Article

Professionalizing the Imam in Europe: Imam Training Programs as Sites of Deliberative Engagement

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Abstract: This article discusses the first experiences of a supplementary imam training program that has been designed in the Netherlands for community-based imams, female religious leaders and mosque committee members. This “Professionalization of Imams in the Netherlands” program (PIN) was set up as a cooperation of the Representative Council of Muslims (CMO) and Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, supported by state-subsidy. The article discusses how the initiators maneuvered within and beyond the politicized burden of expectation that has surrounded the establishment of European-based imam training programs for decades now. The article provides a unique insight into the program’s design, its collaborative partners and participants’ experiences, understanding the program as a site of deliberative engagement. It shows how the stakeholders ideally see ownership of the curriculum and trainee recruitment as a shared responsibility for the Muslim community and the public educational institution, whereas the state is willing to finance it. The article outlines how in this attempt the stakeholders must deal with some paradoxical dynamics that influence this notion of “shared ownership”. Sharing these analytical observations and recommendations will hopefully help stakeholders involved in setting up similar European programs to make rational decisions on content and format of (future) supplementary programs, within and beyond fields of power, authority and interest.

Keywords: Imams; Imam training; Europe; The Netherlands; deliberative capital

1. Introduction: Imam Training as Empowerment or Government Control?

“... the Gordian knot of the debate about Islam in Europe remains an issue of philosophical, theological and epistemological order...” [T]he [imam training] project consists of a certain degree of interference into religious mechanisms that (re)define the European representations of Islam’s overall future function.”

Farid El Asri (2018, p. 102)

The training of imams has been a “hot topic” in many Western European societies for several decades now and of great concern to Muslim and non-Muslim stakeholders alike (Hashas et al. 2018). The office of imam has often been considered as the “most effective access point to influence and organize European Muslim communities” (Hashas et al. 2018, p. 13; Aslan and Windisch 2012). Consequently, we witness everywhere in Europe how initiatives for European-based imam training programs are being developed (Vinding and Chbib 2020). Clearly, the complexity is great and there are many variations. Observers paint a picture of highly complicated processes of negotiation between Muslim organizations and the national state. Kin-states like Turkey and Morocco attempt to keep control, opening their own facilities in Europe, or suggesting international collaborations (e.g., Ferreiro Galguera 2011; Peter 2018; Schmidt and Trucco 2019; Vinding and Chbib 2020). The two most used words in public, political and scholarly debate in this regard are “bridging” and “challenges”. Imams are often considered as potential “bridge builders” between the Muslim community and secular majority society—on the prominent condition that they
possess the right skills and competencies to do so. Whereas the essential qualification of imams in Muslim majority countries is a first and foremost profound knowledge of the Islamic scriptural sources, legal–ethical traditions and ritual guidance, the European secular context requires new skills of imams to answer questions facing Muslims here. It appears indeed “challenging” to organize publicly-funded teaching and training facilities in which Muslim organizations, the state and educational institutes successfully work together.

1.1. The Search for Common Grounds by Three Stakeholders

Whereas stakeholders generally agree about the urgency to establish new training facilities in Western Europe, they do not necessarily do so on the same grounds; they might disagree on the question of which “bridge-ends” must be connected and why. There is an often mentioned, presumed gap between a religious authority based on knowledge of the Islamic tradition on the one hand and a Western secular notion of what is considered “apt” Islamic knowledge on the other. We see this contrast often used in socio-political agendas particularly since the early 2000s. On the one hand, there is a political discourse that considers educational facilities in Europe imperative in preventing Islamic radicalism and extremism, giving a key role to the government in establishing these training institutes. Yazbeck Haddad and Balz, for instance, observed in 2008 a (strong) relationship between French, British and Dutch governments’ endorsement of these programs to train “Euro-friendly” imams to combat radical Islam. As one important policy strategy, they point at an “active promotion of a “moderate” and “tolerant” Islam that is more attuned to European policies and values and efforts to create a Euro-friendly imam corps that include re-educating the imams in schools with government ties” (Yazbeck Haddad and Balz 2008, p. 216). On the other hand, we often see a public and political discourse that emphasizes the necessity of teaching imams in knowledge and skills of how democracy works—which is now considered lacking. In this discourse, Muslims are framed as “newcomers” in Western-European society who have until now insufficiently grasped the majority society’s demands, even after more than sixty years of presence, or who even have refused to integrate. This socio-political discourse emphasizes the relative weakness of Muslims’ internal organization in Europe, hardly able to cooperate on a supra-community level to mobilize their community for their own emancipation.

