

# **A Review of Religious Education in Malaysia and Thailand**

**Nor Tasik Misbahrudin<sup>1</sup>, Abd Halim Mohd Noor<sup>2</sup> and Chanchai Rittiruum<sup>3</sup>**

<sup>1,2</sup> University Teknologi MARA, Cawangan Melaka,  
78000, Alor Gajah Melaka, Malaysia  
nortasik@uitm.edu.my

<sup>1,2</sup> Center for Islamic Philanthropy and Social Finance,  
University Teknologi MARA, Cawangan Melaka,  
78000 Alor Gajah Melaka, Malaysia  
drabdhahim@uitm.edu.my

<sup>3</sup> Chiang Rai Rajabhat University Chiang Rai, Thailand

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## **Abstract**

Education is one of the important agendas in the development of a country. Every country has a unique educational system to offer its citizens. Mostly there are few types and levels of education offered by the government of a country. In Malaysia, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Higher Education are responsible for overseeing education matters. Besides mainstream education, Malaysia is also popular with religious education. Since Malaysia is an Islamic country, the majority of religious education in the country is centered on Islam, and Tahfiz education is the most widely practiced. Currently, this education has received a huge interest among parents and children itself. In contrast to Thailand, Thai Buddhist temples have surpassed all other learning institutions as the primary source of religious instruction for the vast majority of the populace. The education is focused on monastic, which is divided into four categories. Hence, this article will review the religious education practices in Malaysia as well as Thailand. This study used library research to gather all information of religious education from both countries. It is found that both religious education in these countries has developed in recent years, becoming more systematic and gaining in popularity.

**Keywords:** Education, Malaysia, Religious Education, Thailand.

## **1. Introduction**

Malaysia currently has two distinct educational systems: public and private. However, both public and private education institutions must register with the appropriate regulatory body to operate legally. Malaysia's mainstream education system is based on government-run national schools from preschool to tertiary level. Additionally, international schools, vernacular schools, and religious schools are available. Sekolah Pondok, Madrasah, and other Islamic schools are among Malaysia's earliest forms of education.

Meanwhile, in the past, Thai society revered Buddhist temples as centers of education because Buddhism provides education opportunities for everyone, monks and laypeople alike. Those who have completed the ordination study are considered knowledgeable and capable of good behavior due to their exposure to moral and general academic education. Historically, anyone interested in pursuing a career in government was required to complete religious education. However, after Thailand's new educational system was implemented, a portion of the temple's land was donated to construct a general public school adjacent to the temple. Wat

Mahannapharam School is the first school to adopt this strategy. Since then, normal education has been separated from the temple, and a public school system for basic education has been established. As a result, the popularity of parents sending their children to ordination and temple education is dwindling, but monk education (Sangha Education) continues to operate.

## **2. Religious Education in Malaysia**

Before independence, Muslims in Malaya received informal instruction in Islam from Quranic teachers and Islamic scholars. They were taught only the fundamentals of Islam, such as how to write the Quran (Jawi), all matters about the Fardhu Ain, the pillars of Islam, and the pillars of Faith (Amin & Jasmi, 2012). Residential schools, referred to as Pondok in Melaka, emerged as the prototype institutions offering an organized form of Islamic education. The *buka Kitab* (opening the book) method was used. A Tok Guru would sit in the center of a semicircle formed by his students and deliver lessons emphasizing memorization. By a simple testimonial, the Tok Guru himself graduated his student (Hamid, 2017).

Education on Islamic fundamentals flourished in the 18th century due to scholars' and preachers' migration from the Middle East to Malaya (Abdullah, Abdullah, & Rosman, 2015). The migration has accelerated Islam's spread in Malaya. However, Islam's spread encountered a few impediments, such as a lack of teachers and schools. As a result, some scholars established both a home and a mosque to teach the Quran.

