



# **Safety First**

**Relationships and Sexuality Education  
(RSE) program for Muslim students in  
Victorian Islamic schools**

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## Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land on which we come together to conduct this project, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of Victoria. We pay our respects to their Elders past, present and emerging, and recognise their enduring connection to the land, waters and culture. We extend this respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, as we continue to learn and grow together on this shared land.

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## Report prepared by

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1. In line with Monash ethics guidelines, which emphasise confidentiality and anonymity of all data, these school names are pseudonyms.

## Abbreviations

<b>ACARA</b>	Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority
<b>CDT</b>	Curriculum Design Team
<b>LGBTIQ+</b>	lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, intersex, queer, asexual and other identities
<b>PAR</b>	participatory action research
<b>PLD</b>	professional learning and development
<b>RSE</b>	Relationships and Sexuality Education
<b>SBSE</b>	school-based sexuality education
<b>VCAA</b>	Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority

## Glossary

<b><i>adab</i></b>	Arabic for 'etiquette and good manners'
<b><i>deen</i></b>	Arabic for 'religion'
<b>Hadith</b>	There are a number of well-known Hadith, the authenticated sayings or actions of Prophet Muhammad that are considered part of the common domain of Muslim thought. When quoting Hadith, Muslims always end with a blessing for Prophet Muhammad: 'peace be upon him' (p.b.u.h).
<b><i>halal</i></b>	Arabic for 'permissible'
<b><i>halaqa</i></b>	Islamic pedagogical inquiry circle
<b><i>haram</i></b>	Arabic for 'prohibited'
<b><i>haya</i></b>	Arabic for 'modesty'
<b>imam</b>	community religious leader
<b>Qur'an</b>	The Holy Scripture of Islam, believed by many Muslims to be the final revelation from Allah (God). The Qur'an is regarded as perfect, eternal and unchangeable. It contains 114 chapters ( <i>suras</i> ) and 6000 verses ( <i>ayats</i> ) and serves to address all believers.
<b>sharia</b>	Islamic law
<b><i>sunnah</i></b>	lived experiences of the Prophet Muhammad

# Project Team



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# Executive Summary

## Background

Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) is a fundamental part of comprehensive school health education, focusing on various aspects of human sexuality and personal development. However, RSE remains a contentious issue, particularly for individuals from diverse faith backgrounds, including Muslim communities. While advancements in RSE have aligned with democratic and rights-based standards (UNESCO, 2018), the inclusion of open discussions on sexuality and secular ideologies in the curriculum have sparked moral panics and public protests. These concerns are particularly prominent among Muslim communities, who seek school curricula that align with their family values, beliefs, and religious views (Sanjakdar, 2021).

Despite advancements in Australian school-based sexuality education (SBSE) curricula, there is limited understanding of how Victorian Muslim young people, in particular, understand sex, sexuality and sexual health education, and their ability to make informed decisions to protect themselves. As a result, there are currently no specific school-based curriculum programs, resources, or strategies to support the sexuality educational needs of Victorian Muslim young people. The absence of a culturally and religiously appropriate sexuality education curriculum has led many Muslim parents to withdraw their children from SBSE. With limited support from home or the broader Muslim community, many young Muslims struggle to fully understand the topic.

To address this gap, this project developed the first culturally and religiously appropriate Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) school curriculum development programs, unique to each participating school, with a focus on studies in Child and Personal Safety. In collaboration with Islamic school communities (including leaders, teachers, students, and parents), health professionals, and educational consultants, this program used participatory action research (PAR) to develop individual school RSE curricula and pedagogies that integrates Islamic perspectives on sexual health and promotes awareness of child safe behaviours.

## Project Aims

1. To develop with Independent Victorian Islamic Schools a comprehensive school-based RSE program for Muslim young people
2. To build on research-informed and culturally/religiously aligned curriculum practices and pedagogy to enable school leaders and teachers to develop and implement RSE with a focus on child safety
3. To develop young Muslim people's capacity to understand, make and implement appropriate decisions that ensure their sexual and personal health and safety and those of others

## Methods

The project adopted a participatory action research (PAR) approach and spanned two years, from January 2023 to December 2024. Five Melbourne-based Islamic schools participated in the project—Asr College, Hidayah College, Ustaz College, Zakaa College and Rahman College.<sup>2</sup> In accordance with PAR, the data collection methods included in-depth individual and focus-group interviews, surveys, observations, and document analysis. The project was structured in five phases:

**Phase 1: Stakeholder engagement and discussions**

**Phase 2: Dissemination of data and individual school curriculum mapping**

**Phase 3: Professional learning and development workshops**

**Phase 4: School-based participatory action research**

**Phase 5: Sharing project outcomes**

Full details of the data collection methods used in each phase are outlined in the methodology section of this report.

The level of participation varied across the five schools. Some schools had larger numbers of participants, while others had fewer. Overall, more than 30 parents participated in focus group discussions. Over 40 leadership team members (including principals, coordinators, and subject heads) took part in in-depth interviews, with parent focus-group interviews at two schools only. Both teachers and parents completed online surveys, with close to 100 teacher responses and over 50 parent responses. Student surveys totalled 84, and 10 students were interviewed from one school only. In Phase 4, school curriculum documents, lesson plans and some classroom observations were reviewed. All participants received an explanatory statement outlining the project's purpose and were informed about their involvement in accordance with Monash University's research ethics guidelines.

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2. In line with Monash ethics guidelines, which emphasise confidentiality and anonymity of all data, pseudonyms have been used for the school names throughout the document.



## Findings

Many stakeholders (teachers, students, parents) across the participating schools were supportive of the development of an RSE curriculum, including a focus on Child and Personal Safety and Development. There was strong support for integrating the curriculum into the school's existing health and/or Islamic studies program, with only a couple of the schools suggesting RSE should be delivered as a module over a school term.

Stakeholders highlighted the need for an RSE program that equips students with the knowledge and skills to avoid dangerous situations, particularly through healthy sexual health practices. The program should empower young Muslims to make informed decisions about staying safe, protecting themselves, and behaving appropriately in various contexts. It should be factually accurate, age-appropriate, and aligned with students' developmental stages. There was consensus on the importance of teaching respectful relationships, consent, and rights and responsibilities. Both students and teachers expressed interest in strategies for navigating relationship issues. Teachers emphasised the need to address language issues to prevent violence and foster respectful relationships. Many participants viewed teaching respectful relationships including understanding gender dynamics and broader issues relevant to LGBTIQ+ communities as essential for living in today's society, but warned that such issues would be confronting and would require a sensitive approach. Many participants suggested that the curriculum should address these issues from an Islamic perspective, aiming to correct current misconceptions about Islam and Muslims as well as equip students with the tools to engage with different views respectfully.

Participants emphasised the importance of ensuring that content and delivery are culturally relevant, and focused on Islamic teachings. This approach was seen as crucial for promoting both healthy personal development and behaviour that aligns with Islamic faith principles. Parents, in particular, expressed concerns about how the curriculum might influence their children's understanding of Islam and were focused on preserving Islamic values and identity. They stressed the shared responsibility between schools and parents in educating children about RSE but also voiced concerns about maintaining control over the content and its delivery.

In conclusion, the *Safety First* program was seen as an opportunity to create a safe and supportive curriculum program and environment for students to learn about sexuality, healthy relationships and personal safety, with a strong focus on Islamic values and cultural sensitivities.



# Part 1

# Introduction and Background

## Purpose of the project

The purpose of this project was to collaborate with stakeholders from independent Victorian Islamic schools to develop a comprehensive Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) program for Muslim students, with a focus on Child and Personal Safety. While sexuality is a key aspect of Islam, rooted in the Qur'an, Hadith, *sunnah* and sharia, it remains a contentious issue in many Muslim communities. Concerns over secular views on sexuality, such as LGBTIQ+ relationships and gender fluidity, often challenge traditional Islamic perspectives. For Muslim parents, this creates urgency to protect their children's understanding of sexuality from perceived external influences, leading to resistance against 'Western' approaches to sexuality education and a desire to uphold Islamic teachings.

In Islam, sexuality is seen as a legitimate and natural part of life, with clear guidance provided on its nature and purpose. However, interpretations of sexuality within Muslim communities can vary. Misconceptions often arise from the blending of cultural traditions with religious teachings. While Islamic teachings are generally sex-positive and inclusive of sexual diversity and gender, cultural influences can sometimes lead to differing views. These cultural norms may obscure the true teachings of Islam, making open discussions about sexuality more challenging. Given the diversity within the Muslim community, it is important to find ways to engage with different perspectives on sexuality.

For Muslim youth, especially those raised in the West, developing an understanding of their sexuality involves negotiating between Islamic teachings and Western ideologies. This ongoing process of balancing religious and cultural traditions with modern societal norms is part of their journey towards forming an idealised Islamic identity. Despite

the cultural challenges, many Muslims remain committed to the teachings of the Qur'an and Hadith regarding sexuality, sex education, and relationships.

Thus, the aim of this project was to engage in school based curriculum mapping to create an RSE program that respects these complexities, addressing the needs of Muslim students while aligning with both Islamic principles and the realities of living in a diverse, multicultural society. This curriculum program was developed in collaboration with parents, educators, and community leaders to ensure it fosters healthy, respectful relationships while staying true to Islamic values.

## Description of the project

In Victoria, there are three school sectors: government, Catholic, and independent. Although RSE has been part of Australian education for over 40 years (Ollis & Coll, 2018), its delivery varies across states and territories. Independent schools have the autonomy to develop their own curricula, teaching methods and policies, while complying with state laws and guidelines. However, all Victorian schools must adhere to the Child Safe Standards, which require policies and practices to manage the risk of child abuse. Under the *Australian Education Act 2013*, schools must implement either the Australian Curriculum or an alternative curriculum approved by ACARA and listed on its recognition register, such as the International Baccalaureate (primary-years or middle-years program), Australian Steiner Curriculum Framework or Montessori National Curriculum. As Islamic schools are recognised as part of the Victorian independent school sector, this project used PAR approach to create individualised RSE curricula tailored to each school's unique needs. Table 1 below outlines the five phases involved in this project.

Project Phase	Phase Objectives	Phase Activity	Date	Participants
<b>Phase 1:</b> Stakeholder engagement and discussions	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To engage in discussions with various school stakeholders including principals, leaders, teachers, students and parents, about the desired goals and outcomes for a comprehensive school-based RSE program</li> <li>To gather ideas from stakeholders through an online survey and individual and focus-group interviews</li> </ol>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Distributed the survey at each school</li> <li>Held parent/community information sessions, if necessary, to discuss the project</li> <li>Conducted interviews with parent groups and the leadership team</li> <li>Professionally transcribed interviews in preparation for Phase 2</li> </ul>	February 2023 – August 2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Whole school community, including leaders, teachers, students and parents</li> </ul>
<b>Phase 2:</b> Dissemination of data and individual school curriculum mapping	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To engage in a comprehensive analysis and reporting of data gathered in Phase 1</li> <li>To disseminate analysed data to individual schools</li> <li>To engage in discussions about how to use the data to begin RSE curriculum development</li> <li>To meet with each school twice during this phase to provide guidance, answer questions, and co-create tailored learning experiences that focus on RSE and classroom strategies</li> </ol>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Each school established a Curriculum Design Team (CDT) to work on the project</li> <li>Project team analysed the data collected from surveys and interviews</li> <li>Project team compiled the data into information booklets for each school</li> <li>Project team scheduled meetings with each school to share the data collected in Phase 1</li> <li>Using the data booklets, CDTs engaged in curriculum mapping exercises with the project team</li> </ul>	September 2023 – October 2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>CDT at each school</li> <li>Members of the project team</li> </ul>
<b>Phase 3:</b> Professional learning and development workshops	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To plan and deliver professional learning and development workshops about different areas to assist CDT in the development and delivery of an RSE at their school</li> </ol>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Organised a series of three professional learning sessions at ISV over a one-week period; sessions focused on fostering collaboration between different sexual health community sectors and developing curricula at the school level</li> <li>After the workshops, CDTs at each school began developing their RSE curriculum</li> </ul>	February 2024	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>CDT at each school</li> <li>The project team</li> </ul>

Project Phase	Phase Objectives	Phase Activity	Date	Participants
<b>Phase 4:</b> School-based participatory action research (PAR)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To assemble a CDT at each school, consisting of teachers, leaders and parent groups</li> <li>The CDT to engage in PAR throughout a chosen school term.</li> </ol>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Project team guided the CDT at each school on how to implement the PAR process</li> <li>Each school trialled its newly developed RSE curriculum over the course of a school term</li> <li>Project team met with the CDT to track progress, provide guidance, and facilitate improvements</li> </ul>	March 2024 – August 2024	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>CDT at each school</li> <li>The project team</li> </ul>
<b>Phase 5:</b> Sharing project outcomes	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To meet with other schools, share and celebrate project outcomes</li> </ol>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Project team organised a one-day event at ISV, where each school presented their RSE curriculum, shared challenges and celebrated achievements</li> <li>Each school also discussed future work and plans in this area</li> </ul>	December 2024	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>CDT at each school</li> <li>The project team</li> </ul>

**Table 1:** Details of the five phases involved in the *Safety First* project

This project was set within the context of Victorian Islamic school education and curriculum reform for two key reasons. First, it addressed issues related to sexuality and Muslim young people, particularly through the lens of Islamic thought. Islamic schools have become an integral part of the Australian education system, offering Islamic perspectives and developing Islamised curricula. These schools provide the growing Muslim community with an educational framework that contrasts with the secular nature of many mainstream Australian schools. However, a key paradox exists: despite claiming to offer a 'holistic Islamic education', subjects that cover sex, sexuality, relationships, pleasure and desire are often excluded from the curriculum. This project presented an opportunity to co-develop a comprehensive, school-based RSE curriculum tailored for Muslim students, making it the first initiative of its kind in Australian Islamic school education.