Furthermore, the politically loaded issue at hand is how to “bridge” the two parties’ wishes (government and Muslim organizations) standing on each side. Should Islamic expert education be initiated by the state? Or should it be the Muslim organizations that reach out from private initiatives to public universities or colleges? The first approach, “top-down”, runs the risk of failing if there is insufficient Muslim “ownership” over the content and governance of the program, and a disconnection with the practical demands of Muslim grassroots. This risk of losing trust from the Muslim side is even more prominent if the government is thought to foster a “specific kind of Islam”, a “taming of imams” (Yazbeck Haddad and Balz 2008). Some observers point at a tendency of European governments to instrumentalize imam training as a way of “disciplining the Muslim subject” (Hafez 2014). A “bottom-up” approach, however, in which individual Muslim organizations organize private training facilities in Western Europe, has so far mostly resulted in a fragmented educational landscape, organized along religious–ethnic–political lines. Moreover, politicians have difficulty trusting these community-based provisions, fearing that conservative leaders with little affiliation with broader society will be trained here, while remaining under influence of foreign governments or transnational movements (see for instance Scott-Baumann and Cheruvallil-Contractor (2015) on the UK).

European imam training programs, whether organized by the private or the public sector, by the Muslim community itself, or as part of the national system of education, thus “all face challenges of credibility and legitimacy from either within the Muslim community or the authorities—or both” (Martikainen and Latvio 2018, p. 425). The paradox, however, is that none of the three stakeholders (Muslim representative organizations, state actors and
educational stakeholders) can realize on its own a program that converges expectations, aims and standards (Agai 2020), while at the same time they do not fully trust each other in sharing ownership (Jouanneau 2018). Particularly the two discourses of “securitization” and “integration” risk exacerbating the binaries they seek to address. Thus, mutual distrust risks jeopardizing the efforts of those stakeholders who genuinely want to establish a space in European publicly-funded institutes for training Muslim religious professionals with the knowledge and skills so eagerly needed inside and outside the mosque.

This being said, one witnesses various initiatives in Western Europe in which state, Muslim organizations and educational institutes (are willing to) collaborate to better prepare imams for their tasks in European secular countries. One such option has been to establish Bachelor and Master programs at publicly funded universities or higher vocational colleges as an alternative for (or replacement of) traditional education in Muslim majority countries, notably in Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands. Another option is in the form of state-subsidized supplementary programs for imams who are trained abroad and now come to work as an imam in a Western European mosque, for instance, in Switzerland and the Netherlands (Vinding and Chbib 2020).

1.2. State Subsidized Supplementary Programs for Imams

This article focuses on a recent example of this latter option. It discusses a unique program that has been designed in the Netherlands as a professionalization program for community-based imams, female religious leaders and mosque committee members. It was set up as a cooperation of the Representative Council of Muslims in the Netherlands (CMO) and the Faculty of Religion and Theology of Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, supported by state-subsidy. The article’s first aim is to share some evaluative insights from the program’s first run in 2018–2019. The second aim is to discuss how the initiators maneuvered and deliberated within and beyond the politicized burden of expectations and conflicting legitimations sketched above. Following the theoretical outline guiding this Special Issue, it takes the Dutch professionalization-of-imams-program as an example of an “assemblage” emerging in the “problem space” of “how to define what constitutes relevant and apt knowledge and Islamic expert education in Europe” (Groeninck and Boender 2020). The underlying article describes how the initiators neither intended to take the hegemony of the secular epistemic for granted nor wanted to disclaim or abnegate the relevance of prior Islamic theological training for the Dutch context. The program’s aim was thus not to problematize the already existing “symbolic capital” of the participating imams, in the form of already acquired theological knowledge. Instead, it intended to add what I will suggest to call “deliberative capital”, as it focused on acquiring those skills and competencies that are needed to have their voices heard in the Dutch public sphere.

This leads to the article’s third aim which is to propose an analytical focus for further research into this field. Based on my evaluation of the Dutch PIN program, I will propose that the concept of “deliberative capital” enables us to empirically bring into focus the emphasis on the necessity to acquire skills and competencies to better prepare for working in the Dutch context. Moreover, it can prove analytically helpful because “deliberative capital” can be defined as “an object of competition within the field [of power], as it serves as a basis for inclusion and recognition, on the one hand, and exclusion and denial of recognition, on the other hand” (Holdo 2016, p. 403). According to Holdo, “[t]he problem . . . is not simply that those marginalized in public discourse [read: imams, WB] lack skills or competences. Their problem is the lack of the publicly recognized forms of capital” (Holdo 2016, p. 406). It is precisely this power-critical perspective (Leirvik 2016) that enables us to see how in socio-political negotiations about the conditions of imam training there is a dynamic of inclusion as well as exclusion at work. Who determines which conditions the foreign-trained religious functionary must meet in order to participate fully in society, and based on what reasoning?