Since independence on August 31, 1957, jurisdiction over Islamic education has been ambiguous between the federal government and the nine state governments, each led by a Malay ruler who serves as the state's head of the Islamic religion. Islamic education in Malaysia is classified into two types: formal and informal. Formal Islamic schools are integrated into the national education system and offer secular as well as religious education. Students enrolled in formal Islamic schools must sit for the national examination and use their high school diploma to pursue post-secondary education. While most formal Islamic schools are public and administered by the Ministry of Education or the State Islamic Religious Council, many formal Islamic private schools have opened in recent years.

As shown in Figure 1 below, the management of Islamic schools in Malaysia involves overlapping jurisdictions of three agencies: the Ministry of Education (via the Islamic Education Section), the State Islamic Religious Council, and the Department of Islamic Development (JAKIM). This is because the responsible authority for each school depends on the type of school even though the schools are running the tahfiz curriculum. Schools are a federal matter meanwhile, Islamic schools are a state matter.

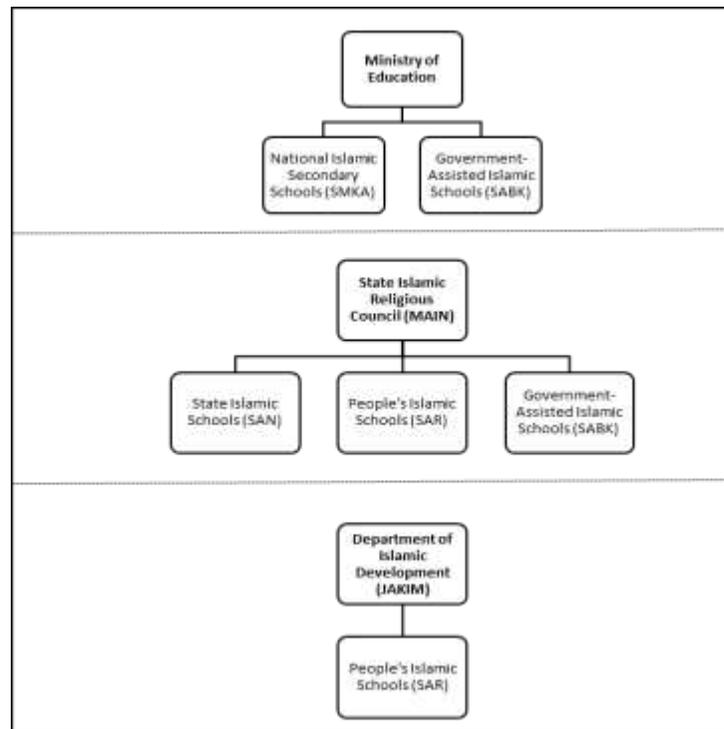


Fig. 1 Management of Formal Islamic Schools in Malaysia

Meanwhile, Pondok, Tahfiz institutions, and some People's Islamic Schools are informal Islamic schools (SAR). These schools offer an exclusively Islamic curriculum, with the sole emphasis on memorizing the al-Quran in Tahfiz institutions. Many Muslim parents enroll their children in these institutions to believe that they will receive a more rigorous religious education than they would receive in informal Islamic schools, thereby preparing their children to become better Muslims (Hassan, Fakhrudin, Mutalib, & Jaafar, 2015). However, Tahfiz institutions were recently integrated into formal Islamic schools such as SMKA, SBPI, and SABK by adding a Tahfiz subject.

## 2.1 Tahfiz Institution and the Development Overview

Tahfiz institutions are educational institutions dedicated to teaching students to memorize and recite the entire Quran (Bani, Katan, Noor, & Fatah, 2014; Muhamad al-Bakri, 2013). Malaysia now has 1267 Tahfiz institutions, up from 58 in 1999. The institutions are privately owned or managed by the federal government through the Islamic Development Department Malaysia (JAKIM), the Ministry of Education, and state governments through SIRC. Over 91% of Tahfiz institutions in Malaysia are privately owned (Haz, 2007). Foundations may privately hold Tahfiz institutions, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), or individuals. These institutions may be registered with the Society Registration Office, the state government, or the Ministry of Education. Based on data from Simpeni Jakim, there are 980 registered private Tahfiz in Malaysia. The distribution of Tahfiz in Malaysia is presented in Table 1 below. Selangor has the highest number of registered tahfiz with 334, followed by Johor and Perak. The huge gap between the number of registered tahfiz is due to each state's different rules and regulations. For

instance, in Selangor tahfiz school cannot operate before they complete their registration process. While the other state give permission to register after they started their operation.

