

Assuring Quality Outcomes: Best Practices For Higher Education In Islamic Countries

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to discuss the appropriateness of using imported quality standards to assess the quality of education in an Islamic context and whether the resulting education contributes to the achievement of national goals. Using dialectical inquiry and fitness of purpose analysis, this paper compares the purposes and outcomes of education as defined by Western and Islamic standards and suggests quality benchmarking considerations that ensure the sustainability and integrity of education in Muslim countries. The central argument is that overall, the imported quality frameworks do not prevent the implementation of Islamically-based educational systems, but the quality rhetoric needs to be interpreted and applied in an Islamic manner. Suggested best practices include implementing mutual consultation, mastering core concepts, and ensuring that the professors understand the context of Islam. These Islamically-based best practices represent easily accessible and customizable benchmarking guides for universities in the Islamic world that concerned practitioners can adopt when constructing or modifying home grown and foreign institutions of higher education.

Keywords: Higher Education, Quality Assurance, Islam, Benchmarking, Standards, Best Practices, Accreditation, Fitness of purpose.

Introduction

In today's education market the production of ethical higher order thinkers firmly grounded in the needs and aspirations of their nation is played against the needs of a global market. Core to the conflict is the

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idea of the creation of a knowledge economy, where employees embed their knowledge into a company's 'routines, systems, and tools' (Delong & Fahey 2000, p114). The question here is whether higher education quality assurance is promoting a knowledge worker fit for Islamic countries. The purpose of this paper is to examine the field and tools of quality assurance in higher education to help articulate the needs and requirements of quality education and produce students that are able to further the goals and aspirations of Muslim society. This paper aims to contribute to the assurance of context-appropriate knowledge workers by exploring the state of quality assurance today, illustrating the difference between Islamic and Western education through dialectical inquiry, doing a fitness of purpose analysis of western quality standards to Islamic contexts, and offer some best practice considerations for this context.

Concerns about Quality Definitions

Definitions of quality in higher education have undergone substantial change since the 1980s, a determined shift towards the mercantilization of the university characterized by a neoliberal model of global capitalism (Santos 2006). With the rise of the privatizing influence of capitalism and its emphasis on accounting standards, educational institutions have increasingly turned to quality control and assurance to ensure that there is a monetary return on investments in education. Emphasis on income generating research and government and industry collaborations caused a shift in focus from serving societal needs to serving corporate and governmental interests. As a result, learning how to learn takes precedence over acquiring a body of knowledge (Morley 2003). Where once universities aimed at transforming society and creating an enlightened man, now they aim to meet workforce needs and be financially viable.

Today, meeting the needs of the workforce and maintaining financial viability means emphasis on being globally competitive. For example, quality assurance across Europe has been driven by the Bologna process which is 'meant to strengthen the competitiveness and attractiveness of the European higher education' (Benelux Bologna Secretariat 2009). Quality assurance guidelines and benchmarks were designed not only to improve internal systems but also to maintain global competitiveness. Adopting these guidelines and the external quality evaluation systems

that go with them may privilege the institutions they were designed for over those that may have different objectives, guiding principles and instructional language. Certainly, if the system is linked to ranking, those who most closely abide by the organizing principles and values will likely have a higher ranking (Alperin 2013).

Beyond creating a market for university services, globalization of higher education has also played a key role in increasing emphasis on governmental interests. Higher education has played a role in defining America's place in the hierarchy of nations through the use of 'soft power' (Nye, 2004), or indirect means of inter-country interaction. Education has been deemed highly effective in explaining American values to the rest of the world (Altbach & Peterson 2008). It has particular weight with government officials concerned with the Muslim world, who see international higher education as a key strategy to foster greater understanding (Djerejian 2003, Task Force on Public Diplomacy 2003). The concept of countries racing to produce a 'World Class University', as defined by global accreditation and ranking systems, can harm the national interests of those participating (Deem *et al.* 2008). For the Middle East and other developing countries, the western push towards being the best means that developing countries are both importing university systems through branch campuses, and disinvesting in public universities through the adoption of foreign quality standards which do not adapt to local concerns and values. In the knowledge economy, they have become consumers, rather than producers (Collins & Rhoads 2010).