I will present these insights as a researcher who has participated in numerous national and international expert meetings on imam training in the Netherlands and Western
Europe. Importantly, although I have not co-designed the Dutch PIN curriculum, I have been able to closely watch consultations of the board of governors and have had regular conversations with the executive team between 2017 and 2019. I also gave a lecture in the Dutch PIN program and had access to the evaluation material of the Faculty Religion and Theology. Sharing my analytical observations and recommendations will hopefully help stakeholders involved in setting up similar European programs to make some rational decisions on content and format of (future) supplementary programs, within and beyond fields of power, authority and interests.  

Below, I will first provide a brief overview of the Dutch context of imam training before entering into the specificities of the Professionalization of Imams in the Netherlands (PIN) program. After presenting the program, its collaborative partners, and its participants, I will discuss how the stakeholders tried to deal with the politicized context and the “paradox of conditionality” some Muslim initiators experienced. From my evaluative description of the first experiences of this educational experiment, I will come up with a proposal to study this further both empirically and theoretically. Thus, after taking stock of these developments, I will end by emphasizing the necessity of further empirical research into these professionalization or supplementary programs as sites of deliberative engagement.

2. The Training of Imams in the Netherlands

There are many different “types” of imams at work in Europe. Vinding (2018) made a typology in which he distinguishes twelve ideal–typical constructions of religious authority, based on educational qualifications and institutional employment. Thus, we see a range of options, varying from traditionally or self-taught imams and female leaders working in local mosques, to European-trained Muslim chaplains (male and female) working in prisons and hospitals.

The majority of imams in Europe consist of men who work in the protected environment of the mosque and are employed by a mosque council or a foreign government (so-called “Ambassador imams”) (Vinding 2018). They received their education abroad and came to Europe to be employed as imam. Mosque congregations in Europe hold this education in a Muslim-majority country in high esteem (Martikainen and Latvio 2018). “The conventional transmission of knowledge from master to disciple and credentials from traditional universities retain strong symbolic capital in the assignment of [Muslim religious intellectual] authority” (El Asri 2018, pp. 112–13). The thorough knowledge of and access to the scriptural sources and legal ethics of Islam, provide religious leaders with what has been called “epistemic authority” (Vinding 2018, p. 232; referring to Hallaq 2001, 2009; Wilson 1983).

2.1. Epistemic Authority as Core of Professional Authority

It is this epistemic authority that is both acknowledged as “symbolic capital” as well as problematized when they arrive working in the Western European context. The limitation to training abroad, with its strong focus on textual studies over pastoral issues, is increasingly considered as less ideal for the European context (Ali 2018, p. 304). This is not only voiced by external considerations briefly sketched in the introduction. It also is a deep concern for the emancipation of Muslims in Europe who want to develop their own spaces for learning in public universities in Europe. In Muslim circles, there is a strong sense of urgency, “although these problems [with current imamship practices] have less to do with government security concerns and more to do with being in tune with community concerns and possessing the skills to lead” (Ali 2018, p. 297). It is particularly the lack of skills and professional competencies that is often addressed as creating a distance between young generations of Muslims and imams. The latter cannot adequately fulfill their role as counselors, because they literally do not speak the language, nor can they empathically “connect” because they are unfamiliar with social structures, legal frameworks and local customs (Hashas et al. 2018; Boender 2013). In this way, a considerable number of community leaders have difficulty dealing with complex situations.
brought to them by their congregation. Due to lack of skills, they cannot participate fully in the public debate, neither within the mosque premises, nor reaching out from the mosque. What is needed, then, are “qualified “pioneers” who have significant authority within their respective community and are also recognized for their expertise by public institutions” (Vinding and Chbib 2020, p. 39).

To achieve the formation of these “pioneers”, the Netherlands (like other European countries) has been “experimenting” with different constructions of Islamic expert education over the past fifteen years, with varying degrees of success. Among the providers of various forms of imam training and Islamic spiritual care were universities, accredited universities for applied sciences (hogescholen), and private institutes. Before discussing the specificities of the PIN program meant for community-based leaders, I will briefly list some initiatives that were designed in the framework of Dutch higher education to accommodate students who finished high school in the Netherlands and now wish to study to become a Muslim religious expert (imam/theologian/teacher).

2.2. Islamic Theology and Islamic Spiritual Care in the Dutch National Educational Context

From 2005, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam has offered a scientific study program in Islamic Theology and Islamic Spiritual Care at BA and MA level, followed by the possibility of a one-year post-Master study program in Imam training. Until now, several hundreds of students, mostly with a Muslim background, have graduated from these programs. Two more state-funded programs started in the same period, but stopped after a while, amongst others because of lack of students. Between 2006 and 2013, Leiden University offered a scientific education that relied strongly on the Leiden tradition of historical–critical study of Islam. The program paid much attention to the situation of Muslims in the West, but the students did not actively learn how to deal with Islamic law and ethics in practice. The training did not prepare for the imam profession. The official training that should provide this has never got off the ground. The scientific Islamic Theology Bachelor and Master in Leiden have been phased out since 2013 (Berger 2021). Another publicly funded full program for imam training/Muslim chaplaincy/Islamic pedagogics ran between 2006 and 2013 at the university for applied sciences (Hogeschool) InHolland. This program terminated in 2017/18. Five Islamic organizations were closely involved in this program. The specialization Imam already stopped in September 2012; the two other specializations were phased out from September 2013. Reasons were amongst others financial and organizational: the number of graduates remained low (Boender 2013).