Second, a school curriculum is a powerful tool for driving educational change. By situating this research within curriculum reform methodology (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005), Australian Islamic schools and their curricula become key sites for development and reform, fostering the creation of new knowledge in RSE, Child and Personal Safety. The potential for a comprehensive RSE curriculum for Muslim young people opens up alternative approaches to sexuality education and offers diverse understandings of sexualities. As independent institutions, Islamic schools have the opportunity to assert local and collective knowledge on this topic, fostering a deeper awareness and dialogue about religious identity. This also invites broader conversations about the value of embracing pluralism in this field. Thus, this project served as a chance to acknowledge and legitimise the perspectives and voices of marginalised Muslims on a curriculum issue that has sparked considerable debate within the Western Muslim community.



# Part 2

# Review of Related Research



## Sexuality Education

Sexuality education in schools is a crucial component of comprehensive Health and Human Development education, offering students accurate and age-appropriate information about human sexuality, relationships and sexual health. The aim is to promote understanding of key concepts such as consent, gender identity, sexual orientation and personal boundaries, while addressing issues like sexual health, contraception and the prevention of sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Traditionally, sexuality education focused heavily on biomedical and hygienic aspects, often delivered through conservative, teacher-led pedagogies (Logan, 1980). However, contemporary approaches recognise the importance of addressing the socio-cultural contexts in which young people develop. This shift acknowledges the need for education that reflects the realities and tensions between individual experiences and broader societal norms.

There is an increasing demand from young people for reliable sexuality information that helps them navigate the transition from childhood to adulthood. Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) is one such approach, offering a curriculum-based process that covers the cognitive, emotional, physical and social aspects of sexuality. CSE promotes respectful relationships, understanding of human rights, gender equality, and the prevention of sexual risks and ill health (UNESCO, 2018). Without high-quality sexuality education, young people may be vulnerable to harmful sexual behaviours and exploitation. When delivered appropriately, school-based sexuality education empowers students to make informed decisions about relationships and their sexual identity.

## Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in Australia

The Family Planning Alliance Australia (2016) defines RSE as an ongoing learning process that begins at birth and spans an individual's life, addressing the physical, emotional, mental and social aspects of sexuality and relationships. The goal is to create a safe, supportive learning environment where students can openly discuss issues related to sexuality and relationships, enabling them to make informed, responsible choices. RSE is delivered through a combination of curricula and programs, which may vary by state, territory and school sector. The content and delivery methods differ across schools, with some integrating RSE into broader health education, while others offer specialised courses on sexual health.

The Australian Curriculum provides guidelines for teaching RSE, emphasising inclusivity, respect and the importance of critical thinking in relationships. RSE covers a wide range of topics, including consent, communication, gender identity, sexual orientation, contraception, STIs, and reproductive health. National policies addressing violence against women and children have significantly influenced RSE's development. For example, the Australian Government Department of Social Services and the Council of Australian Governments highlight the importance of RSE in promoting respectful relationships and preventing violence. Organisations like Our Watch have advocated for RSE as a tool to prevent domestic violence and foster cultural change by challenging harmful gender stereotypes. These policies align with national priorities to create safer communities and promote gender equity, underscoring the critical role of education in shaping societal attitudes and behaviours.

In a safe learning environment, Australian students should have access to age-appropriate RSE that respects diversity and uses inclusive resources that represent various cultures, religions, sexual orientations, gender identities, and family values (Family Planning Alliance Australia, 2016). To support this, the Victorian government established the Safe Schools program in 2010, fostering a supportive environment for LGBTIQ+ students (Safe Schools, 2022). Although the program expanded nationwide in 2013, it faced political criticism, leading to its cessation in several states in 2017. As states developed their own RSE programs, there was an increased focus on ensuring that programs used in schools adhered to strict guidelines to prevent potential risks such as child sexual abuse or grooming (Kelleher, 2017). This scrutiny is part of broader efforts to align with the Child Safe Standards, ensuring that schools protect children from harm and create safe, inclusive spaces for learning.

## **Child Safety and Child Safety Standards**

Over the past few decades, changes in people's sexual attitudes and behaviours, along with a growing recognition of child abuse, have prompted many countries to take these issues more seriously. In response, numerous governments have implemented mandatory child safety standards to protect children and young people. Australia began addressing these issues systematically with the establishment of a six-member Royal Commission on January 11, 2013, tasked with investigating how and why sexual abuse occurred within Australian institutions, and providing recommendations to prevent further abuse (Moore & McArthur, 2017). The Commission's primary goal was to examine how institutions responded to instances of child abuse in the past and identify failures in systems meant to protect vulnerable children.

The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse uncovered widespread evidence of abuse within Australian institutions, revealing that those in positions of authority often failed to take appropriate action. In many cases, perpetrators were moved to different roles, allowing them to continue working with children despite credible concerns about their behaviour (Commission for Children and Young People, 2021). Based on interviews with 121 children aged nine to 17, the Commission's final report highlighted significant systemic issues and offered several recommendations for improvement. A key finding emphasised the importance of understanding child safety dynamics and fostering trustworthy relationships between adults and young people. The report also defined 'safe environments' as those that are structured and orderly, noting that while being safe and feeling safe are related, they do not always occur simultaneously. It stressed the need to ensure that children not only are safe but also feel safe in all aspects of society (Moore & McArthur, 2017).

In response to these findings, the Royal Commission recommended the introduction of Child Safe Standards in 2019 to promote the safety and wellbeing of children across Australian institutions. The Victorian government strengthened these standards in 2021, recognising the need to embed child safety into the culture of organisations. These enhanced standards aim to create environments free from discrimination, promoting diversity and inclusion. They also require institutions to educate staff on issues related to sexual orientation, intersex status, and gender identity, while respecting and supporting children's decisions regarding their gender identity, including their preferred names and pronouns (Commission for Children and Young People, 2021).

To support the implementation of these standards, the Victorian government developed tools to help organisations assess and improve their practices. These tools focus on aspects such as the perception of diversity, experiences of discrimination, children’s vulnerabilities, and the empowerment of children in their interactions with adults. One such tool, titled ‘How empowering is my organisation?’ (see Figure 1 below), is used to evaluate an organisation’s effectiveness in implementing child safety practices (Commission for Children and Young People, 2021, p. 37). These tools are designed to help institutions adopt child-centred practices that not only protect children but also foster an environment where children feel respected and safe.

The Commission for Children and Young People (2022b) considers an organisation safe for children when it ‘takes deliberate steps to protect children from physical, sexual, emotional and psychological abuse and neglect’ (p. 9). A child-safe organisation, thus, is an organisation that prioritises ‘children’s safety and wellbeing’ and ‘fosters and demonstrates openness’ (p. 9). Currently, the Commission has the power to regulate almost all organisations in Victoria and make certain that these organisations comply with the standards. Legislative changes starting in January 2023 aim to strengthen and widen the Commission’s supervision of child safety standards (Commission for Children and Young People, 2022b).



**Empowerment tool 1:**  
How empowering is my organisation?

Part three: Tools

My organisation							
	1	2	3	4	5	How do we know?	What can we improve?
	None of the time		Some of the time		All of the time		
Leaders demonstrate that they value children and young people and their views							
Leaders demonstrate that they value children’s rights							
Your organisation celebrates diversity – different cultures, genders, ages, sexualities and religions							
Your organisation actively discourages discrimination against people (including children and young people) on the basis of culture, gender, age, sexuality or religion							
Your organisation is aware of children and young people’s vulnerabilities							
Your organisation has strategies in place to empower children in their interactions with adults and within the organisation							
Your organisation has invested in opportunities to enable children and young people to have their say							
Your organisation has policies in place that clearly articulate how children and young people influence the organisation							
Your organisation supports staff to have appropriate and empowering relationships with children and young people							

**Figure 1:** How empowering is my organisation?  
(Source: Commission for Children and Young People)

This ongoing effort to create safe and inclusive environments underscores the vital role that education plays in preventing abuse and promoting wellbeing. In this context, sexuality education in schools is particularly important, as it equips young people with the knowledge and skills to understand their rights, set boundaries and foster respectful, safe relationships. Providing comprehensive sexuality education not only helps protect children from harm but also empowers them to navigate their personal and social lives with confidence, ensuring they are both safe and feel safe in all aspects of their development.

## RSE, Culture and Religion

Culture and religion play a significant role in shaping how sexuality education is perceived and taught in different communities. Cultural values and religious beliefs influence attitudes towards topics like gender roles, sexual orientation, and relationships, which in turn affect the content and approach of sexuality education programs. In some cultures or religious groups, traditional teachings may emphasise abstinence or discourage open discussions about sexuality, while others may promote respect, consent and healthy relationships. While adherence to a specific religious moral code can shape a sexuality education curriculum, evidence suggests that in many societies, 'cultural resistances are more important than religious prohibitions and affect more the nature and content of sexual health education' (Latifnejad Roudsari et al., 2013).

Research indicates that socio-cultural neglect in RSE for children and young people is prevalent in many countries, highlighting the importance of developing an understanding of sexuality education that is inclusive of varying cultural and religious perspectives (Al-Saadoon, Al-Adawi & Al-Adawi, 2021). Sexual health programs that fail to acknowledge

religious and cultural diversity can experience 'breakdowns' leading to rejection of government initiatives and reduced effectiveness in schools (Rasmussen et al., 2015, p. 49). Many researchers argue that RSE programs can be successful if they are based on 'culturally appropriate curricula' (Aguilar et al., 2023). Therefore, it is crucial for sexuality education programs to be sensitive to these diverse cultural and religious contexts, ensuring they respect differing beliefs while still providing accurate, inclusive and age-appropriate information to support young people's health and wellbeing.

## RSE: An Islamic Perspective

Islam acknowledges the importance of sexual needs and relationships, and discussions about sex and sexual health are not inherently taboo in Islam. The Qur'an, Hadith and the *sunnah* of Prophet Muhammad emphasise the significance of sexuality within marital and family life. Sexual health education in Islam is considered a vital part of a child's religious upbringing, with many Muslim parents and educators recognising its importance for both the safety of children and the success of marriages when approached in a culturally and religiously appropriate manner.

Sex education programs for Muslim young people should integrate principles from Islamic teachings and adapt content to produce better outcomes. One such principle is *haya*, which refers to feelings of conscientiousness, shame, bashfulness and modesty. *Haya* can be understood as the feelings that prevent inappropriate behaviour (Elshinawy, 2021; Elias et al., 2019; Ermayani, 2020; Sanjakdar, 2004). Certain elements of current mainstream sex education, such as demonstrations of condom use, explicit videos, or detailed images of the human body, typically contradict the Islamic notion of

haya. Additionally, terms like 'safe sex' and 'free sex' are seen as problematic because they lack the responsibility Islam expects within the context of marriage. Many Muslim educators assert that sex education for Muslim students should be framed within the concept of *haya* to promote a culture of modesty and shame).

Another key concept in Islamic sex education is *adab*, which refers to etiquette and good manners (Bin Ramlan, 2019). Islam emphasises the dignity of individuals in both personal and social contexts, particularly in sexual relationships. *Adab* entails following respectful sexual behaviours and avoiding prohibited actions. In the context of Islamic sex education, it is crucial to provide a proper understanding of the relationship between men and women within marriage, as well as the importance of self-restraint and avoiding deviant sexual behaviours (Ermayani, 2020). The aims of Islamic sex education are broad, focusing not only on protecting children's safety but also on shielding them from immorality and deviation (Ermayani, 2020). Topics commonly discussed in secular sex education, such as premarital sex, illicit relationships, LGBTIQ+ issues, and masturbation, need to be carefully discussed to ensure that Islamic *adab* is not compromised.

While there is agreement among Muslim parents and teachers that students need to understand the nature of their developing sexuality, the approach to teaching (pedagogy) is critical. Parents seek a sex education program that emphasises Islamic morals alongside safety and health. By incorporating teachings from the Qur'an, Hadith and sharia, sexual health education can promote both student safety and spiritual development, offering a way to explore Islamic ideology (Sanjakdar, 2009). Muslims are likely to embrace such programs if they align with Islamic values.

In the context of Australian schools, which are part of a secular and pluralistic society, it is essential for educators to recognise the diverse cultural and religious backgrounds of Muslim students (Sanjakdar, 2009). While maintaining their commitment to Islamic values, Muslim students should also be exposed to and learn to understand behaviours that may not align with Islamic teachings but are accepted in a pluralistic society such as theirs (Sanjakdar, 2004). Islamic schools can play a very important role in enabling students to better understand themselves, their faith, and their place in society, fostering awareness and understandings of broader societal values.



## RSE in Australian Islamic Schools

Australian Islamic schools have long faced challenges in addressing sex education, with many concerned that current programs contradict Islamic teachings in the Qur'an and Hadith. As a result, sex education components in the curriculum are generally opposed by Muslim parents, and subsequently many Muslim families continue to 'withdraw their children from participation in sex education programs at school' (Sanjakdar, 2009, p. 261).

While most Islamic schools in Australia acknowledge the need for sexual health education that aligns with Islamic teachings, 'very little has been achieved to make this a reality' (Sanjakdar, 2005, p. 1). Teachers at these schools often find themselves constrained by the existing curriculum structures, policies, and practices. They struggle to incorporate cultural understandings and traditions that conflict with certain aspects of RSE (Sanjakdar, 2009). To consider the possibility of integrating an Islamic perspective into the sexual health curriculum, Muslim educators seek to 'confront longstanding political issues and hegemonic structures' (Sanjakdar, 2009, p. 261). This confrontation would help the education system begin addressing the curriculum challenges and create conditions where RSE can be part of Islamic education. While support from federal and state governments is essential to develop a workable sexual health education curriculum, Islamic schools must also adopt a flexible philosophy and practices that best meet the specific educational needs of their students and wider parental community (Sanjakdar, 2005; Sanjakdar, 2009).

## Designing and Developing School Curricula

A curriculum is considered workable when its content, pedagogy, philosophy, values and goals align with the school's mission and principles. Additionally, a curriculum is accepted by a school when the time allocated for the subjects is suitable and the resources are readily accessible. If a curriculum is rejected for any reason, it becomes either a null curriculum; 'what schools do not teach' or 'what is excluded' (Eisner, 2002; Sawyer & Norris, 2015). It reflects perspectives that educators may be unaware of and choices that students are not provided with.

