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Transnational Islamic Higher Education: The International Theology Programme in Turkey

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Abstract: Contemporary transnational Islamic higher education is a vibrant field. Despite its growing importance, academic engagement remains limited, often oversimplifying these institutions as mere political tools or missionary efforts. This article investigates the case of the International Theology Programme (Uluslararası İlahiyat Programı) in Turkey, which has become a significant destination for foreign Muslim students, particularly from Europe, seeking Islamic higher education. Drawing on interviews with German students and alumni from the International Theology Programme, the article argues for a more complex understanding of transnational Islamic higher education that incorporates both structural influences and the proactive strategies employed by students. Furthermore, it demonstrates that while the study programme aims to serve diaspora communities by training future religious leaders, it often falls short in addressing specific needs related to students' native languages and their sociocultural experiences in their home countries.
Keywords: Transnational Islamic higher education, Islamic theology, Turkey, Germany

Zusammenfassung: Transnationale islamische Bildung ist ein dynamisches Feld. Trotz ihrer wachsenden Bedeutung bleibt die akademische Auseinandersetzung begrenzt und reduziert diese Institutionen oft auf politische Werkzeuge oder missionarische Bestrebungen. Dieser Artikel untersucht das Internationale Theologieprogramm (Uluslararası İlahiyat Programı) in der Türkei, das in den letzten Jahren zu einer wichtigen Adresse für internationale muslimische Studierende, insbesondere aus Europa, geworden ist. Anhand von Interviews mit deutschen Studierenden und Alumni des Programms plädiert der Artikel für ein komplexeres Verständnis der transnationalen islamischen Hochschulbildung, das sowohl strukturelle Einflüsse als auch die proaktiven Strategien der Studierenden berücksichtigt. Zudem zeigt er, dass das Studienprogramm, obwohl es darauf abzielt, Diasporagemeinschaften durch die Ausbildung zukünftiger religiöser Führer zu dienen, oft versäumt, die spezifischen Bedürfnisse in Bezug auf die Muttersprachen der Studierenden und ihre soziokulturellen Erfahrungen in ihren Heimatländern zu berücksichtigen.
Schlagwörter: Transnationale islamische Hochschulbildung, islamische Theologie, Türkei, Deutschland

Introduction

Islam, like many religions, is characterised by various transnational dimensions. First and foremost, its universalist idea of reaching all people, regardless of ethnicity, nationality, or race, makes it inherently transnational (Mandaville 2014, 276). This transnational character is also evident in numerous examples of Islamic education. Already, pre-modern Islamic education was characterised by a highly individualised and learner-oriented translocal landscape, with students travelling from teacher to teacher (Arjmand 2018, 24). Significant intellectual centres emerged across the Muslim world (e.g. Cairo, Damascus, Samarqand), forming a vibrant transnational 'epistemic community' (Mandaville 2014, 277).

The advent of globalisation and new communication technologies has accelerated such transnational currents, reshaping the landscape of Islamic authority and education. Today, important Islamic theological centres (e.g. Al-Azhar in Cairo, the Islamic University of Medina, and Al-Mustafa International University in Qom) not only shape global Islamic discourses but also educate new generations of religious leaders. Despite the growing importance of transnational dynamics in Islamic higher education, academic engagement with such institutions remains limited. Moreover, research often understands these institutions as mere political instruments or examples of missionary work. While acknowledging the validity of such perspectives, this article aims to provide a more nuanced understanding of transnational Islamic higher education by including students' experiences of what I call *transnational learning spaces*. It does so by examining transnational Islamic higher education through the case of the International Theology Programme (Uluslararası İlahiyat Programı) in Turkey. Integrated into Turkish universities, this study programme has become a significant destination for foreign Muslim students, particularly from Europe, seeking Islamic higher education.

The empirical material presented in this article is part of a larger data set that builds on in-depth interviews and extensive fieldwork, which was conducted both in Germany and Turkey between September 2019 and December 2021 among German students and alumni from the International Theology Programme. In total, 27 students and alumni (12 female, 15 male) have been interviewed with the purpose to produce educational biographies. Emphasising specific cases and examples of students and alumni, this article does not represent all students of the International Theology Programme 'in their full complexity' (Atkinson 2015, 153). Instead, the article will make use of specific examples of students and alumni to find an explanatory edge.