Educational Quality in Islam

For Muslims, the most important question in the field of quality or any other field has traditionally been whether it has a historical precedence in the revealed truth, in the life of the Prophets(AS)^b, or in the administration of the four rightly guided Caliphs who followed the Prophet Muhammad (SAW). The fact that seeking education is firmly grounded in Islam is well documented from the first instance of revelation that insisted that the Prophet (SAW) read, with a prescription

b 'AS' is a customary honorific for holy people meaning upon whom be peace. Other abbreviations in this document include (RA) meaning God's blessing be on him, and (SAW) Peace be upon him

for actively seeking knowledge (Qur'an 96:1). There is also evidence that assuring quality is important. The Caliph Umar bin Khattab (RA) established many means of assuring quality in professions, including establishing a guild system, personally observing the needs of people in his city, and sending envoys to ensure that rulers of lands under Muslim rule were acting as they presented themselves (Al-Qarashi 1990). This not only set the precedent but also established foundations of participatory needs assessment and self-governance.

Yet despite the historical precedence for Islamic grounding in education and self-governance, educational systems in Muslim countries are often detached from Islamic values. As in the West, political expediency and changing agendas in education affect education in Muslim countries today. There have been several attempts to reinvigorate Islamic education. Notably, the Arab renaissance in the 19th Century offered in response to colonization, and Islamization of knowledge in the 1980s in response to globalization (Abul Fadl 1988). Conferences devoted to the Islamization of knowledge found that in light of increasing economic dependence and western hegemony in all areas of life, "a proper education policy is the kingpin in any scheme for evolving a strategy for setting the house of the Muslim Ummah in order" (Erfan & Zahid 1995, VII). Ultimately, these conferences concluded that what makes education Islamic is simply whether or not Islamic beliefs are the principle focus of the educational activities. In addition, they detailed some hallmarks relevant to higher education in Islamic countries and Islamic Studies programs in western countries including the articulation of Islamic values, Qur'an and Hadith as foundational texts, promotion of science for the good of mankind, promotion of Islamic theories in economics, politics, sociology and philosophy, making sharia the core, and establishing a provisional body of Muslim thinkers and educators to monitor and drive education (Erfan & Zahid, 1995). These values were helped to determine the quality of higher education. However, in recent years, the focus on producing Islamic knowledge, having a voice, and developing Islamically based teaching methodologies has waned in favour of a focus on ensuring that Universities in Islamic countries meet western standards of education.

Reform has now taken on the guise of quality assurance. Coffman (2003) reports that in higher education in the gulf, the American educational system reigns supreme. Overall, the trend is towards the

creation of ‘knowledge regimes’ which connect to foreign centres of power rather than to each other (Mazawi 2010, p. 212). In practice, this means Islamic countries are likely to pair with foreign Quality institutions as subsidiaries or extensions (Bashur 2005). In 2011, the Association of Quality Assurance Agencies in the Islamic World (QA-Islamic) was formed with one primary goal to encourage cooperation with regional and international quality assurance organizations (Malaysian Qualifications Agency 2012). This is in line with the results of the 2006 United Nations Development Program’s report *Quality Assessment of Education Programs in Arab Universities*, which includes a recommendation that strategic reforms should include more adherence to external benchmarks (UNDP/RBAS 2006).

Founded in 2007, The Arab Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ANQAHE) surveyed its member institutions in the Middle East and North African (MENA) region and found that regional quality assurance agencies do little or no institutional research to validate assessment results or improve their processes. Additionally, only 25% of the agencies reported any change to their evaluative approach in the last 3 years (Sahraoui 2012). The questions did not include the source of quality assurance guidelines or what the quality assurance guidelines included. This suggests that compatibility of guidelines to culture was not considered an important aspect of understanding the needs of these agencies.

