techniques of the learning and teaching approaches" (Jazeel, 2020, pp. 196 - 198).

Lack of Opportunities to Learn Local Languages

The national languages are not given sufficient attention in *Madrasah* institutions, it is evident from the fact that very few *Ulama* are fluent in the Sinhala language (Jazeel, 2020, p. 200).

Absence of Compulsory Primary Education in madrasah

According to the studies conducted by Zuhyle et al. (2020), 78% of the *madrasah* candidates do not complete their ordinary school education (p. 40). An alarming issue with *madrasah* education persists, despite the country's compulsory education policy, which stipulates compulsory education for children between the ages of 6 and 14.

Absence of an Effective Management Board

A board of management is a crucial requirement for any educational institution. Having qualified people with different backgrounds in religious education and general education is essential for *Madrasah* institutions in Sri Lanka (Zuhyle et al., 2020). The absence of such a management board is also highlighted as one of the problems in *Madrasah* education.

Absence of a Unified Aim and Objectives

Jazeel (2020) highlights that the vast majority of Sri Lankan *Madrasahs* are unclear about their aims and objectives. For instance, he found 13 types of aims among the 98 *Madrasah* participants in his research. Not having unified and clear aims and objectives for an educational institution indicates the vulnerability of its operations.

Absence of a Standard Operating Procedure for Administration

The unavailability of standard operating procedures for *Madrasah* management is also identified in the literature as one of the challenges facing *Madrasah* education in Sri Lanka. According to Zuhyle et al. (2020), most *Madrasah*s in Sri Lanka do not have a written procedure for their operation.

Lack of Teacher Training and Employee Facilities for Staff

Several issues related to staff in madrasahs have been highlighted in the literature. According to Jazeel (2020), significant weaknesses include the lack of proper training arrangements for teachers, and in most instances, immediate past graduates of the same madrasah are recruited as teachers without adequate teacher training programmes.

Lack of Finance and Resources

The significant finding of Zuhyle et al. (2020) highlights that 99% of the *Madrasah* institutions in Sri Lanka are locally funded. The main sources of funds they identified are monthly student fees, donations from local philanthropists, and the endowments – *Waqf.* However, most face financial issues even when running daily operations (p. 31).

Lack of Community Engagement

Misconceptions about the activities and operations of madrasas are one of the problems highlighted. Even some other faith-based politicians called to close the *Madrasah* institutions, falsely claiming they were nurturing

extremism (Ramzy et al., 2022b). Hence, the lack of community engagement, even within the Muslim community, is found among 47% of the *Madrasah* institutions (Zuhyle et al., 2020, p. 33). Therefore, the lack of community engagement has also been identified as one of the problems among *Madrasah* institutions in Sri Lanka.

The Dichotomy of Education, Religious and Secular, Within the Madrasah

'There is a general resistance to attempting to include the secular subjects in the *Madrasa*h curriculum due to the influence of the traditional thought, which views that such a situation dilutes the religious character of *Madrasa*h education' (Jazeel, 2020, p. 200).

In NGT sessions, upon completion of the initial briefing, the panel of experts unanimously agreed to move the session towards individual idea generation. Participants were given two options: the first was to review the outcome of the integrative literature review, which listed the problems faced by *Madrasah* education in Sri Lanka. The second option was to start with one's idea generation, followed by a discussion of the findings of the integrative literature review. One of the subject matter experts guided the panel, stating below.

> It is better to create our own ideas prior to going through both documents; this will help to make sure that both of the lists will not influence us (SME3-1).

All participants agreed on this suggestion; after recording initial ideas, an open discussion was started on each influential element. The following 16 challenges were identified at the end of the discussion for idea creation.

1. Traditional teaching and learning methodologies
2. An apparent dichotomy exists in *Madrasah* education, as there are limited opportunities and resources for *Madrasah* students to excel in mainstream education
3. Course duration
4. The curriculum, branding, pedagogies, and operations are to be updated to address contextual issues.
5. No standard operational procedure for inception and management
6. No qualified board of management
7. Lack of qualified staff, staff training (academic, spiritual), lack of opportunities for staff training
8. No precise aim or objective
9. Lack of coordination among local *Madrasah*s and lack of international connection with international Islamic institutions
10. No connection or support with mainstream educational institutions, such as NIE, MOE, Training colleges, Universities, and UGC etc.
11. Lack of community awareness, engagement and support
12. Resources
13. No uniformity in student intake, quality of intake,
14. Career
15. Number of madras to be controlled and the area of establishment
16. No successful framework as it was in the golden ages of Islam

As agreed after the initial first round of discussion, the second round starts with the challenges identified in the integrative literature review. At the end of the discussion, a total 30 challenges were identified as below.