A private initiative whose program has been accredited but not financed by the state is the Islamic University of Applied Sciences Rotterdam (IUR). Started in 1999, it offers a Bachelor’s degree in Islamic theology accredited by the Dutch-Flemish Accreditation Organization (NVAO) and a Master’s degree in Islamic Spiritual Care also accredited by NVAO. The Bachelor of Islamic theology prepares for the professional field of working in the mosque—men as imam/theologian, women as religious teacher/theologian. A similar initiative, the Islamic University for Applied Sciences Europe has gone bankrupt in 2018 due to maladministration. The most recent lot is Islamic University for Applied Sciences Amsterdam (IUasA), organized by Federation Milli Görüş North-Netherlands. Because of a strong sense of urgency, this mosque umbrella organization did not wait for new state-funded initiatives and started private training in September 2018. The program is led by Muslim teachers trained and promoted in the Netherlands. This training is in close contact with the headquarters of MG in Cologne (Germany). Not part of the Dutch higher education constellation, but worth mentioning in this brief account, is the Diyanet scholarship program for Dutch students (m/f) with a Turkish background for a full four-year study at a Turkish Faculty of Theology (İlihiyat Fakültesi). This UIP program has been in existence for ten years. A limited number of students have now returned to the Netherlands after graduating to work here or continue studying at VU.

A further discussion of these Dutch initiatives or the reasons for termination is left out of the scope of this article. It suffices here to say that at present only a few Dutch
young Muslims seem interested in becoming mosque-based imam or female religious functionaries. Among the often mentioned reasons are low salary and status of imams and a preference of studying economically more viable disciplines like economics, medicine, law or pedagogy. Additionally, communities still seem to favor religious leaders trained abroad. The latter still largely outnumber the graduates from the “homegrown” Dutch educational initiatives mentioned above (Boender 2013; Larsson 2018). We will now zoom in at a recent and unique Dutch initiative aimed at those imams and religious leaders that are already working in the context of the mosque and have been trained abroad. This target group has arrived in Europe to work within a specific constellation of epistemic and institutionalized authority. Their Islamic knowledge and professional competencies are both acknowledged and problematized.

3. Professionalization of Imams in the Netherlands (PIN) Program

In 2018–2019, the Faculty of Religion and Theology of Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (VU), the Representative Council of Muslims in the Netherlands (CMO) and the Council of Moroccan Mosques in the Netherlands (RMMN), jointly offered an intensive, interactive, practice-based training program that aimed to serve the needs of the Dutch Muslim community and their religious professionals. The Professionalization of Imams in the Netherlands program (PIN) primarily targeted those imams, female religious leaders and mosque board members that are employed by or volunteering in an organization. They are called “organizational imams or professionals” in Vinding’s typology, or “mosque or congregation imams and preachers” who are locally employed or loosely associated (Vinding 2018; Vinding and Chbib 2020, p. 45). Thus, PIN aimed to increase the professional working repertoire of community-based leaders who are already active in mosques in the Netherlands (Vinding and Chbib 2020, p. 22). Seventy-five religious functionaries participated, among which eleven women, all having advanced theological knowledge.

3.1. Professional Skills for Imams in Pluriform Dutch Society

Focusing on professionalization skills to adequately function in pluriform Dutch society, the program consisted of different modules and covered twenty-two days spread over one year. In two Masterclasses, of two days each, participants were introduced in the themes of “Western society and religion” (Masterclass 1) and “Modernity and Islamic theology” (Masterclass 2). In five more modules spread over twenty days, the participants delved into different aspects of complex societal problems, focusing on the themes of “(Muslim) youth, social identification and religion”, “Explaining Qur’an in the Dutch context”, “History, culture and governance of the Netherlands”, and “Interreligious dialogue and world religions”. They also received media training. Several participants also followed intensive Dutch language training. The program included excursions to the Parliament, the Peace Palace, a high school, the national Jewish museum, the Protestant Church Service Organization, a Catholic church, two synagogues and a museum for religious art. Thus, the program aimed to expose imams to central issues and challenges in Dutch society and equip them to be (self) reflective practitioners. The university setting and academic lectures provided an academic context to develop skills to discuss central social issues with their mosque constituencies and other professional contexts, including religious lessons and sermons. The year ended with a festive ceremony at the VU on 15 April 2019 in which the participants received a certificate. The imams and their families were congratulated by representatives of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, the director of CMO, and the President of the Executive Board of Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.