The article starts by briefly engaging with existing literature on transnational Islamic higher education before it outlines the origin, structure, and admission process of the International Theology Programme in Turkey. It then explores students' experiences within transnational learning spaces, drawing from interviews conducted with German students and alumni between September 2019 and December 2021. Highlighting students' experiences, the article advocates for understanding transnational Islamic higher education as a complex educational field where students' agency plays a crucial role.

Transnational Islamic Higher Education

Transnationalism refers to both an empirical phenomenon and a research agenda. As a research agenda, transnationalism provides a framework for understanding political, social, cultural, or economic phenomena that extend beyond nation-state boundaries. While transnational perspectives in research can vary, they consistently challenge 'methodological nationalism' by encouraging us to move beyond the nation-state as the central unit of analysis (Wimmer & Glick Schiller 2003; Keßler & Szakács-Behling 2020). In other words, transnationalism offers a lens through which to understand the intricate webs of political, social, and cultural interactions that transcend conventional nation-state boundaries.

Islam as mentioned earlier, has an inherent transnational character. Most recently, the advent of globalisation further has increased the transnational nature of Islam. New modes of transportation, information, and communication have impacted Islamic authority worldwide (see e.g. Turner 2007; Moll 2012, 2018; Stjernholm 2019). In light of these changes, transnational ties and the pluralisation of Islamic authorities (Mandaville 2007) have begun to reshape the field of Islamic higher education. This is evident in the reorganisation of state-run Islamic higher education institutions, which increasingly cater to international Muslim students with specifically designed study programmes and scholarships (e.g. Bano and Sakurai 2015; Farquhar 2017; Bruce 2020). Some institutions have even established

branches abroad operated by alumni and offer online distance-learning courses for diaspora communities (Farquhar 2017).

Seeing this transformation, research has increasingly focused on transnational dynamics within the global educational field. The post-9/11 climate brought significant public and academic attention to *madrasa* institutions. In Western mainstream discourse, madrasas were often depicted as breeding grounds for radicalisation and terrorism (Berkey 2010, 40; Moosa 2015, 207–9). However, research has revealed a more complex and heterogeneous nature of these educational institutions, which manifest differently in various local contexts (e.g., Malik 2008; Noor, Sikand, and van Bruinessen 2008; Riaz 2008; Berkey 2010; Moosa 2015; Bakar 2017). Similar to the madrasa, other educational institutions, such as Islamic universities in Muslim-majority countries, have received increasing interest among scholars in recent years. Focusing on educational institutions, two primary strands of research have emerged. The first strand examines the nexus between politics and education, exploring how Islamic institutions in Muslim-majority countries are intertwined with political institutions and how this relationship impacts political authority and legitimisation (Eickelman 1985, 1992; Starrett 1998; Hefner and Zaman 2007; Zeghal 2009; Bano 2018a; Bano & Benadi 2018). The second one highlights the transnational dimension of such educational institutions, investigating their roles in transnational networks (Zeghal 2007; Bano & Sakurai 2015; Farquhar 2015, 2017; Bruce 2018, 2020).

Despite these rich contributions, there is little focus on students' perspectives and experiences, which complicate our understanding of the transnational field of Islamic higher education, with a few notable exceptions. Michael Farquhar's book (2017) on the Islamic University in Medina (IUM) is particularly notable. While the IUM is often seen as a key example of missionary work and the "export of Wahhabism", Farquhar challenges this simplistic view. He highlights the agency and diversity within the student body, arguing against a homogenous understanding of students' trajectories and a one-dimensional view of transnational Islamic higher education. Benjamin Bruce (2020) also advocates for a nuanced understanding of transnational Islamic higher education by focusing on the International Theology Programme. While acknowledging the programme's potential role in the Turkish state's religious diaspora policies, he also identifies specific limitations due to students' experiences in transnational education. Similar to Farquhar and Bruce, this article aims to complicate the understanding of transnational Islamic higher education. It does so by examining the International Theology Programme in Turkey, a central institution for transnational Islamic education, and highlighting students' experiences in the transnational learning spaces.

The International Theology Programme

While the Turkish theological landscape is often met with scepticism by traditional Islamic scholars for its perceived lack of methodological rigour and inability to foster morality and piety among students (Bano 2018c), it has, nevertheless, developed into an important player in the global field of Islamic scholarship and authority. Due to regional instabilities resulting from the Arab Spring in the early 2010s, it has become an increasingly appealing address to international Muslim students (Bano 2018b, 288-89).