1. Outdated teaching and learning methodologies
2. Apparent dichotomy in *Madrasah* education, incompatible, un-unified, not outcome-based
3. Level of Intercultural Education of other faiths
4. Duration of study
5. Lack of opportunities for learning other local languages
6. Curriculum not in line with the national education policy goals of the country

7. Qualified members for the board of management
8. Training facilities for board members
9. Succession planning for board members
10. Accountability for board members
11. Qualified staff
12. Facilities and opportunities for staff training
13. Standard employment privileges in line with local labour law
14. Aim, objective, vision, and mission
15. Coordination among local *Madrasah*s and connection with international Islamic institutions
16. Connection and support with mainstream educational institutions, such as NIE, MOE, Training colleges, Universities, and UGC, etc.
17. Community awareness, engagement and support
18. Funding
19. Infrastructural facilities
20. Library facilities
21. The proper screening process for intake
22. Extracurricular activities
23. Opportunities and resources to excel in mainstream education for *Madrasah* students
24. Number of madras to be controlled and the area of establishment to be monitored
25. Minimum standard and accreditation body for the quality and duration
26. Standard operating procedure for establishment and management
27. Monitoring and auditing
28. Significant impact of *Madrasah* graduates on society
29. Availability of religious education in government schools
30. Opportunities in evening and weekend schools for religious education

After finalising all challenges, the session continued to group the selected challenges. Accordingly, the elements are grouped, and domains and domain names were selected from the open discussion and participants' suggestions. All 30 influential challenges were arranged under 10 domains, as shown below.

1. Curriculum
    a. Outdated teaching and learning methodologies
    b. Apparent dichotomy in *Madrasah* education, incompatible, un-unified, not outcome-based
    c. Level of Intercultural Education of other faiths
    d. Duration of study
    e. Lack of opportunities for learning other local languages
    f. Curriculum not in line with the national education policy goals of the country
    g. Lack of extracurricular activities

2. Management Board
    a. Qualified members for the board of management
    b. Training facilities for board members
    c. Succession planning
    d. Accountability

3. Staff affairs
    a. Qualified staff
    b. Facilities and opportunities for staff training
    c. Standard employment privileges in line with local labour law

4. Aims and Objectives
    a. Aim and objectives
5. Relations
    a. Coordination among local *Madrasah*s and connection with international Islamic institutions
    b. Connection and support with mainstream educational institutions, such as NIE, MOE, Training colleges, Universities, and UGC, etc.
    c. Community awareness and, engagement and support

6. Resources
    a. Funding
    b. Infrastructural facilities
    c. Library facilities

7. Student Affairs
    a. The proper screening process for intake

8. Career prospects
    a. Opportunities and resources to excel in mainstream education for *madrasah* students.

9. Board of Governance
    a. Number of madras and the area of establishment to be managed
    b. Minimum standard and accreditation body for the quality and duration
    c. Standard operating procedure for establishment and management
    d. Monitoring and auditing

10. External factors
    a. Significant impact of *Madrasah* graduates on society
    b. Availability of religious education in government schools
    c. Opportunities in evening and weekend schools for religious studies

Once this step was completed, the domains and respective elements were created. It is time for voting to rank the domains following the categorisation. The domains were selected as follows for voting on the priority ranking list. The seven-point Likert scale chart was used to vote among the following finalised domains.

1. Curriculum
2. Board of Management
3. Staff affairs
4. Aims and Objectives
5. Relations
6. Resources
7. Student Affairs
8. Career prospects
9. Board of Governance
10. External factors

However, after the counting, it was found that relations and career prospects got the same priority. Hence, all participants agreed to proceed with a second round of voting, limited to these two items. The final results after the second round of voting were as follows.

Table 2. *Results of 02ⁿᵈ Round of Voting to Find the Priorities of Selected Domains*

	Domain	E1	E2	E3	E4	E5	E6	E7	E8	Priority Ranking after 02ⁿᵈ Voting
1	Curriculum	5	7	7	6	6	7	7	7	1
2	Board of Management	6	7	6	7	6	5	7	6	2
3	Staff affairs	5	6	5	5	6	4	4	6	5
4	Aims and Objectives	6	6	7	5	7	7	3	4	4
5	Relations	6	5	4	4	4	7	4	5	7
6	Resources	5	4	6	4	5	6	5	5	6
7	Student Affairs	5	4	4	6	4	3	6	3	9
8	Career prospects	6	5	5	5	7	4	5	2	8
9	Board of Governance	7	7	7	5	4	5	7	7	3
10	External factors	4	4	4	4	5	2	5	2	10

E – Expert

Note. Adapted from Rislan, M., Abdullah, Z. B., & Ramzy, M. I. (2025). Tracing the Origins and Development of Madrasah Education in Sri Lanka. Jurnal Pendidikan Islam, 11(1), 133-146

According to the final results, the domains were selected in a priority ranking order as follows through the NGT sessions.