The PIN initiative differed in important ways from the earlier government-organized civic integration program (inburgeringscursus)—now no longer running—that was specially designed for imams who come to the Netherlands with a work permit for the period of their employment contract (Boender 2000). Firstly, PIN is a supplementary program on a voluntary basis, whereas the governmental course provided compulsory integration courses for imams (with consequences if one does not make it). PIN is only financially
supported by the government; Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, CMO and RMMN invested in kind. Another important difference is that in PIN the initiators decided about the competencies and skills considered necessary for imams and mosque committees. They choose the lecturers and invited the participants instead of the government. A curriculum advisory council was established, with representatives from Muslim organizations, the Vrije Universiteit and educationalists with a Muslim background. This meant that, different from governmental “citizenship courses”, it were the Muslim organizations, in cooperation with Vrije Universiteit, that invested in finding support and trust among Muslims.

The seventy-five imams and mosque governors that participated in the 2018–2019 trajectory were from eight different ethnic backgrounds (thirty-four Moroccan, twenty-seven Turkish, four Surinamese, three Pakistani, three Afghan, two Bosnian, one Iraqi and one Dutch), mostly Sunni and a few Shi’a. They received their training in Morocco, Turkey, Egypt, Bosnia, Saudi Arabia and in some cases also the Netherlands. The majority of them were employed by a mosque committee or were volunteers in a mosque. Some participants, however, did work outside the mosque, notably as spiritual caretakers. This was the case for most of the female participants as well as some of the male imams. The starting point was that all were already fully-fledged professionals, who in this professional training place were brought into contact with aspects of the new environment in which they have come to work.

3.2. Exploring and Enjoying the Engagement with Denominations and Ethnicities

It can be called unique that so many imams from different origins came to know each other, collaborating intensively, and exchanging on their professional practices, for instance by writing each other a letter about how they organized a youth lesson, or sharing the content of their Friday sermon. In this way, they were supported to develop into what the program makers called a “reflective practitioner”. From the evaluations, we can see that this interethnic gathering was appreciated by the participants. For some, it was the first time that they encountered colleagues from other denominations and ethnicities. One participant said: “I enjoyed being together from different organizations while normally we lack time to meet each other.” Generally they liked the quality of the lecturers, the classroom facilities, including prayer facilities, food and drinks. Additionally, the excursions were highly appreciated, for instance to the Peace Palace, or the guided tour on the Jewish history of Amsterdam, as they brought them to previously unknown places. The program’s aim to acquaint the participants with various aspects of Dutch society which would otherwise remain unknown or inaccessible, was also positively evaluated:

“I think it was a special meeting in a positive sense. We discussed topics that one normally does not consider. The (guest)lecturers knew exactly where the sore points lay and made this a subject for discussion (problems that we face as Imams).”

“I liked to see how things are related in the present. Many things, names, places have much more meaning to me now. I feel more connected with the Netherlands because I learned the origin and development . . . . I got more respect and tolerance for certain views as I now know how these have grown from the past.”

Additionally, the media training was highly appreciated, like the practical exercises to speak in front of the camera, but also “to learn how media view Muslims”. A recurring point of criticism was the fact that much precious time in the Masterclasses went to on-site translation from Dutch to Turkish and Arabic, which was also at the expense of interaction. The courses were given by academic and non-academic-based lecturers. Of the fourteen academic lecturers, four were professing Muslims. Eleven out of eighteen non-academic presenters were Muslim and five of them were Christian. Some PIN modules were led by imams who are familiar with the Dutch language, relationships and manners. They spoke with their new colleagues to prepare for their task of helping Muslims find
their way in society. The importance of their input was emphasized several times in the evaluations, because they not only helped to identify the problems and possible causes, but also suggested possible solutions that could be directly linked to practice. The themes of the project were chosen in such a way that the participants will feel more equipped to better function in their professional practice. Judging from the evaluations, this resulted in deeper insight about their own position as a religious minority, producing more self-confidence. One participant explained how this worked for her when she got to know better the religious history of the Netherlands:

“One thing I noticed very much in the lessons at the VU, and that is that the teachers kept talking about ‘we’. They see us as part of society. Just like gays, Christians and atheists, we as Muslims can be ourselves in the Netherlands. That’s a really nice feeling. During the history lessons we heard how much battle has been fought for this. The fact that we live in a country where you can choose what your faith is, did not come naturally. And it was also funny: we already find the anti-Islam sentiment fierce. But if you know how painful and fiery the struggle has been between Protestants and Catholics: brothers of the same religion!” (female participant in Trouw 13 May 2019 (van Beek 2019)

Another participant phrased this effect as follows:

“I found it special in this module to see the connection with things as they are in the present. Many things, names and places have much more meaning to me now. I feel more connected to the Netherlands because I got to know its origins and how it came about. So this has been a very educational and successful specialization module, in my opinion. I have also gained more respect and tolerance for established opinions and beliefs now that I know how they came about over time.”