Central to this appeal is the International Theology Programme (Uluslararası İlahiyat Programı). While the programme's promotional flyer refer to the study programme as the 'International Divinity Program' (Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı 2020), I have chosen to refer to the programme as the 'International Theology Programme'. The term 'divinity' is generally used for vocational courses and programmes in Anglophone contexts. Thus, to highlight the predominantly academic outlook of the study programme I regard the term 'theology' as more apt than 'divinity'.

The scholarship programme offers a five-year BA for Turkish diasporic Muslims, particularly in Europe. It aims to train religious personnel who understand the needs of Muslim communities in their home countries. The following sections will outline the programme's genesis, structure, and admission process.

Genesis

Since the 1970s, the Turkish state has been sending imams and religious personnel to European countries, thereby becoming involved in the religious life of Turkish diaspora communities. However, in the course of the 9/11 attacks in the United States in 2001, and subsequent attacks in Madrid (2004) and London (2005), this model has come under increasing pressure and criticism within the receiving countries. Several European governments launched initiatives curtailing Islamic practices (Humphrey 2009; Pasha 2009; Cesari 2012; Mavelli 2013). As part of these securitising processes regarding Islam in Europe, Islamic religious authorities and mosque communities with affiliations to foreign entities came under heightened scrutiny from European governments and media (Haddad & Balz 2008). In Germany, for example, a discussion sparked about the so-called 'import imams' that associated them with espousing extremist ideologies within 'backyard mosques' (Hinterhof Moscheen) operating beyond state oversight (e.g. Søvik 2014; Bayrak & Alkın 2018). In this context, Diyanet (Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı; Directorate of Religious Affairs) imams faced particular scrutiny due to the suspicion that they function as the extended arm of the Turkish state and their alleged involvement in activities such as espionage against members of the Fethullah Gülen movement in Germany (e.g. Yücel 2016; Hür 2017; Süddeutsche Zeitung 2017).

The increasingly critical and restricting climate throughout European states urged the Turkish state to rethink its model of providing religious services to Turkish diaspora communities. Eventually, the Diyanet proposed the idea of establishing the International Theology Programme offering theological training to Muslims living abroad, with a focus on Muslims in Europe (Dere 2014; Bruce 2018).[1] In 2006, the programme was officially launched by the Diyanet with the first cohort of 18 international students at Ankara University. Currently, six universities are part of the International Theology Programme (Ankara University, Istanbul University, Necmettin Erbakan University in Konya, Uludağ University in Bursa, Marmara University in Istanbul and the 29 Mayıs University in Istanbul). According to numbers published by the Diyanet, the programme accommodated in 2024 462 students from 16 countries and 1081 students had graduated from the programme to date (Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı 2024).

Structure

Islamic theology in Turkey is embedded within universities as a scientific discipline unlike other Islamic theological fields in Muslim-majority countries. The first theology (ilahiyat) faculty was established at the University of Ankara in 1949 and intended to provide a place for the scientific and objective study of religion that would stand in contrast to the Ottoman *medrese* system. In addition to the main curriculum, the theological faculty in Ankara was also to offer courses in psychology, sociology, comparative religious studies, and European languages (Körner 2005, 50–51). Following the

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[1] During the 1990s, the Turkish state already gained experience in providing theological training at Turkish universities to foreign students from Turkic states, the Balkans, and the Caucasus. This experience significantly shaped the development of the International Theology Programme (Dere 2014, 124).

establishment of the Ankara faculty, several Higher Islamic Institutes (Yüksek İslâm Enstitüsü) were founded between 1959 and 1982. They were established with the ambition to provide general religious education for religious personnel (Körner 2005, 57; Agai 2010, 156). Most of these institutes transformed into faculties of theology in 1982. Positions at the new theology faculties were then mostly staffed with graduates from the Ankara faculty meaning that, in 1993, six out of their nine deans were Ankara graduates (Körner 2005, 58).