Table 1: Number of Tahfiz Institutions Registered with Darul Quran JAKIM

No	State	Number of Tahfiz Institution registered with JAKIM
1	Johor	122
2	Kedah	62
3	Kelantan	55
4	Kuala Lumpur	24
5	Melaka	42
6	Negeri Sembilan	46
7	Pahang	61
8	Perak	79
9	Perlis	14
10	Pulau Pinang	35
11	Sabah	39
12	Sarawak	17
13	Selangor	334
14	Terengganu	50
	Total	<b>980</b>

\*Data as per September 2021

As previously stated, Malaysia's Tahfiz curriculum is non-standardized. There are two distinct types of curricula available: traditional and modern. The traditional curriculum focuses exclusively on memorization and knowledge associated with memorization. Meanwhile, contemporary Tahfiz incorporates their Tahfiz syllabus into their regular education curriculum. The combination of two syllabuses has gained popularity in Malaysia due to its potential to assist students in memorizing the Quran while also excelling academically (Solahuddin Ismail, 2018). Indirectly, this increases the number of opportunities for Tahfiz students to study in government institutions. However, the combined syllabus was primarily used by Tahfiz working for the state or federal government, while most private institutions continued to use their syllabus.

To strengthen Tahfiz institutions, the government has implemented a National Tahfiz Education Policy (DPTN). DPTN's primary objective is to ensure that Tahfiz institutions produce students who pursue careers in professional services. Tahfiz Turath, Tahfiz Science, Tahfiz Dini, and Tahfiz Vocational are the four primary curriculum modules offered by DPTN. Additionally, the collaboration between Darul Quran and higher education institutions to offer a Diploma in Tahfiz al-Quran wal Qiraat is a government-funded program designed to assist students in pursuing higher education. This programme is currently being implemented in ten universities and colleges throughout Malaysia, including Universiti Tenaga Nasional (UNITEN), Universiti Teknikal Malaysia Melaka (UTeM), Kolej Pengajian Islam Johor (MARSAH), Kolej Universiti Islam Melaka (KUIM), and Universiti Kuala Lumpur (UNIKL).

### 3. Religious Education in Thailand

In comparison to Malaysia, religious education in Thailand focuses on monastic education. Monk education can be broadly classified into four domains: 1) Dharma Study, 2) Study of the

Pali, 3) Elementary Education, and 4) Postsecondary Education (Religious Affairs Department MoE, 1984).

#### 1. Dhamma Research (Nak Tham)

The Dhamma Study focuses on the study of Dhamma and Vinaya for monks to correctly practice Buddhist principles and accurately transmit Buddhist knowledge to others. The Nak Tham curriculum is divided into three levels: elementary (Nak Tham Tri), intermediate (Nak Tham Tho), and advanced (Nak Tham Ek), with each level requiring an examination to pass (Payulpitack, 1991).

#### 2. Pali Study

Pali studies begin in the third grade and continue through the ninth grade (Prayok 3-Prayok 9). While grades 1 and 2 are not intended to be self-contained, they are considered prerequisites to grade 3. When a student completes all three grades, he is offered the "Parian" title and addressed as "Maha" before his name. Pali studies focus on the translation of Buddhist principles from Pali to Thai and from Thai to Pali. The translation requires a literal rendering of the Pali texts; free translation is not permitted. Pali studies are classified according to the division of the underlying Tipitaka. For example, the Sutta Pitaka is appropriate for grades 3–6, the Vinaya Pitaka is appropriate for grades 6–8, and the Abhidhamma Pitaka is appropriate for grades 8–9. Students must memorize and reproduce an accurate translation of the original scriptures (Payulpitack, 1991).