Many expressed a clear desire for a follow-up and a more extensive program.

“I think it was insightful but too short.”

“A full-time masterclass course of 2 years may be compiled with regard to well-qualified Imam with good completion to a master’s degree.”

“If you do not know the language of a country, you will miss a lot of culture and communication, so we have to even better learn the language and immerse ourselves.”

These participant evaluations have encouraged the initiators to continue the program and the intention is to run another year. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, this has not yet been realized.

4. Understanding the Imam Training as Sites of Deliberative Engagement

These first positive experiences with PIN (a relatively large number of participants and their positive evaluations) suggest that PIN can be one possible answer to the need for supplementary training for imams and Muslim professionals in Europe, albeit not the only one. There is certainly no “one-size-fits-all” educational model because of the large variety of Muslim professionals and contexts in which they work. Moreover, it does not mean that it will be easy to set up a collaborative program like this. An important characteristic of the PIN program has been its notion of “shared ownership”: Muslim organizations, the academic partner, and the state, made a tripartite effort—a res mixta as Ucar (Ucar 2010) called it in 2010. In PIN, the Muslim organizations were in the lead, while the university provided the academic context, whereas the government endorsed the project with a (modest) subsidy.

4.1. Trust and Common Grounds for “Shared Ownership”

However, trust between these stakeholders has to grow. It is precisely that aspect that we must examine more closely. As sketched earlier in this article, several other attempts
have failed. To be sustainable, stakeholders need to commit themselves to make sufficient resources available, be it financial (the state), time and expertise (the university), and trainees (Muslim organizations). However, regarding governance, (financial) feasibility, and credibility, the three parties have to deal with “government politics”, with “university politics”, and “federal mosque politics”; doubts can arise at unexpected moments because of internal affairs in each of these domains, interfering the fragile collaboration. For example, it turned out that not all mosque boards gave PIN participants the opportunity to follow the entire course, as not all elders in the community yet embraced these actions of their imam to leave the (what Ali calls) “restrictive environment of the mosque” (Ali 2018, p. 300). The education partner can also be confronted with mistrust. Sözeri et al. (2018) concluded in their interviews with Diyanet administrators in the Netherlands that they not always agreed with the fact that non-Muslim lecturers are appointed at universities to teach Islam.

However, perhaps most important is that “shared ownership” can be complicated by a “double paradox”, caused by the influence of the “securitization frame” or the “integration frame”. Especially the Muslim partners suffer from this paradox: the more the Muslim representative body CMO makes an effort for the same cause as the government, the more it can be portrayed as uncritically conforming to the dominant majority (Bal 2019). This can be a cause for mistrust on the part of the Muslim community. Although CMO is the only organization that can claim Muslims’ judicial rights for state-subsidized institutions or projects, CMO still enjoys relatively little recognition from Muslim communities, particularly among non-organized Muslims (Boender 2014; Laurence 2012). The fact that political interest might be driven by a “securitization agenda”, thus puts a strong burden on the developments. In a mild sense, it is about the political hope that new programs and the imams will be able to sever ties with the countries of origin and transnational Islam. More pronounced, however, it is the political mantra “who pays decides”, whereby foreign money—or manpower, in the form of imams—is by definition accompanied by the transfer of “unpleasant ideas”, as a Dutch publicist called it. This frame influences the suspicion that PIN was established by the government as a cunning way to block the option for mosque communities to hire the foreign imams of their choice. Evidently, the “securitization discourse” can have a counter-productive effect, because Muslims would not agree with a program that trains skills if these are “dictated” by the state. Additionally, the “integration discourse” which fosters an essentialist anti-intellectualist image of the imam who needs to be “retrained”, weighs heavily on the process: only with the right competencies, one can and may participate. It puts Muslims in a defending position which leaves less space to be openly critical about concerns they share about integrationist and anti-Western understandings. The “integration discourse” can also undermine the efforts of non-Muslim educators or stakeholders who can easily be discharged as “speaking for Muslims”.

Consequently, it is a fine line on which the CMO must balance between the suggestion to “blow along” with a government that wants to facilitate a “moderate Islam”, and the sincere desire to support a well-equipped, Dutch-oriented imam. Here, we stumble upon the question of who decides what the “right” skills and competencies are to be allowed to participate in a “deliberative democracy”. Any attempt to set up a supplementary program like this, be it in the Netherlands or elsewhere in Western-Europe, must be aware of the dual effect of inclusion and exclusion that is part of the difficult emancipation process of any religious minority group, but particularly of Muslims.