1. Curriculum
2. Management Board
3. Board of Governance
4. Aims and Objectives
5. Staff affairs
6. Resources
7. Relations
8. Career prospects
9. Student Affairs
10. External factors

To ensure the content validity and internal validity of the elements and their respective domains, a member check was conducted. As agreed, upon with participating SMEs, a Google questionnaire was sent to assess the relevance of the selected elements and domains, and the content Validity Index was calculated for each element within the domain. The I-CVI values are 1.00, except for two elements under the domain of external elements: the availability of religious education in government schools, which has a value of 0.88, and opportunities for religious education in evening and weekend schools, which also have a value of 0.88. However, the results of both these elements

exceed the required level of I-CVI value for acceptance, which is 0.83 for a minimum of six experts (Lynn, 1986; Polit et al., 2007). The universal agreement value too reached UA =1, which is 100% agreement except for the two similar items under the domain of external elements, which are the availability of religious education in government schools and opportunities to learn in evening and weekend school for religious education both these elements show 88% agreement among the participant experts. However, the overall universal acceptance value is 0.95, 95% agreement for the elements and selected domains.

THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Madrasah education in Sri Lanka is based on institutional theory, demonstrating social structural resilience. This theory considers three pillars: (1) regulative, (2) normative and (3) cognitive legitimacy for social structures like schools (Meyer & Rowan, 1983; Selznick, 1996). Regulative legitimacy stems from the state and government's applicable regulations. For this study, the regulative legitimacy is to be established with the proposed elements, since most of these elements are already incorporated into the country's law. For instance, the Ministry of Education will legitimise the proposed governing authority board with necessary legislation, enabling it to meet legal standard requirements, unlike how *madrasahs* currently operate under the DMRCA, since DMRCA's legitimacy is questioned in managing educational institutions (Parliament, 2020; Rislan et al., 2025; Zuhyle et al., 2020). The necessity of such a board can be triangulated with the previous studies and the recommendations of the Sri Lanka parliament's sectoral oversight committee. However, the finding of this study differs from previous proposals in that such a board shall be under the Ministry of Education, not under the DMRCA, while DMRCA shall be a part of this board. This study, in line with the theoretical background, proposes that an educational institution's legal legitimacy can be obtained only through the most relevant arm of the government.

The *madrasah* education must follow the standards of MOE requirements, including necessities to establish a *madrasah,* teacher qualifications, and curriculum standards to meet the MOE's Sri Lanka Qualification Framework (SLQF). The legitimacy will enhance enforcement mechanisms, including inspections, audits, and penalties for non-compliance. The trust of *madrasah* stakeholders will increase, particularly among parents, teachers, students, and management. The regulatory demands by the MOE will continuously improve *madrasah* education in the long run. Normative legitimacy is achieved by adhering to social norms, values, and professional standards in the Sri Lankan context. The domain of relations under which community engagement will enhance the knowledge of cultural diversity for normative legitimacy. Cognitive legitimacy is obtained from the rules and norms that exist within the environment. This research considered the opinions and expertise of subject matter experts in *madrasah* education to identify the challenges, and all existing norms in this field were considered influential elements. Furthermore, the importance of successful *madrasah* education for Islamic scholars is crucial to the well-being of society. Hence, the findings of this research, along with the proposed domains, can contribute to achieving cognitive legitimacy.

The Durkheimian theory of networking has more significant theoretical implications for *madrasah* education. The findings of this study imply a theoretical framework that could network *madrasah* education in Sri Lanka with the mainstream educational sphere. This theory involves working for a specific period or towards a common goal while maintaining the differences and uniqueness of individual organisations. The construct of this theory includes (1) mechanical solidarity, (2) organic solidarity and (3) collective consciousness (Durkheim & Giddens, 1972). Mechanical solidarity refers to the cohesiveness within a society due to its shared similarities and common behaviours, values, and norms. In the case of the proposed domains, adapting to the country's shared educational vision and goals, and integrating with the Sri Lankan Qualification Framework (SLQF), will unify all *madrasahs* under a governing board, establish minimum standard requirements and standard operating procedures, thereby strengthening mechanical solidarity.

Organic solidarity refers to the interdependencies that arise from the specialised roles of each member within an organisation. The unique board of management for each *madrasah* aims to set and achieve its objectives, selecting a curriculum in line with different schools of thought and adopting various stages of the Sri Lankan Qualification

framework according to the vision and expectations of the *madrasah*. This will ensure the specialisation of the selected *madrasah*s. The collective consciousness refers to the unifying forces within organisations or society. *Madrasah* education aims to produce religious scholars who will unite all *madrasahs* in a shared goal. The element of relations, both horizontally and vertically, will enhance the collaboration among the *madrasahs* and networking.