#### 3. General Education

The Ministry of Education is entrusted with establishing regulations approving the Phra Pariyattitham Schools, General Education Division. This is a form of applied education for Sangha Education, which is concerned with the development of knowledgeable successors capable of a profound understanding of dharma principles and the propagation of Buddhism. Once monks and novices leave monasticism and transition to lay life, they can pursue education at a government school and eventually enter government positions or other job opportunities to benefit themselves and the country. This type of study is currently available at temples (Religious Affairs Department MoE, 1984).

#### 4. Higher Education (Sangha University)

King Rama V recognized the importance of education and thus enacted systematic reforms in line with many civilized countries to improve educational opportunities for citizens and novice monks. King Rama V urged monks to combine the study of the Buddhist Scriptures and modern education. As a result, King Rama V mandated the establishment of two Buddhist universities to serve as the primary mechanism for providing higher education to monks, namely Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University (MCU) and Mahamongkut Buddhist University (MBU). Additionally, monks may study at other universities, both domestic and international. MCU and MBU offer bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degree programs to monks and laypeople, and some programs are offered in English (Somsak, 2015).

Higher education for Thai monks has grown in popularity over the last decade, as evidenced by MCU's student statistics (Office of Registration and Education Evaluation, MCU, 2020). The following table summarises the number of undergraduate and graduate students enrolled at MCU over the last decade.

Table 2: Number of undergraduate and graduate students of MCU

Year	Number of Students
2008	11710
2009	14516
2010	17009
2011	19054
2012	23588
2013	25255
2014	26330
2015	23955
2016	23984
2017	21235
2018	20129
2019	18420

Interestingly, while the number of undergraduate students at this Buddhist university is declining, the number of graduate students is increasing. In 2008, the ratio of graduate to undergraduate students was only 8%. (undergraduate 11710 students, graduate 885 students). However, in 2019, this ratio increased to 19%. (undergraduate 184203 students, graduate 3574 students).

The four domains of Buddhist education for Thai monks represent an intriguing area for research project endeavor, and the primary goal of this systematic Buddhist education platform is to mobilize Buddhism propagation by integrating Buddhist principles with the Thai education system to provide educational opportunities for monks and ultimately produce spiritual and academic enlightened scholars. Ven. W. Wachiramethi, for example, is an outstanding product of Thai Buddhist education. He earned a B.A. in Nak Tham Ek, Parian 9 from Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University, an M.A. in MCU, and an honorary Ph.D. from five Thai universities. Ven. W. Wachiramethi is a well-known monk, scholar, author, and social worker in Thailand who has made numerous contributions to the propagation of Buddhism and served as a role model for education in Thailand and throughout the world. Ven. W. Wachiramethi is also the first Thai to be appointed as a UNHCR Patron, promoting peace and compassion toward refugees and humanitarian crises and supporting UNHCR through the dissemination of Buddhism and Dhamma teaching to people worldwide (UNHCR, 2020).

#### 4. Conclusions

In conclusion, although religious education is not the main focus of education in a country, it nonetheless contributes to the development of national education in a certain country. Religious education is increasing in popularity in society. Many parents view this knowledge as critical

because it can help their children develop a strong spiritual foundation. In Malaysia, Islamic education has been recognized as a mainstream option, and the number of institutions offering Islamic education has increased in response to growing parental interest. Religious education is provided at the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels of education. Meanwhile, in Thailand, education for Buddhist monks is systematized, beginning with Dhamma Study (Nak Tham), Pali Study, General Education, and Higher Education. There is also an increase in acceptance of monk learning which can be seen from the increase in the number of students from 2008 to 2019 for graduate and undergraduate students.

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