4.2. Fine Political Lines between Religious Organizations and State

In PIN, this thin line has been watched in three ways. Firstly, the separation between church and state must guarantee that the line is not crossed by the government. Although the government welcomes this initiative, there is no substantive government involvement. The curriculum advisory council installed by CMO and VU also sees to this. Secondly, PIN’s starting point has been the acknowledgement of the value of the participants’ theological
knowledge. The PIN is meant as a supplementary program to practice those professional skills that are not yet included in the education followed in Muslim majority countries. For mosque congregations, it is not the lack of knowledge of the Islamic tradition that is considered the core of their problem. In many mosques, this “epistemic authority” and *ijaza* (“diploma credits”) gained in traditional educational settings, is highly valued, as Vinding’s (2018) research shows. A growing number of Dutch Muslims do not want to be dependent anymore from countries of origin. However, this does not mean that they do not want to make use of educational programs abroad at all. Taking this epistemic authority seriously, the PIN program allowed an open, critical reflection and discussion about the participant’s explanation of the sources in the Dutch context. The imams appreciated the attention given to dealing with both Muslim radicalism and anti-Islamic tendencies in society. They thought it was only good that this was on the agenda. It increased their opportunities to talk to young people. However, as a male participant said in the interview in *Trouw*:

“We do not do this because we have to do it from someone, or because we are learning this at the VU. No, combating intolerance is simply our Islamic belief.”

Third, the PIN program aims at strengthening the imams’ professional skills and competencies. The aim is to increase their “deliberative capital”, which will provide them more access to public debate as spokespersons of their congregations. “Deliberative capital” is, however, “not measurable independently from the context of its production and the specific norms that determine its effectiveness” (Holdo 2016, p. 407), which in the case of imam training cannot be understood outside the larger politically and societally driven project of integration and emancipation. Designing a program like PIN is about negotiating what is seen as relevant within the space of secularism. However, attempts to get the imam to integrate need not only involve learning the skills necessary to join the dominant group. Perhaps also the symbolic capital imams already possess can be used better or differently. The success of a program like PIN then lies to a significant extent in, or even depends on, the perception that these are spaces where imams learn tools for deliberation that foster participation and inclusion in the public sphere. This was expressed by one of the participants as follows:

“The trajectory may give the impression that ‘imams’ and ‘the Netherlands’ are quite different from each other. But we are not that different at all. We share more things than not. I estimate that more than 90 percent of our standards and values are simply the same. Taking care of the weak, being good for your loved ones, treating people the way you want to be treated yourself. The differences are small.”

Male participant in *Trouw* 13 May 2019.

In the case of PIN, then, it might not be the metaphor of a “bridge” that helps us to understand what stakeholders have tried to realize, but the metaphor of three “hoops”. In this metaphor, the three stakeholders all hold up a hoop and fold them in such a way that three circles find a critical point in the middle where the interests overlap. It is in the middle that stakeholders can assemble to realize their ambitions together.

More research is needed to explore how exactly this works in the context of the imam training as a site of deliberative engagement. Such research can explore to what extent the definition of what the deliberative capital is, is in itself the commitment of the deliberation (Bourdieu 1992, pp. 186–87). This Bourdieuan perspective will allow us to see how “legitimacy claims derive their legitimacy from the relative power of the groups whose interests they express. When the definition of the judgement criteria and the principles of hierarchization itself constitute the stakes of struggle, there is actually no good arbitrator, because there is no arbitrator who is not at the same time also a part” (Bourdieu 1992, p. 187). In Holdo’s words, this means that “the recognition stemming from the field’s own type of capital is part of a complex struggle and hierarchy, while being at the same time a resource of the field itself” (Holdo 2016, p. 403). It will therefore
also be necessary to further investigate what other forms of deliberative capital would be available in addition to the competencies and skills that are already being identified in the PIN program. After all, it is precisely the recognition of alternative forms of deliberative capital that can give marginalized people access to public discussions, even if they do not master all skills and competencies (Holdo 2016). Such an analytical approach might prove helpful to investigate the effectiveness not only of the next edition of the Dutch PIN project, but also of comparable European imam training programs.

5. Concluding Remarks

Imams and other Muslim professionals work in and between “Islamic” and “Western” epistemological frameworks. In European public and political debates, these are often presented as contrasting, or at least as insufficiently matching. Whereas in the current post-secular societies the dire need to “bridge” these epistemic frameworks is shared by European governments and Muslim representative organizations in innovative forms of imam training, the actual attempts often come with challenges. Paradoxically, legitimate, credible and feasible proposals to “pass the bridge” can become unacceptable for one or more stakeholders if they rest on conditions set by one end.