Not having a system that professors, administrators, and students in a particular country helped to design can lead to a compliance culture rather than a genuine quality culture (Cremonini *et al.* 2012). The ANQAHE study found that 67% of quality assurance agencies studied described “lack of QA culture and/or experience in HEIs” as the biggest obstacle to the development of quality assurance in higher education institutions’ (Sahraoui 2012, p. 90). In the end universities may be caught in a cycle of expending time and resources to meet the administrative needs of quality assurance cycles to the detriment of time and resources spent on ensuring student success and outcomes. As literature on external quality assurance attests, the impact of quality assurance on improving a university “mainly depends on internal follow-up, on decision making within the higher education institution after the evaluation takes place” (Cremonini *et al.* 2012, p.13). If neither the process nor the outcome is

valued by the higher education institution, quality assurance is likely to have little or no positive impact.

Dialectical Inquiry on Higher education

Most academic discussion about higher education in western versus Muslim majority countries focuses on the issue of comparative methodologies, presented as two opposing visions for education which the following dialectical inquiry will pull out areas of synergy. As Berniker and McNabb (2006) posit, dialectical inquiry can be effectively used to study participant models of organizational processes. When put in dialogue, western and Islamic methodologies reveal the underlying assumptions used by organizational actors, and lead to the development of a more effective model to govern universities that study Islam or exist in Islamic contexts. For this purpose it is instructive to define the discipline according to relevant elements of the rubric of the Maliki Scholar, Ahmed As-Sawi (1939), who said “It is necessary for every student of an art or science to know and understand its ten basic principles, its definition, subject matter, founder, proper name, corroboration, legal status, propositions, excellent merit, relationship with other sciences and its fruit”. The following comparison uses a careful treatment of Islamic Studies in particular, under the understanding that the goal of a Muslim scholar in any field is the same as those of a Muslim scholar studying Islamic Studies; to serve God through serving humanity.

Source and Use

The founder of Islamic education is the Prophet Muhammad (SAW), and for corroboration of its usefulness, the Qur’an states ‘Say: “Are those equal, those who know and those who do not know? It is those who are endowed with understanding that receive admonition” (39:9). Anas Bin Malik (RA), reported that Allah’s Messenger (SAW) said: “Seeking of knowledge is incumbent upon every Muslim” (Tirmidhi, 218), and Abdullah ibn Amir ibn al As (RA) narrated that the Prophet (SAW) said: “Knowledge consists of three things: the decisive verses (Qur’an), authentic Hadith and prescriptions rightly deduced from the two. What is beside them is superfluous” (Abu Dawud 2879). The legal status of studying the sciences of Islam is that it is mandatory for all Muslims.

In contrast, the foundation of Islamic studies in the west began with the study of Arabic for the purposes of politicians, missionaries and archaeologists. The field has slowly grown from there (Parker, 1986). To corroborate the usefulness, there were two important thrusts of Islamic studies: “knowledge of the practical aspects of the Arabic Language and also the cultural, political, economic and business arenas. It was unanimously agreed by the business sector that these were vital” (*ibid.*, para 13). It is not legally binding, but it is recommended by policy makers for the safety and security of the economy and politics of nation-states (Parker 1986).

The two perspectives show that under Islam, education creates a better person, is a requirement for everyone, and revolves around a core religious discipline. In the west it is viewed as a means to a national, political or economic end.