With the AKP (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi; Justice and Development Party) coming into power in 2002, the theological landscape in Turkey has experienced significant growth. Due to the political and financial support from the AKP government, the number of theological faculties has increased rapidly from nine faculties at the end of the 1980s to 26 faculties in 2011 (Dorroll 2014, 1038–39). The number of students also increased exponentially, from approximately 500 in 2006/07 to 6,500 in 2011. By 2019, the number of faculties increased again to 105 faculties with a total of 96,000 students of whom 60 per cent were female (Dorroll, 2021, 176). Despite the ongoing growth in the number of faculties and students, the AKP government has been marked by its restrictive and suppressive policies since 2011 (Öztürk 2016, 627; see also Öniş 2015; Akkoyunlu and Öktem 2016), significantly impacting academic freedom within the Turkish theological sphere.[2]

Initially designed in opposition to the classical Ottoman medrese system, Turkish Islamic theology incorporates a wide range of subjects, from classical Islamic sciences to sociology, history of religions, and the study of non-Muslim faiths (Wilkinson 2019). The faculties follow a threefold structure with three main departments: The Basic Islamic Sciences; Philosophical and Religious Sciences; Islamic History and Islamic Arts. The International Theology Programme is embedded in this overall structure. Initially, it was treated as a separate educational programme but has since been integrated with the faculties' general theology programmes. Thus, international students typically study together with Turkish students, which was a proactive decision taken by many faculties to improve the level of education and help the integration of international students at the faculty, as I was told by one professor on the International Theology Programme.

While the study programme's content and emphasis on specific subjects can differ between universities, the overall structure is similar for all students on the International Theology Programme. The programme is structured into five years of study, which are referred to as classes. Students typically start with a two-semester preparatory course in Arabic. Here, students engage in the fields of grammar, reading, and understanding, listening and comprehension, and written and oral expression. Following this preparatory Arabic course (30 ECTS points), students enter the regular study part of the programme. It consists of eight semesters over four years in which students have to achieve a total of 254 ECTS points, which they can accumulate by completing the compulsory courses and a few elective modules. Additionally, students have to complete an internship, which many undertake in their home countries. During my fieldwork, German students often told me that they undertook this internship in Germany, for example, in their local DİTİB mosque community.

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[2] One prominent example is the case of the Turkish theologian Mustafa Öztürk, who is regarded as a controversial figure for his work on the historicity of the Qurʾan and resigned from his professorship at Marmara University after experiencing a campaign of criticism and pressure (see Güsten 2021; Karabat 2020).

Admission

Admission to the International Theology Programme is contingent upon six entry requirements. Firstly, students must have completed their secondary education and hold a diploma equivalent to a Turkish high school diploma. In the case of German applicants, this equates to the Abitur, comparable to A levels in the UK or the International Baccalaureate Diploma. However, German students can also apply with the so-called Fachabitur (fachgebundene Hochschulreife), a certificate granting access to study programmes in a specific subject area. Secondly, applicants must demonstrate citizenship, dual citizenship, or permanent residency in their country of residence. Although theoretically open to all international students with valid status, successful applicants without a Turkish family background must complete a mandatory preparatory course to acquire the necessary Turkish language skills. However, through my research and discussions with DİTİB officials and professors on the study programme, it became evident that very few individuals without Turkish heritage would apply, and among those who did, success rates were low. Thirdly, applicants must be 24 years old or younger at the time of application. Fourthly, candidates must be unmarried. Fifthly, individuals who have previously applied unsuccessfully to the study programme are not eligible to apply again. Lastly, applicants currently enrolled in another theology programme in Turkey are not eligible for the International Theology Programme. Interestingly, the International Theology Programme introduced a base quota of 60% male students in 2009 to address the challenge of a high intake of female students, which was seen as counterproductive for the Diyanet since they cannot work as imams after graduation (Bruce 2020, 1171–2).

The programme's promotional material highlights additional requirements assessed during the interview stage. Prospective students are evaluated by a selection committee regarding their Qurʾan reading and recitation skills as well as their religious knowledge (encompassing aspects of faith and worship, Islamic law, the life of the Prophet, and ethics). Additionally, prospective students may be assessed on general knowledge, Turkish language proficiency, and other academic interests. However, students reported that interview topics seemed arbitrary, focusing mainly on their motivation and aspirations.