Educational authorities design school curricula based on current and widely accepted educational theories. For a curriculum to be successful and widely accepted, it is essential that these theories reflect a diverse range of beliefs, values, cultures and attitudes. Developing a curriculum should involve listening to the voices of teachers, students and parents from all communities and cultures. This is particularly important for Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE), in which sensitive topics are taught and discussed. Teachers should have a role in curriculum design to avoid feeling disempowered or that their pedagogical skills are undermined (Dulfer, McKernan & Kriewaldt, 2023). When teachers feel their input is valued, they are more likely to implement the curriculum effectively. Student involvement is also crucial, as Sanjakdar (2004) explains: 'students ultimately affect the curriculum by mediating it' (p. 12). Students determine how much they engage with the material, how much effort they invest in learning, and how they apply what they are taught, thereby influencing both the planned and enacted curriculum.

To develop a workable curriculum, educational leaders must challenge existing cultural and hegemonic structures in schools (Elias & Mansouri, 2023). To promote democratic curriculum decision-making, the power dynamics in schools should be dismantled (Hantzopoulos, 2015). When decision-making is collaborative, the curriculum is more likely to be developed in a critical and reflexive manner, leading to greater acceptance by schools and their communities. A successful curriculum is one that is consistently subjected to questioning, criticism, and review.

To develop an appropriate RSE curriculum for Muslim students in Australia, education leaders and authorities should adopt a positive approach to inclusive education. Specifically, they should integrate an Islamic philosophy of education, incorporate teachings from

the Qur'an and Hadith, and consider the production of Islamic knowledge, attitudes and behaviours as part of the curriculum. Similarly, Islamic schools and teachers should practice cognitive flexibility, acknowledging broader societal norms while incorporating sexuality education in a way that aligns with Islamic values. A successful RSE curriculum should involve 'the viewpoints and input of teachers, students, parents, and the wider community' (Sanjakdar, 2004, p. 10). This highlights that a well-rounded curriculum results from collaboration among all stakeholders. Inclusive education should be reflected in both curriculum theory and practice. At the same time, the curriculum should remain flexible enough to incorporate multicultural perspectives on sexuality and avoid dismissing prevailing assumptions about Australian morality, attitudes towards sex, and sexuality.



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# Part 3

# Methodology



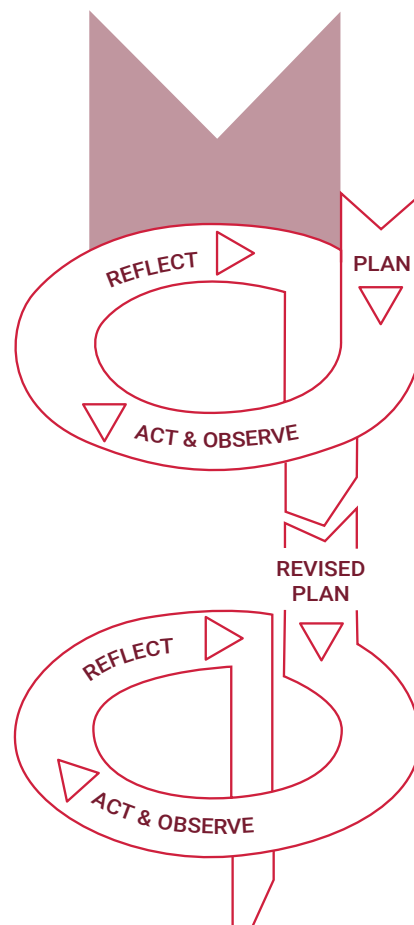
This project aimed to develop the first RSE curriculum specifically designed for Muslim young people in Australian schools. The project used participatory research methods, generating findings and recommendations based on data collected from interviews, a short survey and classroom teaching observations. An analysis of this data highlighted the need for further curriculum development, teacher training and resource development.

While the findings are specific to Muslim educational communities, they contribute to a broader conversation about the challenges and opportunities of creating a culturally and religiously inclusive RSE curriculum in Australian schools. This dialogue is especially relevant in the context of Australia, where culturally sensitive and inclusive RSE programs are still largely missing. The data also suggests that curriculum ideas generated can be used in accessible ways to cater for Muslim young people across all Australian school sectors including government schools, Catholic education and the independent sector.

In this project, participatory action research (PAR) provided a framework for developing and implementing an RSE for young Australian Muslims in Islamic school contexts.

## Participatory Action Research (PAR) and Curriculum Development

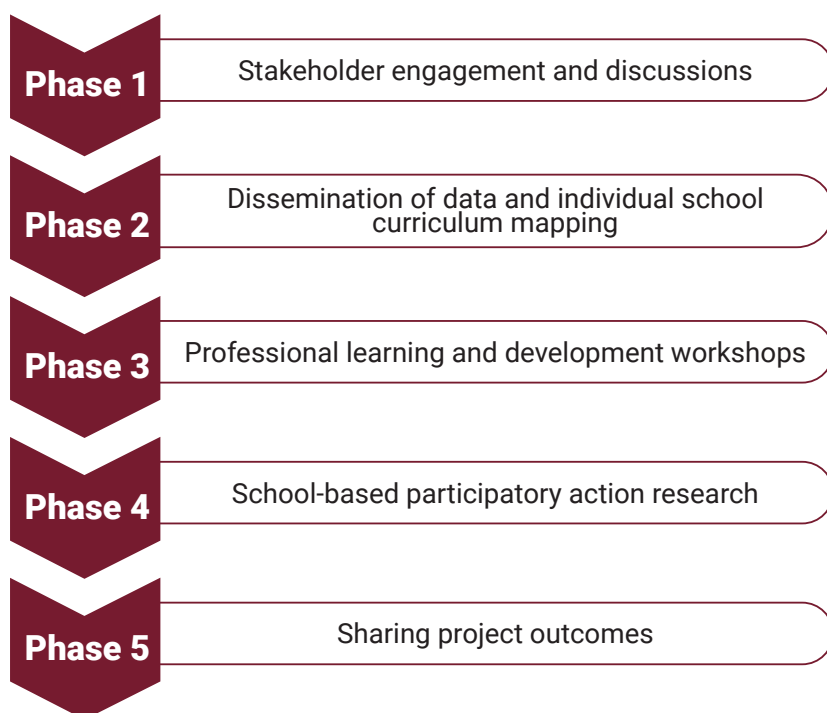
Participatory action research (PAR) is a democratic research methodology focused on practical solutions to pressing human concerns, aiming for the flourishing of individuals and communities. Described as a small-scale intervention in the real world (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000), in this project PAR combined disciplined inquiry with action to develop RSE curricula across Australian Islamic schools. Kemmis and McTaggart's (2005) PAR model, which emphasises teacher's planning, implementing the plan (act and observe) and reflecting on the planning before a new curriculum cycle begins (see Figure 2) was used in this project.



**Figure 2:** Participatory action research (PAR) model

## Phases of PAR in this project

Using PAR, the project was structured around five key phases. See Figure 3 below:



**Figure 3:** Phase of PAR in this project

## Phase 1: Stakeholder Engagement and Discussions

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Curriculum writers often emphasise the need to collect and analyse data to inform the development of a new curriculum process, including conducting a needs assessment or situational analysis. A situational analysis examines the current situation, identifies problems and explores potential solutions. In this study, the situational analysis had two main purposes: 1) to understand potential barriers to curriculum discussions about RSE at each school; and 2) to define the problem based on the perspectives of these stakeholders. This was done through interviews and a short survey.

### **Semi-Structured Interviews**

School principals, teachers, parents and students were invited to participate in semi-structured interviews, each lasting approximately 45 minutes. Members of the leadership team at each school were interviewed individually, while parents, teachers and students participated in focus-group interviews. Interview questions (see Figure 4) were the same for all participants. The interviews were conducted in a quiet room at each participating school at mutually convenient times. All interviews

were audio-recorded and professionally transcribed for analysis. The research team analysed the transcripts by grouping stakeholders' perspectives into emerging themes and categories, without heavy coding, as all details—both major and minor—were of interest. Written consent was obtained from all participants for the use of their verbatim quotes.

- 
- 1 What do you think are the key challenges faced by Muslim parents/students today in Australia?
  - 2 What do you think Muslim families living in Australia want for their children's education?
  - 3 In your opinion, what are the fundamental educational responsibilities of Australian Islamic schools? What is the responsibility of this school?
  - 4 What is your understanding of a Personal Safety and Development program including studies in Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE)?
  - 5 In what ways does this school currently offer a Personal Safety and Development program including studies in Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE)?
  - 6 What kind of changes/improvements to a Personal Safety and Development program including studies in Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) do you want to see in this school?
  - 7 What do you consider to be acceptable or unacceptable aspects of a Personal Safety and Development program including studies in Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) at this school? (i.e. what areas of study should be included/not included and why?)
  - 8 What do you think is the best way to handle the more 'sensitive' topics in RSE, such as LGBTIQ+, challenging gender norms, sexual and gender diversity/equality etc?
  - 9 What do you think is the best way for this school to develop a Personal Safety and Development program including studies in Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE)?
  - 10 What would you like to see as outcomes of a Personal Safety and Development program including studies in Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) at this school?

**Figure 4:** Individual and focus-group interview questions

## Survey

A small-scale survey was used because it is easy to administer and can generate a lot of information in a short amount of time. The survey—administered to all stakeholder groups (the principal, teachers, parents, students)—included a Likert scale, ranking questions and open-ended questions to assess attitudes, opinions and beliefs on various topics. Qualtrics was used to distribute the survey via a QR code on mobile devices. The survey took approximately five minutes to complete and ensured anonymity and confidentiality, in accordance with Monash ethics guidelines. Survey content varied slightly depending on the school's RSE priorities, but generally the same questions were used across all participating schools (see Appendix 1).

## Phase 2: Dissemination of Data and Individual School Curriculum Mapping

The project team presented the findings to each school individually with the goal of helping them gain a clearer understanding of the relevant data and how to use it for curriculum mapping. Before visiting the schools, the project team asked each school to form a Curriculum Design Team (CDT). This team was intended to represent the school's staff, with members from various disciplines. The CDT responsible for curriculum design and implementation.

While the composition of the CDT varied across schools, each team included four to six members, typically consisting of a leadership team member and teachers from health and science backgrounds. After the data presentation, each school's CDT participated in a curriculum mapping exercise, using the data to inform both content and pedagogy. This collaborative exercise, facilitated by the research team, generated initial ideas that were later incorporated into Phase 3.



## Phase 3:

### Dissemination of Data and Individual School Curriculum Mapping

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Each school's CDT participated in three full-day professional learning workshops at the Independent Schools of Victoria (ISV), led by various sexual health professionals from different sectors. The workshops included: Session 1, presented by ARACY (Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth) and addressed a practical approach to improving the wellbeing of young people. Session 2, led by Sexual Health Victoria, explored the landscape of sexuality education in Victorian schools. Session 3, led by Associate Professor Fida Sanjakdar and

Dr Helen Schiele, focused on engaging in curriculum mapping and intersectional pedagogies.

Using the knowledge gained from the workshops, schools began mapping an RSE curriculum for their students to be implemented in Phase 4. In line with PAR, this process was overseen by the project team. A summary of the key ideas across the schools' curriculum planners is included later in this report.

## Phase 4:

### School-Based Participatory Action Research (PAR)

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Over the course of a school term, the CDT from each school engaged in participatory action research (PAR) to implement their newly developed program. Using focus-group interviews, the project team conducted four progress check-ins via Zoom during this phase.

#### Focus-Group Interviews

Focus-group interviews were conducted to foster discussion among the CDT on specific issues, reducing researcher control and allowing participants to develop themes important to them. This approach was particularly valuable for discussing sensitive topics, ensuring

comfort and openness. Four one-hour focus-group interviews were held with CDT members from each school, aligned with the four key stages of action research: plan, act, observe, and reflect.

1. **First Focus Group:** Focused on planning, identifying barriers to RSE curriculum conversations, and guiding action. This session also triangulated data from the survey and observations.
2. **Second Focus Group:** Discussed actions to take and trialled curriculum ideas in practice. These were flexible and subject to change based on real classroom experiences, with observations made to collect data.

3. Third Focus Group: Visited schools to observe classes in action. Observation notes were shared with the CDTs at each school.
4. Final Focus Group: Summarised the process, reflected on changes and discussed next steps using PAR.

These focus-group interviews facilitated collaboration and insight, essential for refining the program during the PAR process.

## Classroom Observations

Classroom observations are crucial for gathering data on how lessons are being delivered and how they can be improved to enhance student learning. During the classroom observations, the project team followed specific guiding questions to assess various aspects of the lesson (see Figure 5). By observing these key questions, we could gain valuable insights into the effectiveness of teaching practices, classroom management strategies, and student engagement.

- 
- 1 Are the learning objectives clearly communicated? Do students understand what they are expected to learn?
  - 2 Are students actively participating in the lesson? Is the teacher using strategies to keep students engaged, such as questioning, discussions, or hands-on activities?
  - 3 Are students engaged in the lesson, asking questions, and participating in discussions or activities?
  - 4 Is the lesson moving at an appropriate pace for the students? Is there a balance between teacher talk and student activity?
  - 5 Are various teaching methods being used (e.g., direct instruction, group work, multimedia, etc.)?
  - 6 Is the classroom environment positive and conducive to learning? Are students comfortable and respectful of each other and the teacher?
  - 7 How effectively does the teacher manage the class? Are there clear expectations for behaviour?
  - 8 How is the classroom arranged? Does the physical setup support the learning activities (e.g., group work areas, seating arrangements, resources)?
  - 9 How do students respond to the teacher's questions? Are they able to answer confidently? If not, how does the teacher support them?
  - 10 How does the teacher give feedback to students (both individually and as a class)? Is feedback constructive and encouraging?
  - 11 Is the teacher using a variety of materials and resources (e.g., handouts, technology, visual aids) to support learning?

**Figure 5:** Questions guiding classroom observations

A detailed journal of notes was taken by the project team during the observations, and feedback was provided to the teachers either immediately following the lesson or through email follow-up. The observation period was limited to one class session, lasting no more than 45 minutes. It's important to note that no student-specific data was collected;

the primary focus was on how the lesson was taught and how the teacher could use the feedback from the project team to refine their teaching strategies and inform future pedagogical decisions. In line with PAR, this process allows for ongoing professional development and the continuous improvement of teaching methods within the schools.