Methodology and Ethics

Western methodology understands itself as offering objectivity and integrity, a scientific approach to studying Islam that has been developed in the fields of orientalism, contemporary social sciences and anthropology. Although traditional Islamic Studies also offers objectivity and integrity, it employs a methodology based on an absolute revealed truth against which statements are rigorously screened for truth and validity. Objective analysis of the validity of hadith and interpretation of law is a common element of the sciences of Islam, yet nothing is thought to be truly objective, as everything is subject to God’s truth and law. Western theories and methodologies are welcomed and subjected to an objective analysis of whether they hold truth in light of Islam. In this frame of reference, western objectivity is a misnomer, as everyone is influenced by their religion and world view. As for integrity, western methodology holds that research must be honestly proposed, performed, reported, and discussed, be fairly reviewed, contributors accurately reported, conflicts of interest revealed, no harm done in the research, and display general good manners with other researchers (McAlpine 2013). Although all of these are important to Muslims, it leaves out the most important form of integrity, which is doing the work for the sake of God, which also ensures it is for the benefit of mankind.

Under Islam, the definition of education is to study the religion of Islam and its applications through use of revealed doctrines, stories

of the Prophets, and other written texts examining the meaning and interpretation of the revealed word of God. In western countries, by Islamic Studies, they simply mean the study of Muslims, the religion of Islam and its applications and also a study of countries or regions inhabited by Muslims. “There is no generally accepted definition of the discipline of Islamic Studies, that its boundaries are not clearly fixed and that there are no uniform and generally accepted programmes” (Waardenburg 1997, p 15). There is also debate as to whether it is an independent discipline or part of other disciplines (Suleiman & Shihadeh 2007).

Subject Matter

The subject matter of traditional Islamic studies includes the Sciences of Quran; Sciences of Hadith; Jurisprudence; Creed and Theology, including the study of various Muslim sects and the study of other religions; Tasawwuf: the Purification and education of the self, heart and spirit; History; and the Sciences of Arabic language. While Logic and Philosophy are strictly not part of religious sciences, they were included in many religious curricula (Khir 2007, p.261). In contrast, western studies of Islam can fall in any of the following categories: History of Religions, Sociology: systematic study of the social, political, and economic aspects and transformations of Muslim societies in the context of an increasingly globalized world (Keskin 2012, p. 1). Anthropology approaches social/cultural phenomena on the basis of Islamic values/principles and with analytical techniques derived from Islamic texts and teachings or the study of Islamic societies and cultures beliefs and practices (Tapper 1995). Area Studies consider Middle Eastern, Mediterranean, African, Asian, Oriental Studies, History, Literature, Contemporary Muslim Societies, Islamic Economics and Finance, Islamic Art and/or Architecture, or Languages such as Arabic, Persian, Urdu, and Turkish.

As for the discipline’s propositions, under Islam, the discipline entails understanding the world through knowledge and understanding of its technical terms and words like: Unity (Tauhid), the five pillars (Islam), Witnessing God (Ihsan), faith and certitude in God (Iman), Soul (Nafs), Sincere devotion (Ikhlas) and attributes of God. For the Western discipline of Islamic studies, the propositions include knowledge and understanding of history and philosophical underpinnings of Islam and

the outward civilizational manifestations with concepts like hegemony, epistemology, metaphysics, logic, Occident/Orient, ethics, aesthetics, and empirical/Subjective.

The discipline's relationship to other sciences is understood in Islam to be at the core of every knowledge pursuit, while in the west, it can only be understood in a multidisciplinary perspective, and is at the periphery of many core disciplines.

In essence, the subject proposition and relationship to other sciences of studying religion in the west is merely descriptive and periphery to other subjects, avoiding discussing the truth behind the religion. For Muslims studying Islam, the primary emphasis is normative, focusing on the truth of the religion, exploring both how it should be embodied and how it actually is (Khir 2007). In academic practice, both western and Islamic approaches cannot be discounted by the other. As Izzi Dien (2007) points out that in most cases, where competing ideologies create academic conflict, an emphasis on critical thinking as a tool does not compromise either party's faith. In fact, no scholar in either tradition can say that the scientific method alone can result in a nuanced scholarly conclusion.