Transnational learning spaces

The International Theology Programme constitutes a key institution in the transnational field of Islamic higher education. Due to its ambition and outlook, it can be understood as a paradigm for diaspora policy in which the Turkish state relocates foreign-born Turkish students to theology faculties in Turkey, aiming to transfer political and social remittances (i.e. ideas, practices, identities) '*from* the homeland and *out into* the diaspora' (Bruce 2020, 1169, emphasis in original). However, student experiences reveal a more complex reality. Instead of solely reinforcing students' Turkish identities, the programme might be more accurately described as a "Turkish-Islamic Erasmus programme that strengthens at the same time the students' Turkish, Muslim and European identities" (ibid., 1176). Engaging students' experiences, this chapter examines two key issues for German students in the International Theology Programme: language and German Muslim lifeworlds. Both aspects relate to the specific experience of studying in transnational learning spaces and demonstrate that students' backgrounds and their connections to their home countries are relevant factors that cannot be overlooked when considering transnational Islamic higher education.

Language

The matter of language proves significant throughout my conversations with students. Language could constitute a specific motivation for students to apply for the International Theology Programme, for example, to learn Arabic or improve their level of Turkish proficiency. Language could also become a challenge for students when they struggle to adapt to the level of academic Turkish within their studies. This section focuses on a perceived lack among many students to engage with theological matters in their native language, German. While many of the students that I interviewed did not have set professional plans for after their studies in Turkey, most stated the wish to return to Germany. Typically, many envisaged to work in some sort of religious role at one point and others again aspired to continue the academic track at a German university. Despite varied future aspirations, the majority of students deemed knowledge of German theological terminology essential for theological literacy. However, they found that the International Theology Programme did not cater to this need, leading to difficulties in communicating theological concepts and expertise in German.

This is fairly striking when considering that the International Theology Programme is designed with the concrete ambition that graduates return to their home countries and provide religious services for the diaspora community. During my conversations with DİTİB representatives, as well as professors of the study programme, they pointed out the potential of International Theology Programme's graduates to meet the need for well-trained religious personnel in Europe. Graduates are expected to fulfil a certain 'bridging function [Brückenfunktion]' within German society that includes the integration of Muslims and prevention of radicalisation, as well as the provision of religious services (Karakoç 2021, 130). Despite the programme's ambition and outlook, my interlocutors missed the theological engagement in their native language. During my fieldwork among German students, I encountered different approaches of students to compensate for this perceived lack. One central approach was for students to form study groups among German-speaking students. Typically established at one faculty, such study groups constituted spaces for students to read theological texts and discuss theological concepts in German. Sometimes, these student initiatives could also include other faculties, most often in Istanbul, where there was a reasonable geographical nearness. One such initiative, I encountered among German students at Marmara University in Istanbul. One German graduate of Marmara University shared how he and other students founded a study group to discuss the Qurʾan in German. Meeting typically after university hours, their goal was to familiarise students with relevant German Islamic terminology.

These were weekly sessions of a series that we called 'Principles of the Noble Qurʾan'. Here, we tried to break down the Qurʾan into its objectives and fundamental principles. So, what is the Qurʾan about? What terms appear in it? And then, interpret that in German. This was a big deal for the students because they had never — this is no exaggeration — explained Islam in German before. They had only learned, spoken, and communicated in Turkish. We could have talked about other topics as well, but the fact that they learned German Islamic terminology was brilliant for them.

The example of the study group from Marmara University and its reception among German students is intriguing since it highlights the perceived lack of engagement with native language theological terminology for students. While designed to prepare students to serve their diaspora communities upon returning to their home countries, the study programme can fall short in providing adequate opportunities for students to engage with theological matters in their native language, specifically German. This gap leads to difficulties for students in gaining theological literacy in their native language, which is seen as essential for their future roles.

German Muslim Lifeworlds

While language proficiency was a crucial factor for many international students, the integration of their home sociocultural contexts into the curriculum also proved to be of equal significance. During the majority of my conversations with German students, my interlocutors stressed the importance of relating theologically to the sociocultural contexts at home. Specifically, they missed an integration of their German Muslim lifeworlds into the curriculum of the International Theology Programme.[3] Put differently, they felt that their studies lacked German theological lenses, which could address issues specific to the situations faced by Muslims as a minority in Germany. In his research on the International Theology Programme, Benjamin Bruce discovered that other international students shared similar criticisms, noting that the curriculum did not adequately address the specific aspects of Islam in the West (2020, 1178). During my fieldwork, professors I interviewed also noted the lack of integration of matters specific to the sociocultural contexts of the students' home countries highlighted the potential benefits of 'tailoring' the programme's outlook and curriculum in a more 'European way'. Thereby, it would be beneficial to incorporate more European texts, texts in European languages, and restructure the programme to address topics relevant to international students. However, the professor acknowledged practical challenges, including language barriers among faculty members at affiliated universities and the diverse nationalities of the student body, which hindered the creation of a universally 'tailored' programme.

