

## **Conferences and Seminars**

### **International Conference on Values and Attitudes in Science and Technology: Kuala Lumpur, September 1996**

The conference on Values and Attitudes in Science and Technology (VAST '96) took place in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia from 3rd to 6th September 1996. It was organized by International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) and Islamic Development Bank (IDB) in cooperation with Akademi Sains Islam Malaysia (ASASI). The conference attracted leading scholars and participants from over 20 countries around the world including Algeria, Australia, Bangladesh, Brunei, Canada, India, Indonesia, Iran, Japan, Jordan, Malaysia, Oman, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Switzerland, Trinidad, Turkey, UK and USA. More than fifty percent of the speakers came from countries other than the host country of Malaysia, and among them the largest number came from USA followed by Canada, Indonesia, India, Saudi Arabia, UK, and Japan.

In welcoming the speakers and guests, IIUM Rector and Conference Steering Committee Chairman Dr. AbdulHamid A. AbuSulayman highlighted the point that developing science and technology culture is not only an economic necessity but also a moral imperative. President of IDB Dr. Ahmad Mohammed Ali addressed the audience, placing particular emphasis on efforts for increasing the number of scientists and engineers, and enhancing facilities for the science and technology community to form networks of cooperation. In his inaugural address the Conference Patron Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, who is also IIUM President and Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister of Malaysia, said that the Muslim countries need to develop their own, indigenous science and technology, otherwise they will remain dependent on other countries which produce technology. He called upon the Muslim and other Asian countries to work together in creating a culture conducive to the development of science. He recalled that

about 100 years ago Sayyid Jamaluddin Afghani had exhorted Muslims to acquire scientific knowledge. Yet the Muslim world today remains a global science and technology backwater. As the world is entering the information age, millions in the Muslim world are condemned to perpetual ignorance.

Dr. B.J. Habibie, Minister of Research and Technology, Republic of Indonesia gave the Conference Keynote Address speaking on Human Resources Development for a Sustainable Growth of the Quality of Life. Dr. Habibie described the concept of "value adding" to human resource development and related his personal experiences in bringing innovations to science and technology development in Indonesia.

In all 71 papers were presented at the conference in the following categories:

1. Science and technology development;
2. Challenges and hindrances in science and technology;
3. Human resource development;
4. Science and technology R&D;
5. Education;
6. Agriculture, medicine and environment.
7. Qur'ān and science and philosophy of science

The issue of values was dominant in many presentations. A special session, called the Vice Chancellors' Forum, dealt exclusively with this issue both from the Islamic perspective and from the perspective of technology and its influence on human values and attitudes. Other topics receiving greater attention included Science and Technology as a foundation for sustainable quality of life, increasing literacy, in particular science literacy in society, and the economic and political factors hindering innovations and development of significant activities in R&D.

There was a good mix of qualitative and quantitative contents in presentations. Many authors presented data on, for example, the number of papers published, population density of scientists and technologists, budget for education and research, in order to determine the standing of Muslim countries in science and technology. Based on such data the conference agreed that the Muslim world is considerably lagging behind other nations in science and technology. It was also the consensus of the conference that the western style of development in science and technology is not the best route for Muslims and Muslim

countries. Several authors attempted to present an Islamic perspective of development that seeks harmony between the needs of progress along with responsibility towards our surroundings and other fellow beings, and how the spiritual dimension can contribute to achieve such a balance.

Another group of authors presented their studies on how Islam views science. In this regard verses from Qur'ān and the sayings of the Prophet Mohammed (peace be upon him) were frequently quoted. It was also observed that inquiry and seeking knowledge are highly encouraged in Islam (the words "science and technology" did not come into being until much later in the history). As a result from the later half of the 8th to 13th century of the Christian calendar the most famous scientists in the world were almost all Muslims who excelled in disciplines like philosophy, alchemy, medicine, geography, mathematics, astronomy, and optics.

The conference was also fertile in diagnosing the reasons for the decline of science and technology in the Muslim world. Briefly the proposed causes can be categorized into: (i) political problems; (ii) narrow understanding of Islam; and (iii) lack of incentives for scientific research.

Another important contribution that the conference made was in determining strategies suitable for strengthening science and technology capabilities in the Muslim world. It was suggested that: (i) the level of intellectual cooperation between Muslim countries must improve; (ii) reforms in the education and research system are required; (iii) more resources should be allocated for social and human development; and (iv) proper local planning should be undertaken and supporting information systems should be provided.

Preceding the Conference a special issue of the *International Journal of Science and Technology*, Volume 9, Number 2, Spring 1996, was published, with papers on the conference theme. Copies of this issue may be obtained from the Foundation for International Development, PO Box 16398, Washington D.C. 20041, USA, tel: (703) 471-1528, fax: (703) 471-3922, email [iunus@iiiit.org](mailto:iunus@iiiit.org). Conference papers have been published in two volumes and are available from the Faculty of Engineering, International Islamic university, Malaysia, Jalan Gombak, 53100 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, tel: (603) 6814400, fax (603) 6867566.

*Ajmal Ansari, & Imtiaz Ahmad*  
Kulliyah of Engineering, IIUM