## Phase 5: School-Based Participatory Action Research (PAR)

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A 'Sharing and Celebration Day' was organised to discuss the outcomes of PAR at each school. Participating schools presented their new curriculum and pedagogical ideas through PowerPoint presentations. This full-day event took place at ISV from 9:00 AM to 3:00 PM in December 2024.

### Data Analysis

Survey analysis involved data coding and descriptive analysis (i.e. frequency distributions and measures of central tendencies). Graphs were used to represent the data visually and identify trends. Thematic analysis was used to analyse interview transcripts and observation/field notes in order to identify key themes. Each member of the project team individually read, coded and identified themes from the data. We then convened as a group to review and discuss each theme in depth, ensuring a comprehensive understanding. The following section of this report presents the findings, organised by these identified themes.

### Limitations

Several limitations must be considered in this study. While the project aimed for broad participation from Victorian Islamic schools, only five schools were involved. Although this is still a positive outcome, with over 15 Islamic schools in Victoria we had hoped for wider participation.

It is important to note that Asr College, Hidaya College, Ustaz College and Zakaa College were consistent participants in the project, beginning in Phase 1. However, Rahman College joined later at Phase 3, with the delay attributed to significant restructuring of the college leadership. Therefore, important information gathered during Phase 1 does not include data from Rahman College.

Despite the project team's established trust and rapport with the schools, we did not achieve the anticipated number of participants. While parents were generally willing to participate in interviews, many acted as gatekeepers, preventing their children from being interviewed. Consequently, the voices of Muslim youth were underrepresented in the study.

Classroom observations were conducted at two schools only: Asr College and Rahman College. Due to time constraints, Hidayat College did not implement classroom teaching of their program, though they have been actively working on developing and refining their RSE curriculum. Hidayat College remains dedicated to making the subject area a key and distinguished part of their educational offerings.

Although schools were supportive and attended most meetings, scheduling conflicts made it difficult to find mutually agreeable times. As a result, some schools missed key sessions, including professional learning in Phase 3 and Phase 5—the sharing of project outcomes.



# Part 4

# Findings



This project successfully enhanced participants' ability to design and implement a Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE) curriculum that aligns with their school ethos, philosophy and Child Safe Standards. Based on data from interviews, surveys and observations across participating schools, the following findings highlight a critical need for continued curriculum development, as well as the creation of diverse resources and professional learning and development opportunities for teachers. There is also a recognised demand among various stakeholder groups for greater support from sexual health professionals across different sectors. With the support of ISV, there is potential to extend this work to the broader Australian Muslim student population and their teachers beyond Islamic schools.

## Key Findings from the Surveys

This section begins by presenting the survey data. As shown in Table 2 below, responses to the survey questions varied significantly across the schools. Some schools received a higher volume of responses, while others had fewer. Some school authorities engaged in selective sampling, inviting only certain individuals to participate. This selective approach resulted in discrepancies in the data, as the sample sizes and compositions were not consistent across the schools.

School	Teachers	Parents	Students
Asr College	44	30	16
Zakaa College	16	14	17
Hidaya College	15	19	0
Ustaz College	13	5	51

**Table 2:** Number of participants who completed the survey across participating schools



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The aim of the survey (see Appendix 2) was to gather insights from teachers, parents and students on three key areas: 1) their understanding of the importance of Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) and Child Personal Safety, 2) the essential topics they believed should be included in the curriculum, and 3) their preferences for the curriculum structure. The findings on these key areas will now be presented, starting with the data from the teacher surveys.

Survey data will be presented under three main headings:

1. Understandings about the importance of RSE and Child Personal Safety
2. Key topics in an RSE curriculum
3. How RSE should be presented in the school curriculum

## 1. Teacher Surveys

### 1a. Understandings about the importance of RSE and Child Personal Safety

Many teachers who responded to Question 6 'What is your definition of a Personal Safety and Development Program?' emphasised the importance of promoting students' learning and knowledge development. There was consensus that personal safety—encompassing physical, emotional, and mental wellbeing—is a basic human right. As one teacher from Hidayah College stated, the program should aim to 'ensure that students' basic right to personal safety is promoted'. Another teacher

from Zaka College stressed that it is 'extremely important' for students to build positive relationships, demonstrate compassion, respect and empathy and develop communication skills in this area for life.

RSE was widely regarded as essential for providing students with knowledge crucial to ensuring their safety and protection. The overall aim of the program, according to teachers at Asr College, is to protect students from any form of abuse or unsafe situations. Teachers emphasised the importance of building a curriculum that helps students recognise and respond to situations that may impact their physical or emotional safety: 'this needs to be a program that allows students to recognise unsafe situations and ... be resilient, support others and know how to get help if they are in an unsafe situation'. With regards to empowering students with knowledge to help them stay safe, many of the teachers at Asr College stressed the importance of developing a curriculum which 'centres scientific facts'. Another teacher noted that the program should aim to 'develop personal knowledge resources and skills that enable the student to stay safe'. As part of the focus on safety, many of the teachers at Asr College stressed the importance of helping students recognise unsafe situations and know how to remove themselves from these situations, support others and seek help when needed:

“ It is a structured program to teach students how to stay safe, identify dangers in any situation and gain the skills to effectively deal with these dangers ...”

“ I think the school ... should design curriculum that is current and progressive to incorporate diversified needs. The program should also incorporate the development of respectful relationships.”

In addition, many teachers across the participating schools, highlighted that this program should also focus on the safety of staff. Several teachers emphasised that 'staff and students should feel safe' and that programs and policies should be reviewed regularly to ensure this safety. There were also calls for this curriculum development initiative to help teachers learn more about their own safety and how they can contribute to a safe classroom environment.

For many of the teachers at Hidaya College, the importance of safety was linked to the challenges related to religious and cultural identity, many young Muslims experience which can result in feelings of marginalisation and exclusion. As one teacher put it:

“ *Personal safety for Muslim students means how to remain safe and navigate life in the outside world as a Muslim. It saddens me to think we need to teach this to our students*”.

Teachers acknowledged that to address these challenges it is crucial to understand the experiences and needs of Muslim families and students and work towards building a more inclusive and equitable society. To strengthen the development of an RSE curriculum and reduce foreseeable risks, teachers at Hidaya College suggested the need for schools to work in partnership with sexual health community services.

Teachers at Zakaa College specifically highlighted the need for exploring creative ways within this 'new' RSE curriculum, to 'combat Islamophobia'. One key challenge identified by many of the teachers is the struggle to provide their students with the freedom to practice their religion without being perceived as opposing the views of mainstream society. Students growing up in Australia often feel pressure to conform to the majority's trends and values, which may conflict with their religious beliefs, identities and moral values. As one

teacher noted, the challenge for students is to 'keep their Islamic identity and values, and interact with the larger society confidently and proudly'.

Another critical issue raised by all the teachers was the importance of aligning their new curricula with Islamic values. For many, this alignment will ensure that students will develop firm convictions on the importance of their own health and safety and those of others. One teacher at Zakaa college wrote:

“ *Islam places high value on a human to refine their qualities and improve oneself on a day-to-day basis. There are merits in discussing foundations of a strong and loving relationship but it should be done in an Islamic Tarbiyah (personal development) class for the students who have reached puberty. Children younger than that age should not be exposed to these so we do not fall into the trap of exposing them to issues when their brains are not developed to understand.*”

When responding to the survey question about their role in teaching RSE, a significant number of teachers across all the schools, reported that they did not have a role in teaching RSE or related topics such as Personal Safety and Development topics, and the majority had never pursued professional learning in this area although they would like to. Consequently, it was not surprising that most participants expressed uncertainty about whether they had the necessary professional learning to effectively teach this curriculum.

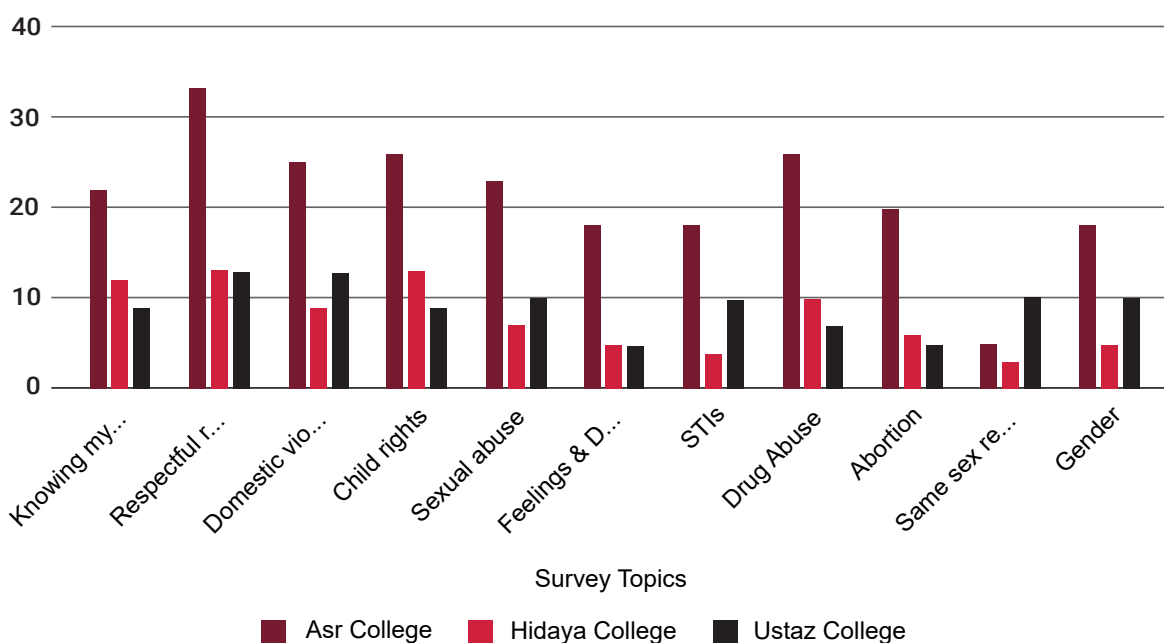
In conclusion, the findings underscore the importance of an RSE curriculum that not only protects students physically, emotionally and mentally but also integrates Islamic values and ensures the safety of both students and staff in a supportive, well-informed environment.

## 1b. Key topics in an RSE curriculum

A question in the survey provided teachers with a list of topics typically covered in a secondary school’s RSE curriculum inclusive of Child and Personal Safety and Development. In response to the survey question ‘How important do you think the following topics are as part of your school’s approach to this curriculum?’ the teachers across participating schools ranked the following as important (see Graph 1 below):

When comparing the survey responses across Asr College, Hidayah College and Ustaz College regarding the importance of various curriculum topics, distinct priorities emerged. Asr College placed a strong emphasis on topics related to personal safety and wellbeing, with high importance given to ‘Respectful Relationships’ (33), ‘Child Rights’ (26) and ‘Drug Abuse’ (26). These topics reflect a focus on protecting students and fostering emotional intelligence. Asr College also ranked ‘Knowing my Body’ (22) and ‘Sexual Abuse’ (23) highly, suggesting an interest in educating students on their physical and emotional boundaries.

### Important topics in a RSE curriculum-Teachers



**Graph 1:** Important topics in an RSE curriculum for teachers at Victorian Islamic schools

Hidaya College, on the other hand, generally ranked these topics lower, with 'Respectful Relationships' (13) and 'Child Rights' (13) standing out as the most significant areas of focus. This school placed relatively more importance on issues related to 'Domestic Violence' (9) and 'Sexual Abuse' (7), suggesting a concern for protecting students from these threats. Notably, Hidaya College showed lower emphasis on topics such as 'Same-Sex Relations' (3) and 'Gender' (5), which aligns with the conservative values often associated with the school.

Ustaz College's responses highlighted a different set of priorities, with a high focus on 'Same-Sex Relations' (10) and 'Gender' (10), suggesting that these issues are more significant for this school compared to the others. It generally placed lower emphasis on topics like 'Respectful Relationships' (13) and 'Child Rights' (9), indicating a lesser focus on these foundational aspects of student wellbeing. 'Drug Abuse' (7) and 'Feelings

& Desires' (5) ranked lower, which might suggest the school places less priority on mental health and addiction-related issues.

In summary, Asr College focuses more on personal safety, emotional intelligence and wellbeing, while Hidaya College emphasises protecting students from domestic violence and sexual abuse, albeit with less focus on broader issues like gender or same-sex relations. Ustaz College prioritises topics related to gender and same-sex relations, reflecting a different set of values, and gives less weight to topics like respectful relationships and drug abuse. These differences highlight the varying values and concerns each school holds regarding student education.

School administrators from Zakaa College removed this question from their survey and opted for another list of key topics (see Figure 6).

Acceptable	Unacceptable
Islamic values and limits	Values against Islam
How they can talk to other people in society	Gender diversity
Maintaining modesty	LGBTIQA+
Role of men and women in Islamic society	
Differences in people	
What is right and what is wrong	
Emotional and social wellbeing	
Respectful communication skills	
Balanced lifestyle that prioritises physical, mental, and spiritual wellbeing.	
Respectful relationships	

**Figure 6:** Important topics in an RSE curriculum for teachers at Zakaa College

This list distinguished between topics deemed acceptable and unacceptable based on the school values. Acceptable topics include maintaining modesty, respectful communication skills, and emotional and social wellbeing, were deemed acceptable. In contrast, topics like gender diversity, LGBTIQ+ issues, and values that conflict with Islamic teachings were considered unacceptable.

### **1c. How RSE should be presented in the school curriculum**

Many of the teachers expressed a strong preference for a Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE) curriculum to be integrated into the existing curriculum, with 80% of teachers favouring this approach. They felt that RSE should be represented through religious education and health education, allowing for a natural connection between these subjects. This 'integrated approach' was seen as an effective way to reinforce the values and concepts related to personal safety and development within the context of existing teaching.

