

Seminar Report

International Seminar on Higher Education in the Muslim World: Challenges and Prospects

The International Institute for Muslim Unity (IIMU), in cooperation with the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) and the International Cooperation and Exchange Office, organised yet another international colloquium dealing with higher education in the Muslim world. It was held at the Renaissance Hotel in Kuala Lumpur, on 16-17 Rabī‘ al-Awwal 1429/March 24-25, 2008 where scholars deliberated upon predicaments and challenges faced by Muslims, both as majority and minority groups, all over the world.

The two-day International Seminar brought together over a hundred policy makers, diplomats and activists from Muslim and non-Muslim countries, as well as international agencies. It alerted the participants to the alarming decline in the quality of higher education in most Muslim nations. It addressed the deplorable condition of higher education in the Muslim world from political, economics, linguistic, social, religious and historical angles. The participants noted the apparent discrepancy between the glorious epoch of Muslim education in the early centuries and its deterioration in the contemporary period. It was argued that the failure of Muslims to develop resulted from the static condition of the educational system and the consequent inability to benefit from the dynamism inherent in modern knowledge. As the Director of IIMU, Professor Hassan Ahmed Ibrahim pointed out, what Muslim World possesses is the “rhetoric-rich culture of traditional Islamic knowledge, but shallow in ideas and is based on excessive indoctrination and memorisation that destroy the reasoning faculty.”

The Inauguration

The opening ceremony was attended by the Deputy Minister of Higher Education in Malaysia, Idris Harun, who in his speech stressed

the need for new generations of Muslims to rise to the occasion, to embrace modern knowledge and to help Muslims prosper. Dr. Abdullah Jassbi, the President of the Executive Council of the Federation of the Universities of the Islamic World (FUIW) asked the audience to stop the “blaming game” and focus to “diagnose our faults as well as attributes.”

In another significant speech, the President of IIUM and the Chairman of IIMU, Sanusi bin Junid, stressed the need to do away with the prevalent dichotomy between the “traditional” and the “secular” streams of education. His was a call for the Islamisation of knowledge to regain the lost glory of the Muslim civilisation. The Rector of IIUM, Prof Syed Arabi Idid, implored Muslims to stop victimising themselves and jeopardise their potential by neglecting higher education, especially in an era where religion and particularly Islam is under attack by the forces of modernisation. He said that it is the duty of Muslims as vicegerent (*khalifah*) of Allah (SWT) to execute their responsibilities with perseverance and determination. He noted that Muslims lament time and again over the loss of Islamic grandeur, yet do nothing to emulate the teachings of the caliphs and thinkers. He wished the Seminar success in coming up with a consensus of ideas and schemes that do justice to higher education in the Muslim world.

Conference Themes and Papers

The seminar discussed more than 80 academic papers and was attended by more than 200 participants. The papers presented during the conference could be summarised under three main themes:

Quality Management of Universities/Ranking Criteria

Papers discussed within the framework of quality assurance and management in universities share a similarity in comparing the quality of education during the early years of Islamic civilisation with the achievements that have been gained thus far. They lamented the fact that not a single international Islamic university is found among the top fifty universities in the world as ranked by international agencies.

The crux of the problem, many participants pointed out, is that Muslims refuse to break the mould from the old-age tradition of

accepting the superficial value of knowledge without trying to dissect the origins or reasons behind such facts. Generally, Muslims are too paranoid when it comes to learning, which forces them to reject new forms of knowledge dismissing them as “secularised” ideas. It appears that the “ideal” form of learning is restricted to Qur’ānic memorisation and adhering strictly and blindly to the *sunnah* of the Prophet (SAW). It goes without saying that this attitude hinders Muslims’ development in coming to terms with the current wave of challenges.

Human Capital Development

Discussions on the sectors of human capital development were conducted in English and Arabic in two different venues simultaneously. The papers presented in the light of socio-political demands illustrated the need for the current syllabus in universities in the Muslim world to erase the dichotomy between the “revealed” knowledge and modern sciences. It is proposed that these two facets of knowledge should be brought together in order to create a balanced educational system.

Several papers focused on the need to re-evaluate and reform the strictly didactic mode of the current Muslim curriculum, in hopes of preparing later generations of educated Muslims for the global workforce. The need for a paradigm shift is urgent. Educators and students need not conform to the rigid student-teacher relationship nor should learning be restricted to the classroom. A conducive learning atmosphere should be created involving the teacher and student on a continual basis and a curriculum that is relevant to the existing social, political, religious and economic contexts should be devised.

A country’s competitiveness is dependent on its capacity to innovate and transfer knowledge to the society for economic and political growth. The effort should begin in universities in the Muslim world in equipping Muslims with knowledge and skills that are compatible with modern professionalism.

Internationalisation and Institutional Collaboration

Essentially, the Seminar aspired to bridge the gap between higher education in Muslim and non-Muslim nations. The segregation of

knowledge is proven to dissipate the potentials of developing Muslim countries, and further obstructs the development of higher education in Muslim countries.

A number of papers discussed at great length the importance for higher educational institutions in Muslim countries to master skills in computer technology and sciences. It is pointed out that Muslims are now living in a “molecular age” and they would lose out if they lag behind in the knowledge and skills required in the “molecular age.” Participants pointed out that adopting and adapting knowledge and skills from advanced educational institutions (the majority of which are in non-Muslim countries) will propel the advancement of education for the benefit of Muslims around the globe.

Resolutions

After a series of serious discussions, the seminar reached the following resolutions. The seminar emphasised, among others, the following needs:

One, to establish objective and comprehensive criteria, reflecting the Islamic identity, for ranking universities in the Muslim world. This would ensure constant improvement in higher education.

Two, to encourage diversity among faculty members through improving their qualifications and through recruiting staff from all nationalities.

Three, to support Muslim women, postgraduate students, and institutions of higher learning to enable them to be creative in teaching and research.

Four, to develop a database for Muslim Academicians which should be updated on a regular basis.

Five, to support exchange of scholars, students, and research among the universities of the Muslim World. The seminar also emphasised the need to support the role of the International Institute for Muslim Unity to promote higher education and unify the Muslim World.

Six, to support Palestinian universities and establish “twin” links with those universities to support their efforts in promoting higher education in Palestine.

Seven, to redesign the curricula with an eye to Islamise knowledge, to make use of modern approaches in the field of Islamic studies and to link research to the needs of Muslim societies. This would ensure the production of well-rounded and more versatile graduates.

Eight, to establish an international centre for designing Islamic curricula and to establish standards for research supervision and supporting supervisors.

Nine, to emphasise flexible administration, with financial independence, that can evolve and develop strategic professional plans.

Finally, to emphasise transparency in appointing and promoting university staff and to support them to produce university level textbooks that incorporate the Islamic worldview in all fields of knowledge.

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