Outcome

The excellent merit of Islamic studies is found in a Hadith that states:

The superiority of the learned man over the worshipper is like that of the moon, on the night when it is full, over the rest of the stars. The learned are the heirs of the Prophets, and the Prophets leave neither dinar nor dirham, leaving only knowledge, and he who takes it takes a big fortune (Abu Dawud).

For the west, pursuit of knowledge in general leads to higher economic outcomes, lower crime, and higher health outcomes, along with an intangible civilizational benefit. Today the emphasis in the west is more on monetary merit.

As to its fruit, the goal of gaining knowledge in Islam is for the learner to become a noble being that exemplifies the best of humanity, and acts as such in every action. In contrast, the goal of knowledge in the west is to become a person who has 'the qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment' (UK Quality Code, 2011, A1 p14).

This polarization points to core beliefs. In the west, secularization and capitalism have been the driving force of education, and seen as a hallmark for modern educational systems. For Muslims, modernization can only come through adherence to religious beliefs and the freedom allowed when core beliefs are not constantly under review (Abdalla *et al.* 2006).

Fitness of Purpose Assessment for Islamic Contexts

Given the differences in intents and semantics between western and Islamic contexts, the question of how to assess educational quality comes down to the particular tool used and whether that tool has the requisite ‘fitness for purpose’ (Woodhouse 2011). Because of the urgency universities feel to stay relevant to changing market needs and also to maintain an appearance that they are on par with or superior to other universities in order to attract a paying student body, accreditation has become the go to standard of quality in the past 50 years. As discussed, these standards were developed in the west to fit western needs and quality definitions. Little attention has been paid to assessing whether or not western accreditation standards fit the purpose of education in countries outside of the west.

The ANQAHE scoping study states that quality assurance agencies in the MENA region overwhelmingly claim to follow a standards-based fitness-for-purpose approach (Sahraoui 2012). However, what has not been done is an analysis of the tool used against the stated goals of what it is analysing. The following analysis assesses the standards used by the American company AdvancED (Higher Learning Commission 2013). Comprised of three US accrediting agencies, it is the largest accrediting agency in the Middle East with over 200 colleges in 12 Countries with offices in Egypt and Saudi Arabia (Taweel 2013). The criteria are as follows:

1. Mission
2. Integrity: Ethical and Responsible Conduct
3. Teaching and learning: Quality Resources and Support
4. Teaching and Learning: Evaluation and Improvement
5. Resources, Planning, and Institutional Effectiveness

On close analysis, I found that although all five criteria were fit for the purpose of assessing quality in an Islamic context in theory, problems lie potentially in the semantics. Islamic parameters and definitions, such

as adherence to Islamic law, use of the concept of mutual consultation (al-shura), and Islamic leadership in human resources, prevent the easy adoption of this accreditation system.

Islamic law (al-Shari'ah)

Although all institutions are explicitly supposed to follow the law of their land in order to maintain responsible conduct under Criterion number 2 (Integrity: Ethical and Responsible Conduct), universities in an Islamic context need to critically examine university policies in the light of Islamic Law. The most important areas of this law are financial such as avoiding interest in student financial aid, facilities, and funding schemes; fairness in contracts; and ensuring human rights in Islam for workers. Each country will have to determine as to which sharia rules to apply from their own courts.

Mutual Consultation (al-Shura)

Another area of uncertainty in the above standards is the area of mutual consultation (shura), which entails not making a decision without consulting trustworthy people about their affairs. In *Tafsir Ibn Khathir*, he interprets the Qur'anic verse "and who (conduct) their affairs by mutual consultation" (Qur'an 42:38), saying:

They do not make a decision without consulting one another on the matter so that they can help one another by sharing their ideas concerning issues such as wars and other matters. This is like the verse: "and consult them in the affairs" (Qur'an 3:159). The Prophet used to consult with them concerning wars and other matters, so that they would feel confident.