In addition to the integrated approach, 50% of teachers preferred RSE to be taught as a 'short module' over the course of a term, giving them the flexibility to address specific topics in-depth without overwhelming the curriculum. Another significant preference, shared by 80% of teachers, was that the teacher should remain responsible for teaching RSE when it arises, following an ad hoc or responsive approach to the curriculum. This method was favoured because it allowed teachers to address issues as they naturally emerged within the classroom, fostering a more organic and timely discussion.

The least favoured approach was the establishment of a dedicated core subject or elective for RSE, particularly within an already overcrowded curriculum. Teachers felt that adding a separate subject would be too demanding and would compete with other essential areas of learning. This feedback highlights the need for flexibility in how RSE is taught, with a preference for integration, responsiveness and adaptability within existing structures rather than adding additional pressure to an already full curriculum.



## 2. Parent Surveys

### 2a. Understandings about the importance of RSE and Child Personal Safety

The majority of parents who completed the survey acknowledged the importance of an RSE curriculum at their children's school including studies in Personal Safety and Development although with notable variations in perspective. Parents who supported the new curriculum development focused on the need to empower children with knowledge, but within the limits of Islamic textual knowledge. As one mother at Asr College wrote in her short response: 'As we put our kid in Islamic school, we hope our kids will get education in Islamic way teaching. What is *haram*; what is *halal*; no alcohol; no drugs. Islamic way between men and women, purdah, relation men and women in nikah, no free sex.'

Other viewpoints about an RSE curriculum from parents at Asr College included:

- “ It's important to empower our children”
- “ Muslim youth need to learn how to protect themselves; Learn how to live safely both physically and mentally”
- “ Trying to negotiate consent and saying no to misogyny on not only a social and cultural level but religious level also”
- “ My children being protected and allowed to flourish as young Muslims”

Parents at Hidayah College also expressed strong support for a comprehensive RSE curriculum, but were not comfortable with openly using the terms 'sex', 'sexuality' or even 'sexual health education'. Many settled for the term 'Personal Safety and Development' although could not clearly define what they want in this program. Many stressed their concerns and perceived undermining of their role as parents if the school chose to deliver this curriculum. In particular, many stressed most concern with the inclusion of gender identity and LGBTIQ+ issues, with one parent writing: '*Most of this content is against our belief as Muslims and our children being exposed to this will unfortunately force me to remove my children from the school completely!*'

At Asr College, some parents were adamant that the responsibility for teaching sensitive topics, such as gender identity and LGBTIQ+, should lie with the family, not the school. As one parent wrote: '*Regardless of what the government decides, I will teach my children what is right and wrong if the school cannot.*' Teachers at Zakaa College highlighted the conservative cultural backgrounds of many of their families, noting that parents are reluctant to address these issues with their children; '*Many of their families are still very conservative*', remarked a teacher, stressing the importance of cultural sensitivity in this curriculum development. One parent at Zakaa College also stressed, '*As a parent, I think it is my primary right to decide how I give that education to my child*'.

Like many of the teachers, parents across

the schools agreed that RSE should not just focus on sexual health issues, but also integrate Islamic values, teachings and principles to ensure that it aligns with students' religious beliefs. Some parent quotes include:



*We just need to ensure that whatever these schools are teaching our children is not in contradiction with divine law"*  
**(Father, Zakaa College).**



*Comprehensive health education can make a significant contribution to the students' learning of Islam by promoting values and behaviours that are consistent with Islamic teachings. By including studies in personal development and respectful relationships ... students understand the importance of treating themselves and others with compassion, respect, and kindness, which are core values in Islam".*  
**(Father, Zakaa College).**



*Teaching about respecting individuals ... being able to teach the differences of people's individual beliefs according to Islamic teachings*  
**(Father, Hidayah College).**

Across the different schools, there was a clear consensus on the importance of aligning RSE programs with Islamic values, with a strong preference for parental control over what is taught, particularly regarding topics like gender identity. While there is some acceptance of the need for RSE, it is essential that such programs be culturally sensitive and grounded in Islamic teachings. The overarching concern is to ensure that children are protected from content perceived as conflicting with their religious and cultural beliefs, while also promoting respectful and safe relationships.



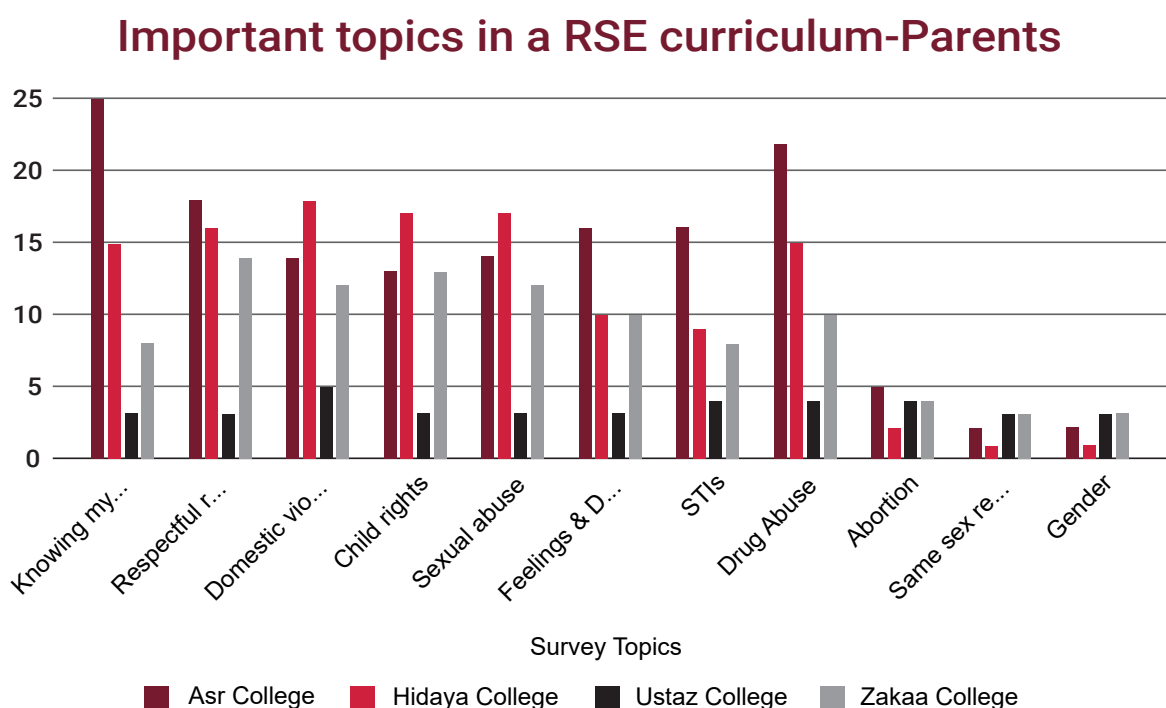
## 2b. Key topics in an RSE curriculum

When comparing the responses across Asr College, Hidayah College, Ustaz College and Zakaa College regarding the importance of various topics in an RSE curriculum (see Graph 2), notable differences emerged in what parents across these schools deem important and unimportant.

At Asr College, parents placed high value on topics that promote personal safety and wellbeing, with 'Knowing my Body' (25) and 'Drug Abuse' (22) receiving strong support. These results suggest that Asr College parents prioritise educating their children about physical autonomy and protecting them from harmful substances. The importance of 'Respectful Relationships' (18) and

'Child Rights' (13) also stands out, reflecting a commitment to fostering positive interpersonal dynamics and understanding legal protections.

Parents at Hidayah College show a similar focus on safety and rights, with strong emphasis on 'Domestic Violence' (18), 'Sexual Abuse' (17) and 'Child Rights' (17), indicating concern with protecting students from harm. However, they generally ranked other topics like 'Knowing my Body' (15) and 'Feelings & Desires' (10) lower, which may reflect a more conservative approach to discussing topics related to personal autonomy and emotional expression. Interestingly, topics such as 'Same-Sex Relations' (1) and 'Gender' (1) were regarded as less important, aligning with a more traditional perspective on gender roles and sexual identity.



**Graph 2:** Important topics in an RSE curriculum for parents of children at Victorian Islamic schools

Ustaz College parents show a distinct preference for topics related to physical and emotional wellbeing, such as 'Drug Abuse' (4) and 'STIs' (4), but rank issues like 'Respectful Relationships' (3) and 'Child Rights' (3) as less important. This suggests that Ustaz College parents might focus more on health-related education and less on the broader social and emotional aspects of RSE. They also rank 'Same-Sex Relations' (3) and 'Gender' (3) as more important, indicating a different set of values that might reflect a broader acceptance of diverse identities compared to Hidaya College parents.

At Zakaa College, parents similarly emphasised the importance of topics like 'Domestic Violence' (12) and 'Sexual Abuse' (12), though their support for 'Knowing my Body' (8) and 'Drug Abuse' (10) is lower compared to Asr College. Like Hidaya College, Zakaa College parents ranked 'Same-Sex Relations' (3) and 'Gender' (3) as less important, suggesting a more conservative view on these topics. Overall, parents across these schools seem to prioritise issues related to safety, protection, and physical wellbeing, but the emphasis on specific topics like gender, sexual identity and emotional education varied widely, reflecting the cultural and ideological differences among the schools.

## **2c. How RSE should be presented in the school curriculum**

Many parents across the schools were unanimous in their belief that the Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) curriculum should be taught in alignment with Islamic teachings. They emphasised the importance of having the Religious department within the school oversee the curriculum to ensure it is consistent with Islamic principles. While some parents suggested that consultation with Health and Science teachers might

be beneficial, they were firm in their stance that only a learned Islamic scholar should be responsible for delivering this content to students, ensuring it aligns with Islamic religious beliefs.

In response to survey questions about how Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE) are approached at home, many parents expressed discomfort with teaching these topics themselves. They cited reasons such as embarrassment, lack of knowledge, and uncertainty about how to approach the subject matter. As a result, these parents were willing to delegate this responsibility to the school, trusting that it would be managed under the careful guidance of imams and religious scholars within each school's religious departments. Many parents felt confident that the school would address these sensitive topics in a way that aligns with Islamic values.

However, the approach to involve parents in the development and delivery of the curriculum varied between schools. Parents at Hidaya College were particularly eager to maintain a close, ongoing engagement with both the teachers and curriculum writers. They wanted to be kept informed at every stage of the curriculum's development and delivery, ensuring they had input into both the content and how it was delivered. This indicates a strong preference for transparency and continuous collaboration between the school and parents on sensitive educational topics.

In contrast, parents at Ustaz College expressed full trust in the school's authority, confident in the school's ability to deliver Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE) without their direct involvement.

These differences highlighted varying levels of parental involvement and trust across the schools, with Hidaya College parents seeking a more active role, while Ustaz College parents were more deferential to the school's decisions.

## 3. Student Surveys

### 3a. Understanding of the importance of RSE and Child Personal Safety

Student participation in the surveys across the three schools varied significantly. At Zakaa College, participation was limited to 17 students and was controlled by the school leadership, who engaged in purposeful sampling by selecting students to complete the survey. It is also notable that only female students participated, and there was no indication of which year level these students were in, nor how long they had been at the school. Despite these limitations, the responses from the nine students who ranked 'Personal Safety', 'Physical/Emotional Development' and 'Gender Relationships' as important, and the seven students who ranked them as very important, provided valuable insights into their understanding. Key themes from these students included:

- “Feeling safe, equal, no discrimination”*
- “Learning about how girls should stay safe and what precautions should be taken in order to keep ourselves and those around us in a safe environment. Learning ...skills when going out to stay out of harm.”*
- “Personal safety is knowing how to defend myself from different types of bullying and different types of assaults”.*
- “Respecting people’s personal space and setting up boundaries. Respecting people’s beliefs even if you do not believe in it.”*

*“Consent is important, and opposite genders must stay 10 feet apart at all times, only converse when needed and GENERALLY STAY OUT OF EACH OTHERS lives. Personal boundaries must be respected at all times.”*

In contrast, Asr College had a more inclusive approach to recruiting students, with the school actively promoting the survey through its newsletter, online and in paper format, which resulted in a small yet balanced response from both boys and girls (a total of 16 student responses). Approximately 55% of the students viewed all topics in a comprehensive RSE curriculum as important.

The largest student response came from Ustadz College, which had 51 surveys completed, with 35 respondents identifying as female. The results indicated a wide range of perspectives on the curriculum, with close to 20 students ranking it as 'very important' and 18 as 'important'. However, there were also eight students who rated the teaching of RSE as 'not important' and five were 'unsure'. The data from Ustadz College displayed a broader variety of responses, reflecting the diversity of perspectives among the students.



Like many of the teacher and parent responses, a closer analysis of the students' definitions of RSE also focused on personal safety and included themes like 'avoiding harm', 'feeling safe', 'respecting others' and 'learning to take care of oneself and others'. Key quotes from the students across participating schools include:

- “ *My definition of personal safety and/or respectful gender relationships education would be knowing about how to stay safe in my personal relationships and respecting the male gender I guess.*”  
(Zakaa College)
- “ *The safety of your personal wellbeing as well as your mental well-being and the safety of those who surround you in day to day activities.*”  
(Zakaa College)
- “ *Personal safety means the safety of an individual and avoidance of harmful activities or people that seem to be a danger to that individual*  
(Uztaz College)

The importance of respecting others and gender differences was also prevalent across the surveys. At Ustaz College, students expressed:

- “ *Personal safety is the safety of an individual and respectful gender relationships education is respecting other genders.*”
- “ *Respectful gender relationships to me means having respect for everyone no matter what their gender or anything is.*”
- “ *Learning to take care of yourself and the people around you, learning respectful behaviour...behaving in a way so as to create a comfortable environment for everyone.*”

In conclusion, while students at all three schools recognised the importance of personal safety and respectful gender relationships, the perspectives on how to teach and approach these topics varied. Students at Asr College were particularly focused on practical safety topics like domestic violence and drug abuse. Hidayah College students emphasised specific behavioural boundaries and personal defence, and students at Ustaz College highlighted a blend of personal safety, respect for others and adherence to Islamic values. These differences underscore the importance of context and culture when developing a curriculum on RSE, as each school's community brings its own set of values, concerns and priorities to the table.