This article focused on a specific form of imam training in Europe, namely a supplementary training designed for foreign imams and female leaders in the Netherlands to better prepare them for the Dutch context in which they have to function. The question of the desirability of such program is a political, social and internal question. It is therefore scholarly and societally important to take stock of how these programs are set up and what the stakeholders encounter.

In this article, I have wanted to show how PIN was set up as a program customized to the needs of the Muslim communities. I argued how it ideally sees ownership of curriculum content and trainee recruitment as a shared responsibility for the Muslim community and the public educational institution, whereas the state is willing to finance it. I pointed out a number of paradoxical dynamics that stakeholders in the Netherlands—and elsewhere in Europe—are dealing with. We can foresee that without sufficient ownership of the internally highly diverse Muslim community, the endeavor is expected to fail. If the university is the only partner to carry the financial risks, it is expected to fail. If the government sees the program as a way to “monitor Islam”, it is expected to fail. It will take time and patience to build trust and shared ownership.

Importantly, the PIN program takes the symbolic capital, rooted in the ‘ilm (religious knowledge), of the imams serious and wants to strengthen their “deliberative capital” in the Netherlands with a program that focuses on the competencies of language skills in Dutch, dealing with public institutions, (social) media, as well as a sensitivity to intercultural and intra-religious diversity and an inclusive democratic citizenship ideal. This is a legitimate endeavor and PIN can be considered a promising experiment given the responses of the first group of participants. None of the stakeholders seeks to downplay the concerns about Islamist extremism, radicalism or restrictive conservatism. However, it is important not to contrast the state and Muslims, as if only the state would have this concern and Muslim organizations not. Precisely the Bourdieuan concept of deliberative capital can help us to keep a critical eye on how norms determine which knowledge and competencies are acknowledged and which are problematized by majority society (Holdo 2016, p. 391). Stakeholders seem to agree that practicing certain civic skills is necessary to be taken seriously in the secular liberal democratic state. However, those involved must ensure that this does not happen from an unbalanced power structure. Shared ownership is key to building trust.

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**Notes**

1. Markus Holdo (2016) studied this in the very different setting of participatory budgeting by volunteers in a neighbourhood in Rosario, Argentina. I like to thank my fellow NIAS-fellow Johanna Söderström for pointing me at Holdo’s study.

2. For a recent overview see Vinding and Chbib (2020).

3. In the Netherlands, the state has historically supported the academic education of the clergy by funding programs at public universities like Leiden University but from the 1970s onwards also at Protestant or Catholic universities, among which the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. This support has to be provided by the government on the basis of equality without interfering in the religious internal affairs.

4. Milli Görüş Noord-Nederland (MG); Nederlandse Islamitische Federatie (NIF); Unie van Marokkaanse Moskee-organisaties in Nederland (UMMON); World Islamic Mission (WIM); Stichting Islamitisch Centrum Nederland (SICN).

5. Note that public and political debate in the Netherlands has put emphasis on educating mosque-imams—and Islamic spiritual caregivers; much less on teacher’s training like in Belgium, Germany or Austria.

6. CMO was established in 2004 as the representative council of Muslims in the Netherlands to organize relations between Muslim communities and the state. One of these relations concerned the training of imams, another the organization of Muslim chaplaincy at prisons and in the army (Boender 2014). CMO has now 12 member organizations. In 2020 the Council of Moroccan Mosques in the Netherlands (RMMN) became member of the CMO.

7. The integration program run by the recently established Islamic Research & Education Institute which offers a training meant for Diyanet-employed Turkish imams should be mentioned here as well but will not be further discussed in this article.

8. An independent evaluation has been carried out by the VU (Team Onderwijsevaluaties, Toetskwaliteit en Institutional Research), made available 6 September 2019. At fifteen occasions printed questionnaires evaluating a specific module were distributed amongst the participants. The average score was between 4.11 and 4.53 on a 5-point scale. According to the evaluation desk this result can be called ‘high’ to ‘very high’. The written comments also show that the participants were generally (very) satisfied.

9. All translations from the evaluation forms were translated from Dutch by the author.

10. The specialization modules were in Dutch-only.

11. Research done by Labyrinth (2019) confirmed this wish among Dutch Muslims.

12. See Martikainen and Latvio (2018) and Pallavicini (2018) who report about difficulties in Finland and Italy.

13. www.davidrenkema.nl, accessed on 5 March 2021.

14. Compare (Habermas 2020).

15. This makes an important difference with the authority of Muslim chaplains or spiritual caretakers, as the research of Mansur Ali (2018) in the UK shows. As the PIN is focused precisely on the community-based imams that work mostly within the premises of the mosque, I leave this out of our discussion here.

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