Here it is clear that decisions in important matters like leadership of an organization, the content of a program, and the overall research agenda must be made through a process of consultation. Those consulted must be trustworthy and knowledgeable, and the entire process should result in an inclusive feeling and buy-in to the direction and processes of the organization. Although the AdvanceEd standards do not prevent mutual consultation, they add an understanding that evidence of regular meetings, and the process of consultation on major decisions is given more importance such that leaders and departments that show evidence of not understanding or buying into the overall direction can be marked

as failing and inefficient. ‘Shura is one of the basics of Islamic law and a mandatory rule; and any (who is entrusted with a public authority) who does not take the counsel of those who have knowledge and are conscious of God, should be dismissed from his position and there is no argument about that’ (Ibn Atiyya 1997,pp. 280-1).

For the purposes of assessing quality, the standards which require careful examination are Criteria 2, 4, and 5. Criterion number 2, (Integrity), states that: ‘The governing board of the institution is sufficiently autonomous to make decisions in the best interest of the institution and to assure its integrity.’ This clause leaves the impression that leadership does not need to interact with those it is leading. An atmosphere of mutual consultation is essential to an ethical environment. Under Criterion number 4 (Teaching and Learning: Evaluation and Improvement), mutual consultation affects the selection of research, curriculum, and student and other community stakeholder feedback loops. This requires business, student, government and religious leader input. Evidence of input must be shown and cannot be taken as an example of undue influence unless not all input is collected evenly. Finally, Criterion number 5 (Resources, Planning, and Institutional Effectiveness) is also affected in that Faculty role in governance must include an emphasis on remaining in touch with field needs and trends for purposes of program development and approval.

Human Resource Management

The process of mutual consultation is part of a larger imperative in quality organizations and education in Islam: that is, Islamically-grounded leadership and human resource management. The focus of leadership in Islam is doing good deeds for the sake of Allah, the Muslim community, and humankind (Kader 1973, in Abed 2006). Abed (2006) and Abassi *et al.* (2010) enumerate personal qualities of a Muslim leader, including conviction, mutual consultation, decision making, knowledge, eloquence, justice, patience, enterprise, leniency, self-sacrifice, humility, responsibility, and accountability.

These essential qualities of a leader have implications in developing a quality assurance framework that ensures that these qualities are being encouraged and actively developed in employees, and that the assessment framework does not reward behaviours contrary to these aims. For research centres whose aim is to provide a platform for

knowledge leaders to contribute to policy changes or innovations in discipline research, these leadership principles have added importance. Islamic leadership affects Criterion number 3, (Teaching and Learning: Quality Resources and Support) in that human resource activities such as candidate selection and employee evaluation must not promote un-Islamic values such as self-aggrandizement. Western qualifications and school rankings should not be used as a factor to identify quality in staff.

Quality Process vs. Quality Culture

Significant to the fitness of standards is the fact that heavy emphasis is given on meeting the requirements of the process of quality assurance and easily measured indicators such as amount of research produced. In a study on the Research Assessment Exercise used to allocate funding to university research centres in the UK, a professor commented that the exercise distracted staff from teaching to the detriment of the students (Morley 2006, p. 24). Internal and External reviews are both conducted by education insiders, and attention to what society needs and wants to know about universities can be an afterthought. As a result, although universities may be mission-driven with adequate faculty, resources, and program accreditation, they may not be able to show how education at the university impacts their students, and how real outcomes in terms of job opportunities and skill sets compare internationally (Massaro, 2010). In other words, although an institution has been accredited, this does not mean that it has been audited against its own claims about itself or that it is meeting the needs of the population it serves (Woodhouse 2012).