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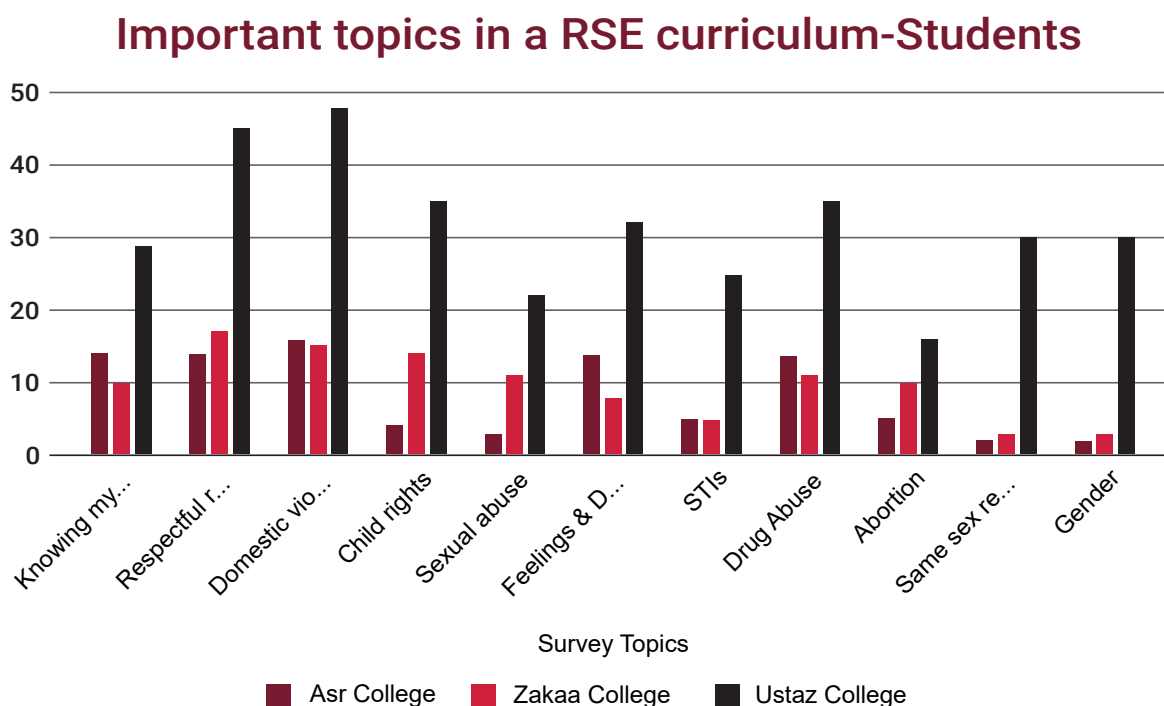
### 3b. Key topics in an RSE curriculum

When comparing the responses across Asr College, Zakaa College and Ustaz College regarding the importance of various topics in an RSE curriculum (see Graph 3), significant differences emerge in what students across the schools find important and not important.

At Asr College, students placed moderate importance on topics such as 'Domestic Violence' (16) and 'Drug Abuse' (14), indicating a concern with issues related to safety and substance use. Topics like 'Knowing My Body' (14) and 'Feelings & Desires' (14) were also valued, reflecting a desire for knowledge about personal development and emotional wellbeing. However, issues like 'Abortion' (5) and

'Sexual Abuse' (3) were ranked much lower, suggesting these topics might not be as pressing for students at Asr College.

In contrast, students at Zakaa College showed a similar interest in personal safety, with 'Domestic Violence' (15) and 'Child Rights' (14) ranking fairly high. However, they placed even less importance on topics such as 'Knowing My Body' (10) and 'Feelings & Desires' (8), indicating that personal development and emotional awareness are not as significant for them. Like Asr College students, Zakaa College students ranked 'Abortion' (10) and 'Sexual Abuse' (11) lower, which suggests that these issues might not be their most significant concerns. They also showed little interest in topics like 'Same-Sex Relations' (3) and 'Gender' (3), reflecting a more traditional stance on gender and sexual identity.



**Graph 3:** Important topics in an RSE curriculum for students at Victorian Islamic schools

Ustaz College students, however, showed a very different pattern, placing much higher importance on a wide range of topics. 'Respectful Relationships' (45) and 'Domestic Violence' (48) were ranked as the most important issues, highlighting a strong interest in building healthy relationships and understanding the impact of abuse. Topics such as 'Feelings & Desires' (32) and 'Drug Abuse' (35) also received significant attention, suggesting a more holistic approach to emotional and physical wellbeing. Ustaz College students also placed considerable importance on 'Same-Sex Relations' (30) and 'Gender' (30), reflecting a more open perspective on these topics compared to students at Asr College and Zakaa College.

In conclusion, while all three schools showed some concern for personal safety and wellbeing, Ustaz College students stand out for their broader engagement with a variety of topics, including relationships, emotional health and gender identity. In contrast, students at Asr College and Zakaa College show a more limited focus, with lower emphasis on issues like gender, same-sex relations and emotional development, reflecting the differing cultural and ideological perspectives across the schools.



## Key Findings from the Interviews

The survey data across the schools presented a variety of responses, reflecting differing levels of engagement and focus within teacher, leadership, parent and student interviews. For instance, Asr College had a relatively balanced number of responses across all three groups—ten for teachers/leaders, seven for mothers, seven for fathers, and ten for students. In contrast, Zakaa College had a much higher leadership

team response (23), but no responses from parent or student interviews, indicating a more leadership-centric approach. Hidayah College also had a strong response from parents only, and Ustaz College showed no participation in parent and student interviews. The full breakdown of these results is provided in Table 3 below, which will be discussed in further detail in this section.

School	Leadership/teacher Interviews	Parent Focus-Group Interviews	Student Interviews
Asr College	10	7 in the mother's group 7 in the father's group	10
Zakaa College	23	0	0
Hidayah College	8	9 in the mother's group 9 in the father's group	0
Ustaz College	0	0	0

**Table 3:** Number of participants who engaged in interviews



# 1. Interviews with Teachers, School Leaders and Parents

A close look at the findings from the in-depth, semi-structured interviews with teachers, school leaders and focus-group interviews with parent groups, reveal responses relevant to the following themes:

- 1a. Concerns about the emphasis on LGBTIQ+ inclusion on Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) curriculum
- 1b. Islamic schools are responsible for safeguarding knowledge and promoting Islamic values
- 1c. Curricula within Islamic schools must ensure that educational content and pedagogy is consistent with the teachings of the Qur'an
- 1d. Careful consideration of the critical role that language plays in shaping perspectives and communication, particularly when discussing sensitive topics

Each will now be discussed.

## 1a. Concerns about the emphasis on LGBTIQ+ inclusion on Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) curriculum

An analysis of the in-depth interviews with male and female teachers, coordinators, and parents from Zakaa College and Hidaya College revealed significant concerns about the inclusion of LGBTIQ+ topics in the curriculum, often linked to religious values and broader societal pressures. Male teachers at both schools expressed concerns about the potential impact of LGBTIQ+ information on young students, fearing it might be inappropriate or harmful. One teacher at Zakaa College noted, 'What concerns me is that if we expose them to this information or that information, how would they react?' (Zakaa College).

Similarly, many parents at Zakaa College expressed discomfort with the promotion of LGBTIQ+ values within the curriculum, with one parent stating, 'Promote it – that's the problem here, the promotion of their way of life does not sit right with the Muslim way of life'. However, as discussions progressed, some parents recognised that LGBTIQ+ topics could not be ignored, particularly since children are already exposed to these issues in broader society. One father at Zakaa College commented, 'As a teacher, as a father, I'll talk as a parent and as an educator. We have been observing what's happening in the community out there ... I am overly concerned as to how much accessibility is given to youngsters. I have concern for my children'. He further emphasised the need for this information

to align with Islamic teachings, saying, 'We are a faith-based community, and religion to us is not confined to the parameters of the mosque, but it's a way of life'.

Many teachers supported a comprehensive RSE curriculum focused on gender and LGBTIQ+ issues, expressing concern about the misinformation children receive through social media and peers. At Zakaa College, one teacher/father remarked, 'There's a lot of false information or information that's not presented in the best manner ... It can be through internet, social media, through their friends, through channels which may not be so healthy and may actually not put it in a perspective that we as parents want'. This sentiment was also shared by parents at Hidayah College, who were concerned that children might receive harmful or misleading information about LGBTIQ+ issues.

When discussing how LGBTIQ+ topics should be handled in the curriculum, schools displayed differing views. Some staff at Hidayah College were firmly opposed to addressing LGBTIQ+ topics in depth, while others saw it as an opportunity to educate students on respect and tolerance. A female coordinator at Hidayah College explained, 'We don't have to agree with their beliefs, but we have to co-exist respectfully because this is the society that we live in'. Similarly, some parents at Hidayah College were open to acknowledging LGBTIQ+ issues, but only within the framework of Islamic teachings. One mother with four children at Hidayah College stated, 'Let's give them a general understanding of what it's about and why Islam says it's not right'. At the same time, other parents felt strongly that such topics should not be addressed at all in school, believing children should be sheltered from these issues. One mother asserted, 'I don't think it's appropriate to teach in a school'. Teachers across schools acknowledged the sensitive nature of the topic and the difficulty of determining when and how

to introduce it to students. As one female coordinator at Hidayah College noted, 'Kids don't mature at the same level ... at what age do you say [these things]? I don't know'.

A significant point of contention was the perceived pressure from external sources, such as government or societal expectations. Teachers at Zakaa College voiced concerns about external agendas influencing the curriculum. One teacher shared, 'I'm scared for these things that are coming in because I feel like an external agenda is being forced upon us' (Male Coordinator). Similarly, many parents feared that societal promotion of LGBTIQ+ rights would be 'forced' on them and their children. A father at Hidayah College stated, 'We are living in an environment that is absolutely promoting this [LGBTIQ+ agenda] everywhere you go'. He expressed concern about being branded as discriminatory if they disagreed with these views.

Both Zakaa College and Hidayah College share a common concern for protecting students from external societal pressures while balancing the need for educational development. Zakaa College placed particular emphasis on integrating Islamic values into the curriculum, while Hidayah College stressed the importance of an age-appropriate, values-based curriculum that respects cultural and faith traditions. Teachers and parents across both schools expressed concerns about the influence of external pressures on students' education and the challenge of navigating these societal shifts around gender and sexuality. Ultimately, the findings highlight a divide between protective concerns rooted in religious values and the recognition of the need to address LGBTIQ+ issues as part of an inclusive, comprehensive RSE curriculum.

## 1b. Islamic schools are responsible for safeguarding knowledge and promoting Islamic values

The views from Zakaa College and Hidaya College regarding the role of teachers in safeguarding students and providing Islamic values education reveal shared concerns but also some important differences in approach. Both schools emphasised the importance of protection from external influences. Teachers recognised that students are exposed to various knowledge areas from the broader Australian society, including inappropriate content: 'When we have students passing notes to each other, writing messages with sexual content, I guess that's when we think that they are exposed to something elsewhere' (female, Zakaa College). Another teacher added: 'With the climate around this day and age, technology, information available, they're probably a bit mature and know things ... more than we think' (Asr College).

Guided by knowledge of their students, teachers at Hidaya College focused on protecting students from 'external variables' until they are old enough to understand. As one senior female coordinator mentioned during the focus-group interview, 'I suppose in choosing an Islamic school, it's about being able to provide their children with a bit of protection from some of the external variables in our environment until the kids are old enough to really understand it'. The focus on protection reflected a broader concern about safeguarding students from influences seen as harmful or conflicting with Islamic values.

Schools prioritised Islamic values education, particularly in addressing topics often discussed in broader society. At Zakaa College, Islamic values were seen as central to the curriculum, with

one teacher stating, 'Islamic education is essentially values education'. However, some teachers at Zakaa College acknowledged that parents' individual values, shaped by cultural norms and traditions, significantly influence the direction of the curriculum. There was also concern about the lack of values education in current approaches to RSE. One teacher said:

“ Because a lot of it [RSE] is usually mixed with values education. As a parent, I think it is my primary right to decide how I give that education to my child, and my fear is that this space would actually mix that whole thing. It won't be just health education but it will become something else, that's what my fear is. And I think there is an inherent assumption that all students coming to these schools understand these things, but they do not.

Another teacher raised the challenge of balancing values education with the reluctance of some families to discuss such topics:

“ Many of these same families are actually very reluctant to talk about these very issues even when the child comes of age; so how do we balance that? Do we need a curriculum around this? We certainly do. Do we need to ground it in the cultural practice and the faith-based practice of these families? Yes.”

### 1c. Curricula within Islamic schools must ensure that educational content and pedagogy are consistent with the teachings of the Qur'an

The importance of aligning curriculum development with Islamic teachings is a central theme in the perspectives of teachers from Asr College and parents from Hidayah College and Zakaa College. It was recognised as essential Islamic knowledge: 'To learn about oneself is essentially Islamic education: This is Islamic education as well. When you try to bring these elements into sexual education or sexuality, it allows us to learn about Islam as well' (Zakaa, male teacher). These schools emphasised the need to protect children's moral and spiritual development while ensuring their education aligned with the teachings from the Qur'an. However, the way these values are interpreted and applied varied between the schools, reflecting broader concerns about societal influences, the role of RSE, and the balance between cultural preservation and adaptation.

At Hidayah College, there was an emphasis on aligning the RSE curriculum with Qur'anic teachings to protect children's innocence and impressionable minds. Parents and teachers alike believed that 'children's minds should focus on the more important things in life, and the most important things about our *deen* (religion) and our education' (father). One father in a focus-group interview remarked, 'There needs to be an emphasis on *halal* (permissible) versus *haram* (forbidden) actions. 'This is what our *deen* allows, this is what our *deen* does not allow'. This viewpoint reflects a desire to limit students' exposure to content that might challenge these values. For many mothers at Hidayah College, the choice of 'images' was a significant concern, as they saw it

as a risk to children's mental and spiritual purity. One mother cautioned, 'They don't need to look at that,' referring to sexualised images that could prematurely expose children to adult content, making them 'curious' and potentially questioning their faith, which could affect their self-image.