Singapore's Joint *Madrasah* System (JMS) Framework is among the few integrated *madrasah* organisational frameworks in Muslim minority countries. In some aspects, the proposed domains represent that the *madrasah* education in Sri Lanka is similar to JMS. However, it contradicts a few other aspects due to the context in both countries. Some previous research, such as Zuhyle et al. (2020), has referred to the Singapore JMS framework for Sri Lanka's *madrasah* education, highlighting a few contextual similarities between the two countries. However, these proposals overlooked the fundamental difference in the educational philosophy in which the educational structures are built in both countries. Singapore is a secular state by constitution, applying the principle of secularism in the general education sphere.

Contrastingly, Sri Lanka, although not a secular state, promotes religiosity and religious values and principles as one of its educational goals. The philosophical stance on education between the two countries has a significant impact on the country's educational infrastructure. For instance, religious subjects are excluded from Singapore's national curriculum and schools. In Sri Lanka, religious education is a core subject in the school curriculum. Hence, this fundamental difference shall be considered in educational policy borrowings between the two countries and contexts of *madrasah* education.

The JMS framework shows integration with the country's mainstream education in certain areas. The Ministry of Education controls all educational institutions, a positive aspect of the Singapore framework. The *madrasah* is registered as a private school under the Ministry of Education in Singapore. The MOE monitors and controls *the* quality of *madrasahs* through the collective achievements in national examinations, including the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) and the General Certificate of Education (Ordinary Level) – GCE OL. Concerning operations, with the collaboration of Muslim community representatives, including the *Madrasah* Council of Singapore and the Muslim Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS), the MOE appoints the *Madrasah* management committee to manage the operations of each *madrasah.* This ensures that qualified individuals will be on the management committee of the *madrasah* in Singapore. The JMS framework also provides career prospects or a ladder for *madrasah* graduates to continue and integrate with mainstream general education.

The proposed domains for *madrasah* education in Sri Lanka comprise similar arrangements in the Sri Lankan context, such as forming a governing authority under the Ministry of Education. The proposed governing authority monitors and controls the quality of *madrasahs,* the duration of *madrasah* education and the number of *madrasahs* explicitly required to address the demand. The composition of this authority can include the DMRCA representatives and community civil leadership, such as All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama and the National Shoora Council. Regarding the *Madrasah* board of management, it is not feasible to appoint directly under the MOE, as it is based in Singapore, since the number of *madrasahs* in Sri Lanka is significantly higher than the six in Singapore. For this reason, the minimum qualifications for *Madrasah* board members, training for *Madrasah* board members, succession planning, and accountability for *Madrasah* board members shall be defined as proposed in this domain. Applying institutional theory and Durkheimian network theory constructs provides a robust and clear understanding of how *madrasahs* function as critical and social institutions. The interconnectedness between the constructs of both theories — regulative, normative, and cognitive legitimacy —underlines the purpose and operation of *madrasah* education in Sri Lanka. Mechanical solidarity, organic solidarity, and collective consciousness emphasise preserving the unique identity and purpose of *madrasah* education while adapting to the demands of the country's diverse and interconnected general education sphere. In brief, the theoretical insights of this study provide a robust foundation for *madrasah* education in Sri Lanka that is socially transformative and contextually relevant.

CONCLUSION

Individuals and community groups manage the contemporary *madrasah* education in Sri Lanka. The MOE in Sri Lanka does not manage the *madrasah* education. The DMRCA has played a role in the registration of *madrasah* education since its inception in 1981. Since the role of the DMRCA is limited in managing *madrasah* education, the challenges faced by *madrasah* education are enormous. Although previous studies have called for reform in *madrasah* education, this study makes a breakthrough by exploring all the challenges from different perspectives. The triangulation of data from existing studies and subject matter experts, facilitated by the nominal group technique, provides robustness to the findings of this study. Hence, this study identifies thirty challenges of *madrasah* education under ten domains. The selected domains provide broader perspectives to address real-world challenges of *madrasah* education. Therefore, this study proposes to address the selected domains and identified challenges to enhance the century-old *madrasah* education in Sri Lanka. Since this study employed qualitative methodologies, it provides an in-depth analysis. However, the selection of qualitative methods limits the analytical triangulation of the findings. Hence, this study proposes conducting similar studies using both quantitative and mixed methods. This study also proposes future in-depth research in the selected ten domains and the development of an organisational framework for *madrasah* education in Sri Lanka to facilitate better management.

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