Best Practices for Benchmarking in an Islamic Context

Ultimately, to fit an Islamic context, a quality system itself must be determined by Islamic values. When undertaking quality improvement, best practices must be taken from the principles of Islam itself. Central to Islamic value research is the principle of Tauhid, or the Oneness of God, which entails that humans acknowledge that all of life and human society is interrelated, just like organs of the same being (Abuznaid 2006, Abbasi, *et al.* 2010, Sloane-White 2011). Islam, as an organizing principle, is close to systems theory that considers an organization as a “set of interdependent parts that contributes something and receives something from the whole” (Thompson 1967, p. 32). In terms of quality assurance, this means less compliance (responding to external

pressure) and self-interest (desire to attract more students and funding) and more a sense of a culture of excellence (Cremonini 2012). Further, it requires that both the heads of organizations and the employees make a concerted effort to guide the organization towards what is good (Toor 2008). “Good” in this context can be described as an organization making a concerted effort to implement best practices in the field.

The process of comparing aspects of organizational processes and outcomes to those of others to identify opportunities for improvement and adopting these “best practices” can be described as benchmarking (Levy and Ronco 2012). The term benchmarking in higher education is loosely used (Birnbaum 2001), and has been hindered in its application by the emphasis on benchmark metrics themselves, which means *compromising* the ultimate goal, “True benchmarking leads to understanding the processes that create best practices and creatively adapting those practices” (Levy and Ronco 2012, p.11).

To this end, and based on the above assessment of quality tools, the following observations on processes that create best practices can help focus quality review on what is important in Islamic environments, so that practitioners can either adapt existing quality standards and best practices from non-islamically based universities to fit their context, or put emphasis on the appropriate areas as defined by Muslims during their benchmarking process.

On the administrative level, the imperative of mutual consultation and Islamic leadership values mean that best practices should include regular staff meetings and individual department alignment with university goals and student and other stakeholder input. The university should operate on the principle of mutual consultation where professors agree on program direction and how best to meet student needs. The research agenda should be discussed and promoted and need for research through the lens of serving humanity should become the driving factor. Human Resource management must aim to incentivize good manners and habits and disincentivize bad behaviours. Annual reviews should emphasize transparency, self-reflection, peer review of need and outcome of work for researchers and professors, team work, and diversity.

On the program level, universities should be grounded in Islam and the acquisition of a body of knowledge. Best practices that support this

are Islamic scholar-leaders promoted as heads of department and faculty which include professors who have a strong grounding in Qur'an and Sunnah. For students, the curriculum should require Qur'an and Sunnah classes for the equivalent of one year or three classes. If the university lacks competency, require outside study at a local mosque, university or overseas. Additional core courses such as Islamic History and Arabic will provide a body of knowledge which can inform application of transferable knowledge. Arabic competency will ensure that the country can reap the full benefits of scholars producing knowledge in their country. Finally, to keep the curriculum current and fit for the needs of the community, best practice can require community input in the form of internship partnerships with student skill review and course content review for market applicability.

Conclusion

Being at the forefront of defining and ensuring quality in higher education institutions is critical to developing a knowledge economy. If Islamic countries are not defining quality in their own terms, then the routines, systems and tool that organizations develop may not fit the needs of their society. If there is dissonance between a culture and the body of knowledge used, then communication and understanding can be limited, thereby making it harder for organizations and economies to succeed. Having internationally competitive universities must be predicated on an understanding of quality education that first fits the nation's needs and aspirations.

By offering simple research-based best practices based on Islamic principles, practitioners will find a way to customize quality standards to fit Islamic contexts using the benchmarking process. At the core of education for every Muslim is an understanding that humans seek continual spiritual advancement through their education and service to humanity and as such quality can be understood as providing a transparent structure that enables this advancement. As the analysis indicates, there is much that western quality standards have to offer in terms of providing a framework for educational improvement, but it must be understood that these frameworks may come with an agenda. Care must be taken in implementing these standards to assure that definitions fit the context. The resulting quality structure should be based in a firm grounding in the revealed truth, and should support activities

that promote honesty, integrity, and service. The desired outcome of quality higher education grounded in Islamic values is a flexible and knowledgeable workforce that helps develop a dynamic knowledge economy that can support sustainable and autonomous development in the Islamic world.

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