Similarly, Asr and Zakaa Colleges both shared a commitment to teaching Islamic teachings from the Qur'an, particularly in aligning discussions about RSE with Islamic teachings on identity. At Zakaa College, many teachers believed that centring teachings from the Qur'an would help develop and protect children's Islamic identity. As one teacher explained, 'So it taps into our personal life, into our social life, into our careers, into all walks of life; so we just need to ensure that whatever we are teaching our children, whatever we are exposing our children to, is not in contradiction with divine law as well'. Another teacher added, 'I think one of the most important topics is identity in our discussions. I mean, as an Australian – well, when I identify myself—I'm Turkish, I'm Australian, I'm Muslim—and our kids are in the process of identifying who they are also from their background; so I think that religion plays a major role that shapes who I am, so my values come from my spiritual wellbeing'. Another teacher at Asr College said, 'Islam teaches us about our sexuality ... it forbids us from a lot of things, which are *haram* and that helps to develop our Muslim identity'.

## **1d. Careful consideration of the critical role that language plays in shaping perspectives and communication, particularly when discussing sensitive topics**

The role of language emerged as a significant theme in the interviews with teachers from Asr College, Hidayah College and Zakaa College. The teachers recognised the impact that language has on shaping students' understanding of sensitive topics and they expressed concerns about how language around sex education was currently being used by students in their schools. However, while both schools acknowledged the importance of addressing language use, they approached the issue in different ways, particularly regarding age appropriateness and the level of exposure to certain terms.

At Zakaa College, there was a strong focus on the exposure students had, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic when the internet became more accessible. Teachers noted the increasing use of inappropriate or un-Islamic language among students post pandemic. One female teacher observed, 'Well, what I noticed was a peak in this kind of knowledge among the students. During COVID, there was exposure ... the internet was easily accessible. Parents were okay with the kids opening their computer, and being part of a school. But at times we know that they were seeing ...hearing other things'. The teacher continued by describing how students came back to school with 'slang' terms related to sexuality, and not in 'scientific or Islamic' language, which raised some concern for her.

Similarly, at Hidayah College, there was a recognition that the language students

encountered needed to be handled carefully. One coordinator at Hidayah College emphasised the importance of using age-appropriate language, particularly in addressing sensitive topics. She shared a story about a young girl who had used the term 'koala' to refer to her 'private parts' when she encountered sexual abuse, noting how crucial it is to teach children the correct names for body parts to ensure they can express themselves in healthy, safe ways. She said, 'Language is power ... one of the things with respectful relationships, what's powerful is that it also helps with emotions ... when kids act out or this thing about leading up to domestic violence, it's often about that frustration, there's no language to it'. The point was made that if children lack the vocabulary to express their feelings or experiences, it could result in significant adults not knowing about children's experiences where sexual abuse may have occurred.

Some teachers expressed concerns about exposure to harmful language if there are limited opportunities at school to discuss the issues. Many agreed that RSE curriculum content needs to focus on the kinds of language that can better prepare children for real-world conversations, especially as they grew older. One coordinator at Hidayah College pointed out that while many parents were reluctant to use explicit terms such as 'sex' or discuss topics like 'LGBTIQA+' in relation to their children, it was essential to acknowledge the reality that children were already being exposed to this language: 'You can't have your head in the sand. What I believe is what we need to do is teach respect. Having that respect, recognising that there are people with various structures in their family structures'. While teachers and parents might be uncomfortable, they must engage in these conversations to help children understand these topics in a healthy, informed way.

## 2. Interviews with Students

Only ten students from Asr College were interviewed for this study; Group 1 consisted of four Year 7 students (mixed gender), and Group 2 included six Years 8–9 students (mixed gender). Although other schools invited their students to participate, many parents acted as gatekeepers, preventing their children from being interviewed. As a result, only interview responses from Asr College will be presented in the following section. A closer examination of the findings reveals responses related to the following themes: the importance of learning about RSE and personal development, awareness of the ‘dominant’ discourse but divided opinions on its values, limited understanding of Islamic perspectives on these topics, and the importance of child rights.

For many students, this curriculum was seen as an opportunity for self-improvement. One Year 7 student noted, ‘This is a good thing... to educate students more about this type of stuff ... because they [students at Asr College] haven’t gotten that education. They don’t know anything about it’. This sentiment reflected the view that such a curriculum could provide much-needed knowledge and skills that is currently not available. Students expressed that they needed this education to navigate different situations in various environments, both in and outside of school, saying, ‘Whether we’re here [in school] or there, like different environments, we should know what to do in different situations’ (Year 7). Another Year 7 student commented on how the school might be better suited to provide this education than parents, noting, ‘I think it’s good because sometimes maybe the parents don’t know how to explain it properly and maybe a school could be better’.

The interviews revealed a range of student perspectives on more sensitive topics. For example, while some students saw the curriculum as an opportunity for improvement, others expressed discomfort or uncertainty about topics like sexuality education, LGBTIQ+ issues, and sensitive subjects such as abortion and STIs. A Year 8 student emphasised the importance of learning about *halal* and *haram* relationships, suggesting, ‘It’s good—they can teach us about *halal* and *haram* so that we can make the right decisions’. For some students, particularly in the older age group, there was a strong desire to understand what constitutes *halal* relationships and avoid *haram* behaviours.

Further on the topic of same-sex relationships, some Year 7 students recognised the dominant discourse around gender equality and sexual identity, with one noting, ‘LGBTIQ+ ... it’s like a normal thing now and everyone does it. Especially like on social media and everything’. Another Year 7 student explained, ‘I would feel uncomfortable learning about something that is not related to our religion, particularly when it came to LGBTIQ+ issues’. For other Years 8–9 students, discussions about same-sex relationships were considered unnecessary and irrelevant, with one student saying, ‘We don’t need to know about different sexualities’ and another asserting, ‘Muslims should not be doing that ... if they are, they are not Muslim’. Some of the students preferred to dismiss the topic with a simple decree: ‘Say it is *haram* and that is it!’

Interestingly, the younger students, in Year 7, expressed more openness to discussing LGBTIQ+ topics in a respectful manner. One student remarked, ‘Although we don’t follow it, we don’t like it, we should respect them as a person’. Another student

emphasised the importance of teaching respect, saying, 'We need to learn to live with it ... we should still respect their decisions, and like, you know, it's none of our business'. These perspectives reflect a growing understanding among students that, despite not supporting LGBTIQ+ identities themselves, they recognise the need for respectful coexistence in a diverse society. However, some students also voiced frustration about the lack of formal education on the subject, with one stating, 'I feel like the schools avoid the topic ... but the thing is, kids are exposed to it anyway'. This suggests a disconnect between the concerns of parents and teachers and the realities students face in the wider world, particularly in relation to social media and peer influences.

The contrast between students' awareness of broader societal issues and their reluctance to engage with them reflected a possible tension between the dominant cultural narrative and the religious framework that guides their beliefs. While some students were exposed to these issues through media and social environments, they felt uneasy about engaging with them in a structured curriculum, especially when these issues conflicted with their Islamic values.

Another area where students showed gaps in understanding was in relation to topics like STIs and abortion, both of which are frequently included in a comprehensive RSE curriculum, including studies about personal development. Many Year 7 students were unaware of these topics, with one student making the following comment about discussing abortion, 'It's not something we could talk about especially with young kids because it can traumatise some people ... cause it is about killing babies'. This student suggested that abortion should be taught only in later years. Other students echoed this sentiment, expressing confusion or limited understanding about issues such as STIs and how they relate to RSE. The conversation around abortion also revealed differing opinions, with one

student expressing support for abortion under certain circumstances, such as in case of rape or if the pregnancy resulted from traumatic experiences, saying, 'It's your choice and I support abortion—abortion isn't a bad thing' (Year 8). This highlights how students' understanding of such topics is often shaped by personal beliefs and outside influences rather than formal education or Islamic teachings.

A key area of agreement among students was the importance of understanding child rights and consent. Many students recognised the need to know their rights in order to protect themselves from abuse. One Year 7 student expressed, 'I think it is important because some people don't know what is right and wrong', while another emphasised, 'If we don't know our rights, then we can be abused and we can't do anything about it because we think that it's not our right to respond'. For Years 8–9 students, there was also a clear understanding of the importance of knowing when it is appropriate to set personal boundaries, with one student noting, 'We should learn about consent' (Year 9) and another stressing the need to understand 'personal boundaries in relation to touch' (Year 9). These understandings of consent and personal boundaries show that, despite some discomfort around more controversial topics in an RSE curriculum, students recognised the value of learning about these issues to protect themselves and navigate relationships healthily.

The interviews revealed a complex and varied landscape when it comes to students' views on RSE. While many students saw value in learning about topics such as *halal* and *haram* relationships, child rights and consent, others were uncomfortable with more complex issues related to sexuality education. These viewpoints suggest an urgent need to equip students with this knowledge to navigate a society that increasingly discusses these sensitive issues, even if they are not entirely comfortable with the content.

### 3. Key findings from Phase 4: Using participatory action research (PAR)

Phase 4 of this project focused on the CDT's engagement with PAR over the course of a school term. This phase aimed to facilitate the development and implementation of the newly designed RSE curriculum at each school community. Throughout this phase, the project team collaborated closely with the CDT at each school to monitor progress and offer ongoing support. The project team provided guidance on how to effectively implement PAR and ensured that schools trial their newly developed RSE curriculum. Regular meetings were held between the project team and each school to track progress, discuss any challenges and make necessary improvements. In this section, key ideas from the curriculum planners presented by each school is outlined, along with observations and insights from the trial phase. PAR ensured that the curriculum was continually refined to meet the evolving needs of students, teachers and parents.

#### 3a. RSE Curriculum Planners – Overview of Key Ideas

Table 4 below provides an overview of the key ideas with the RSE curriculum planners across participating schools.



	Asr College	Zakaa College	Ustaz College	Hidaya College	Rahman College
<b>Topic</b>	Islam and Puberty	Sexuality and Harmony	Safety and Inclusivity	Healthy Sexuality	Relationships—Marriage
<b>Year Level</b>	Year 7	Year 12	Years 10–12	Year 8	Year 10
<b>Model of delivery</b>	Over one school term integrated in Islamic Studies and delivered by teachers of religion	As a module delivered to male students by male teachers only	Two lessons per term over one school term, integrated in Health and PE, Islamic Studies, Biology and Science.	Fully integrated in the curriculum as a core subject to be delivered across terms 1 to 4	Integrated topics within Islamic and religious studies at the school
<b>Key themes/ ideas explored</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop self-awareness and empathy</li> <li>• Understand the concept of <i>haya</i></li> <li>• Cultivate a sense of contentment</li> <li>• Connect hygiene practices with Islamic teachings</li> <li>• Understand physical changes during puberty</li> <li>• Manage emotional changes during puberty</li> <li>• Navigate social changes with Islamic values</li> <li>• Identify positive role models</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Servitude and submission to the Creator</li> <li>• God-centric worldview on sexuality</li> <li>• Human desire</li> <li>• Balancing physical and spiritual needs</li> <li>• Family – a sacred unit</li> <li>• Respectful relationships</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Human desire and <i>tazkiya</i> (self-purification/reformation).</li> <li>• Human desire</li> <li>• Animalistic and angelic attributes as described in Islamic teachings</li> <li>• Tawhid – Our personal and communal lives</li> <li>• Respectful relationships</li> <li>• Status of women in Islam</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gender roles in Islam</li> <li>• Understanding adolescence in Islam</li> <li>• Healthy relationships</li> <li>• Islamic view on body image</li> <li>• Personal boundaries in Islam</li> <li>• Emotion wellbeing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Marriage in Islam</li> <li>• Polygamy/polyamory and Islamic teachings</li> <li>• Respectful relationships</li> <li>• Family unit</li> <li>• Child rearing</li> </ul>

**Table 4:** Overview of Key Ideas in RSE Curriculum Planning Across Participating Schools

### 3b. Classroom Observations

The classroom observations highlighted two contrasting teaching approaches in RSE, each with strengths and areas for improvement.

At Asr College, the lesson was teacher-centred and lacked a clear structure, leading to a disengaged and unproductive environment. There was no clear introduction and there were no defined learning objectives for the session, which hindered students' focus and participation. Students spent time copying questions and answers from the board, with no opportunities for meaningful interaction or discussion on sensitive topics related to sexuality and relationships. Key areas for improvement include:

- clear lesson objectives that outline the relevance of RSE
- student-centred activities that foster active participation, such as discussions on personal experiences or hypothetical scenarios related to RSE
- creative, interactive methods for engaging students with key texts (e.g. the Qur'an or Hadith) to connect theoretical concepts of sexuality to real-life situations and personal relevance.

In contrast, Rahman College exhibited a more dynamic and effective approach to RSE. The teacher clearly defined the lesson's purpose and seamlessly connected the topic to prior knowledge. The classroom environment was based on mutual respect, and the teacher cultivated trust by using praise and behaviour correction to focus on personal development. The lesson promoted critical thinking, self-reflection and respectful dialogue on complex and sensitive topics, such as sexual ethics, relationships and personal boundaries. Activities like research using devices and *halaqa* discussions encouraged students to engage deeply with the material and reflect on the importance of RSE in their lives.

The strengths at Rahman College included:

- clear lesson objectives and a purposeful connection to prior learning about sexuality and relationships
- a classroom environment rooted in respect, focusing on personal growth and responsible behaviour
- activities promoting higher-order thinking and self-reflection linked to the Qur'an and Hadith, providing meaningful, context-specific learning on sexuality education.

However, one area for improvement was the wait time: the teacher's enthusiasm sometimes led to insufficient pauses for students to think and respond, which could limit deeper engagement and reflection on the sensitive aspects of RSE.



# Part 5

## Recommendations

The *Safety First* curriculum development program provided participants with up-to-date information, professional learning and individualised research-informed guidance tailored to each school's unique demographic, aims and philosophy in developing Relationships and Sex Education (RSE). Participants found the program valuable and recognised its importance, especially as this area continues to evolve. Many expressed feeling prepared for when, or if, the teaching of comprehensive RSE becomes mandatory across the independent school sector.