Students typically criticised that the programme does not equip them adequately for future roles as religious personnel in their home countries. This critique often focused on the theoretical outlook of the study programme, which lacked a platform for discussing relevant everyday issues. Specifically, German students frequently noted that studying Islamic theology in Turkey 'distanced' or 'detached' them from pertinent issues in German Muslim lifeworlds. They desired the curriculum to include discussions on relevant issues such as behaviours deemed *haram* (e.g. smoking or having a girlfriend) and other topics including gender and sexuality. For example, two female Ankara graduates pointed out that issues specific to the German Muslim context cannot always be translated into the Turkish context.[4]

Fatma:	For example, we are often asked [by friends] about shaking hands with the opposite sex. So, here [in Turkey] people are really definite: 'No, of course not. You're not allowed to do that.' But if you live in Germany, then you know that shaking hands, for example, is something very common in German society and that it's strange if you don't do it. Then you don't have the opportunity here [in Turkey] to talk about it.
Researcher:	Because there is no background experience [Erfahrungshintergrund]?
Fatma:	Exactly.
Melike:	Culture shock. [laughs]
Fatma:	Exactly. Also with halal products, for example. Nobody worries whether there is pork gelatine inside.
Melike:	Exactly, those are diaspora problems. Things that you only know as a German-Turkish woman. And what's even funnier, when we're in Germany, we ask – for example, when we go out to eat kebabs – then you ask the shopkeeper, 'Hey, is the kebab halal?' When we come to Turkey on vacation, then we do that too

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[3] The usage of lifeworld here is inspired by Michael Jackson's anthropological concept, who grasps lifeworlds to be based on intersubjective relations and characterised by people's self-awareness and autonomy (2013, 2017).
[4] All names of students and alumni are pseudonyms.

– you just get used to [doing] it. And the shopkeepers here, they condemn [verteufeln] you. 'Of course, it's halal!' [laughs].

The example of the two female graduates provides an insightful perspective into students' experience of transnational learning spaces. While living in Turkey and studying at Turkish universities, students recognise it as crucial to relate their theological knowledge to their German Muslim lifeworld, which could differ significantly from the Muslim lifeworlds in Turkey. Since these students commonly envisaged that they would end up working with people back home in Germany, their experiences on the International Theology Programme also made them reflect on the specific issues that they would have to deal with in their professional lives as German Muslims. Therefore, most of my interlocutors highlighted the need for a more European, or specifically German, perspective in their studies. Like the matter of language, I encountered many different study groups among German students and sometimes among other European students, discussing theological issues and problems specific to their home countries (see also Bruce 2020, 1176). This experience among students provides an interesting perspective on the International Theology Programme and its approach to educating religious personnel for diaspora communities. It raises questions about how well-prepared graduates feel about their roles and responsibilities when they become religious personnel in their home countries.

Concluding Remarks

This article explored transnational Islamic higher education through the case of the International Theology Programme in Turkey. The programme is an important institution in the contemporary field of transnational Islamic higher education. Targeting young Muslims within the Turkish diaspora communities, the programme aims to educate future religious personnel for these communities. Considering its outlook, the International Theology Programme is typically seen as a prime example of diaspora policy through which the Turkish state transfers political and social remittances to diaspora communities. Students' experiences reveal, however, a more nuanced reality. Paying attention to *transnational learning spaces* helps to better understand the specific issues and challenges that students face in their studies. In the context of the International Theology Programme, international students missed to some extent engaging with Islam in their native languages, which they understood as crucial for becoming equipped for future professional roles. Furthermore, students and alumni, whom I interviewed, missed an integration of their German Muslim lifeworlds into the curriculum of the study programme, which could address issues and problems specific to the sociocultural contexts in Germany. In response, students started to form study groups to bridge these perceived gaps, underscoring their agency and influence in shaping transnational Islamic higher education. These findings illustrate how students' perspectives and lifeworlds enrich our understanding of such programmes, complicating the notion of institutional influence and highlighting the dynamic interplay of institutional goals and student agency.

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