This section provides a summary of the key ideas generated during the program, which will help guide the following recommendations. As the program focuses on curriculum development, the recommendations will align with the Australian Curriculum, a framework that independent schools use to shape their curriculum development and ensure it meets national educational standards. By integrating these recommendations, schools can create an RSE curriculum that aligns with both the Australian Curriculum and the cultural and religious values of their communities, ensuring a balanced, respectful, and inclusive approach to teaching RSE.



# RECOMMENDATION 1

## Centre the Muslim child by integrating an Islamic ethical framework

At the heart of an Islamic education is the child: the core focus is on nurturing both their intellectual and spiritual development. Islamic education aims to foster a well-rounded individual who not only excels academically but also embodies strong moral values and a deep sense of social responsibility. It is crucial to safeguard and promote Islamic values within an RSE framework for Muslim young people. Islamic values must align with the teachings of the Qur'an, and educators should ensure that course material and resources reflect Islamic views on relationships, family and ethics. Modifications can be made to the curriculum to provide an alternative perspective on topics such as gender roles, marriage and sexual health, while ensuring compliance with Australian Curriculum standards.



### Action Steps

- ▶ Schools should implement policies and guidelines that acknowledge the significance of religion in many young people's lives and the role of religion in shaping students' values and worldviews.
- ▶ To ensure specific Islamic values are respected throughout the curriculum, schools should consider the development of an Islamic manifesto or Islamic ethos document.
- ▶ Schools should integrate Islamic teachings into broader lessons on personal health, relationships and family dynamics, particularly in the context of respect, modesty and ethical behaviour.
- ▶ Schools can invite parent/guardians, community leaders and religious scholars to help guide the development of curriculum content that reflects Islamic values, particularly in sensitive areas like sexuality, gender and family structures.



### Australian Curriculum Link

#### Health and Physical Education (HPE)

*Personal, Social and Community Health* strand addresses relationships, diversity and inclusivity. Content on relationships and ethical decision-making can be delivered in a manner that respects Islamic principles while meeting national standards.

#### Ethical Understanding

Providing opportunities for students to reflect on moral issues in light of personal and community beliefs.

# RECOMMENDATION 2

## Develop culturally relevant RSE teacher and student resources

The absence of teacher and student resources that align with the cultural and religious requirements of sexuality and relationship education remains a significant gap in meeting the needs of a diverse student population. While teachers at some schools in this project have developed their own resources within their Curriculum Development Teams (CDTs), the lack of appropriate, ready-made resources and materials continues to challenge the successful implementation of this program. The development of these resources is essential, not only to guide effective teaching but also to provide educators in Muslim-majority independent and government schools with resources that respect cultural and religious sensitivities.



### Action Steps

- ▶ Establish CDTs at each school to continue developing culturally and religiously appropriate RSE resources tailored to the specific needs of Muslim students
- ▶ Provide additional professional development for teachers on creative and critical pedagogies, enabling them to contribute effectively to the development of new resource materials
- ▶ Network with government and community organisations that provide sexuality education services to enhance resource development. This could include inviting guest speakers, linking to community-led events, and ensuring the materials reflect a broad range of perspectives and experiences relevant to Muslim students.



### Australian Curriculum Link

#### Health and Physical Education (HPE)

*Personal, Social and Community Health* strand addresses relationships, diversity, and inclusivity.

#### Personal and Social Capability (PSC)

Developing self-awareness and management.

# RECOMMENDATION 3

## Provide teacher professional learning and development sessions that demonstrate how to use newly developed RSE resources

While having the right resources is essential for effective teaching, designing and establishing a pedagogy that enables teachers to effectively deliver these resources is even more important. Professional learning and development (PLD) sessions should be held to equip teachers with the skills and strategies necessary to engage students using the newly developed, culturally appropriate RSE materials. These sessions will provide teachers with the tools to ensure that the resources are used in ways that promote active learning, respect for cultural and religious diversity, and a deeper understanding of sensitive topics.



### Action Steps

- ▶ Develop a comprehensive PLD program that focuses on effective pedagogical strategies for teaching RSE using the newly developed resources. The program should cover key topics such as creating a safe and inclusive learning environment, facilitating sensitive discussions, and addressing cultural and religious diversity. This will help teachers feel confident in using the resources to engage students meaningfully.
- ▶ Organise workshops where teachers can actively engage with the RSE resources. During these workshops, facilitators should demonstrate how to incorporate the resources into classroom activities and how to address common challenges in teaching RSE, such as managing sensitive topics or promoting respectful discussions. Teachers should also have opportunities to practice using the materials with their peers and receive feedback.
- ▶ Offer specialised training on cultural sensitivity, emphasising how to adapt the RSE resources to meet the needs of students from diverse backgrounds, particularly those from Muslim or other religious communities.
- ▶ Establish ongoing support structures, such as regular follow-up PLD sessions, peer mentoring, and online communities where teachers can share experiences, strategies, and challenges in using the RSE resources. This will create a network of support for continuous professional development and help teachers refine their practice over time.



### Australian Curriculum Link

#### Health and Physical Education (HPE)

*Personal, Social and Community Health* addresses relationships, diversity and inclusivity.

#### General Capabilities

*Ethical Understanding* provides opportunities for students to reflect on moral issues in light of personal and community beliefs.

#### General Capabilities

*Intercultural Understanding* and *Critical and Creative Thinking* for evaluating societal changes.

# RECOMMENDATION 4

## Adopt culturally responsive pedagogies to enhance differentiated learning

Pedagogical strategies should be thoughtful, respectful and religiously and culturally sensitive when delivering RSE content. It is important for educators to use teaching methods that promote inclusive, non-judgmental and age-appropriate discussions, ensuring that students feel safe and respected. For Muslim young people, of utmost importance is a careful consideration and observation of *haya* (modesty). Teaching methods should be tailored to also accommodate diverse learning styles, needs and backgrounds. This ensures that all students, regardless of their abilities or prior knowledge, are engaged and supported throughout the learning process.



### Action Steps

- ▶ Teachers should be trained in culturally responsive pedagogy that allows them to navigate sensitive topics in ways that include and respect diverse worldviews.
- ▶ Integrate materials, resources and examples from a variety of cultures, histories and traditions. This ensures that students see their own cultures reflected in the curriculum and are exposed to diverse worldviews, fostering respect and understanding.
- ▶ Adapt teaching methods to reflect the learning styles and strengths of students from different cultural backgrounds. This might include incorporating storytelling, collaborative learning or visual and kinaesthetic activities that resonate with diverse students
- ▶ Provide opportunities for students to explore their own cultural identities and reflect on how culture shapes their experiences and perspectives. This helps students develop a deeper understanding of themselves and others, promoting empathy and cultural awareness.



### Australian Curriculum Link

#### HPE—Personal, Social and Community Health

Emphasises *Communication and Interpersonal Skills*, allowing students to express their views on relationships and health in a constructive manner.

#### General Capabilities

*Personal and Social Capability* for fostering respectful interactions and *Ethical Understanding* for navigating complex issues sensitively.

# RECOMMENDATION 5

## Provide a balanced and respectful response to 'dominant' societal trends on RSE

The influence of contemporary societal issues, particularly the emphasis on LGBTIQ+ inclusion, should be addressed with balance and sensitivity in RSE. The Australian Curriculum encourages the development of students' understanding of relationships, diversity, and respect for others' perspectives, which is aligned with the inclusion of LGBTIQ+ topics. However, it is important for educators to provide students with the opportunity to critically explore these topics in a way that acknowledges their own Islamic religious and cultural perspectives and other diverse worldviews.



### Action Steps

- ▶ Ensure that the curriculum addresses contemporary RSE issues while fostering open dialogue and critical thinking. Teachers should encourage students to engage with a variety of perspectives, simultaneously as they develop skills, values, behaviours and attitudes that are respectful and align with Islamised approaches to learning.
- ▶ Offer training for teachers on how to address LGBTIQ+ topics in a balanced way, ensuring they understand the importance of respecting diverse identities and can create a safe, supportive environment for all students.
- ▶ Communicate with parents and the broader school community about how LGBTIQ+ topics will be addressed, ensuring transparency and providing opportunities for discussion, while respecting differing values and perspectives.
- ▶ Align RSE lessons with the curriculum's general capabilities, such as *Critical and Creative Thinking* and *Intercultural Understanding*, to help students evaluate societal trends within a respectful context.



### Australian Curriculum Link

#### Health and Physical Education (HPE)

*Personal, Social, and Community Health* strand addresses relationships, diversity, and inclusivity.

#### General Capabilities

*Intercultural Understanding* and *Critical and Creative Thinking* for evaluating societal changes.

# RECOMMENDATION 6

## Focus on Emotion and Social Development

Schools need to emphasise the emotional and social aspects of relationships, including respect, empathy and communication skills, while integrating Islamic teachings about compassion and care for others



### Action Steps

- ▶ Include activities that help students identify and express their emotions, such as role-playing, discussions and journaling. This promotes emotional intelligence and helps students understand their feelings in the context of relationships.
- ▶ Incorporate lessons on effective communication, active listening and peaceful conflict resolution. These skills are essential for building healthy relationships and fostering empathy and respect among students.
- ▶ Design lessons that encourage students to consider different perspectives, understand others' feelings, and practise kindness. Use group activities or discussions that focus on the importance of empathy in both personal and social interactions.
- ▶ Ensure that trained counsellors are available to offer individual or group support to students, helping them navigate complex emotions and social situations.



### Australian Curriculum Link

#### HPE—Personal, Social, and Community Health

Emphasises *Communication* and *Interpersonal Skills*, allowing students to express their views on relationships and health in a constructive manner.

#### General Capabilities

*Personal and Social Capability* for fostering respectful interactions and *Ethical Understanding* for navigating complex issues sensitively.



# RECOMMENDATION 7

## Ensure Parent/Guardian Engagement

Schools should provide opportunities for families to discuss how RSE content will be taught and delivered in ways that uphold Islamic values, ensuring an inclusive approach for all stakeholders.



### Action Steps

- ▶ Establish open lines of communication between parent/guardians and the school, such as regular newsletters, emails and/or parent–teacher meetings.
- ▶ Form a committee of parents/guardians, teachers and school leaders to provide input and feedback on the RSE curriculum. This fosters collaboration and ensures the curriculum is culturally and religiously sensitive.
- ▶ Offer parents/guardians resources, such as reading materials, videos or articles, to help them navigate conversations about relationships, sexuality and Islamic values at home. This empowers parents to support their children’s learning.
- ▶ Create family-based events or activities that promote discussions on relationships, values and cultural expectations, encouraging parents/guardians to engage with their children in a meaningful way on these topics.



### Australian Curriculum Link

#### HPE—Personal, Social, and Community Health

Emphasises *Communication* and *Interpersonal Skills*, allowing students to express their views on relationships and health in a constructive manner.

#### General Capabilities

*Personal and Social Capability* for fostering respectful interactions and *Ethical Understanding* for navigating complex issues sensitively.

# RECOMMENDATION 8

## Consider the Significance of Language

Language is a critical tool in shaping students' understanding of complex, sensitive topics like relationships, sexuality and gender. It is essential to use language that is inclusive, respectful and mindful of students' cultural and religious backgrounds. Teachers should be trained to use language that promotes empathy, understanding and critical thinking while addressing societal and personal topics related to RSE.



### Action Steps

- ▶ Ensure that the language used in RSE lessons is inclusive and avoids promoting stereotypes or stigmatising language.
- ▶ Encourage the use of terminology that respects all students' identities, including those from non-Islamic backgrounds, and fosters a respectful dialogue.
- ▶ Establish a framework for language use that is consistent across the curriculum, ensuring that it supports students' emotional and intellectual development while being religiously and culturally sensitive.
- ▶ Incorporate lessons on effective communication, active listening, and peaceful conflict resolution. These skills are essential for building healthy relationships and fostering empathy and respect among students.



### Australian Curriculum Link

#### HPE—Personal, Social, and Community Health

Focus on the *Communication* and *Interpersonal Skills* capabilities to promote effective and respectful interactions.

#### General Capabilities

*Literacy* and *Intercultural Understanding* ensure that students develop the language skills needed to navigate complex issues in a thoughtful, respectful manner.



# Part 6

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# Appendix

## Survey Questions

**NOTE:** Surveys were distributed to all stakeholders in this project, including teachers, school leaders, students, and parents. Part A of the survey varied across these groups, asking questions about their personal details, length of employment (where relevant), and the number of children at the school (where relevant). The following are the key questions that were consistent across all surveys.

**Q1** What is your definition of a Relationships and Sexuality Education program including studies in Personal Safety and Development?

**Q2** What is the school's definition of a Relationships and Sexuality Education program including studies in Personal Safety and Development? If the school doesn't have one, what do you think it should be?

**Q3**

The following is a list of some topics typically covered in a secondary school's Relationships and Sexuality Education program including studies in Personal Safety and Development? How important do you think the following topics are as part of your school's approach to this curriculum?

	Very Important (1)	Important (2)	Not Important (3)	Don't know (4)
Knowing my body (1)				
Respectful Relationships (2)				
Unsafe relationships (3)				
Child rights (4)				
Sexuality (5)				
Sexual activity (6)				
Sexual abuse (7)				
Sexual feelings: (8)				
Drug abuse (10)				
Gender norms (14)				

**Q4**

What topics from the above list are missing that you think are relevant for student learning at this school? And what year level do you think these topics should be taught?

**Q5**

**How do you think students at your school should learn about Relationships and Sexuality Education program including studies in Personal Safety and Development?(you may tick more than one box)**

As a core study (like English and Science)(1)

As an optional study or elective(2)

A short module or course(3)

Integrated in specific subject areas (i.e. Islamic studies or science curriculum)(4)

Integrated into the whole curriculum(5)

Other approaches (i.e. life education van, visits by health professionals)(6)

included incidentally, as deemed appropriate by the teacher(7)

Don't know(8)

**Q5**

**Is there anything else you would like to add?**



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University



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**Schools** Victoria