# Reform of Higher Education in Muslim Societies

As part of its ongoing efforts to address the multi-faceted crisis of education in the Muslim world, IIIT organized a two-day symposium entitled "Reform of Higher Education in Muslim Societies". The symposium was held in collaboration with the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington DC and took place at the Wilson Center's headquarters on December 9th and at IIIT headquarters in Herndon, Virginia, on Dec 10th, 2013.



The main objectives of the symposium were: 1) to identify the root causes of the crisis of higher education in Muslim societies, 2) to examine the current manifestations of the crisis and its implications for socioeconomic development in Muslim countries, and 3) to discuss possible pathways to reform that involves governments, institutes of higher learning and other civil society organizations. About thirty scholars, experts and opinion leaders from different backgrounds and institutions participated in the roundtable discussions that extended between Dec 9th and Dec 10th, 2013. The topics discussed in the eight sessions of the symposium were:

- Reform of Higher Education in Muslim Societies: The Context.
Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim & Prof Heidi Hadsell

- The Challenges of Globalization
Prof Heidi Hadsell & Dr. Ermin Sinanovic

- IIUM & Motherhood University: Examples for Reform?
Dr. Nizar Alani

- Economics of Education, the Public-Private Sector Divide and the Issues of Governance
Dr. Vanda McMurtry

- The Traditional System of Islamic Education and the Challenges of Reform
Prof Jonathan Brown & Dr. Mahan Mirza

- The Case of African Islamic Universities
Prof Mbaye Bashir Lo & Prof Ismail Gyagenda

- Science, Technology & Innovation: Teaching & Application
Dr. Imad ad Dean Ahmad & Imrana Omar

- Women in Higher Education
Prof Nizar Alani
Prof Zainab Alalwani

**Summary of Discussions:**
The symposium opened with welcoming remarks from Dr. Haleh Esfandiari, Director of the Middle East

Program at the Wilson Center and Dr. Abubaker al Shingieti, Executive Director of IIIT, USA. Dr. Esfandiari highlighted the focus of the Middle East program at the Wilson Center on issues such as Islam and Democracy, Islam and human rights, and Islam and gender issues. Dr. Shingieti presented IIIT's strategic focus on issues of reform in general and reform of higher education, in particular. The symposium, he said, is meant to start a conversation and help in mapping out an agenda for a concerted effort in reforming higher education in Muslim countries.

**The first session** was moderated by Farahnaz Ispahani, public policy scholar at the Asia Program, Wilson Center; who introduced the two speakers: Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, former Deputy Prime Minister and former Minister of Education in Malaysia and Professor Heidi Hadsell, Professor of Social Ethics and President of the Hartford Seminary.

Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim opened his remarks by characterizing the current state of education in Muslim countries as "catastrophic," and by emphasizing that the traditional system of education has failed. Muslims, he contends, need – first - to study their society's internal dynamics and to lift the "siege mentality" due to Islamophobia, colonialism, and other factors. He cited Ismail al-Faruqi's depiction of rationality as the essence of Islamic society, economic action as expressive of Islam's spirituality, and religion itself as the way how people treat others. Religion's purpose is to ensure human wellbeing (of which promoting education is an important part). He quoted Malik Bennabi's assertion that a vibrant society can only emerge from one's own original ideas. He also pointed to Naquib al-Attas's argument for the primacy of Islam as an intellectual tradition. For a genuine reform movement, Anwar called for corrective measures that give non-Arab scholars more space for intellectual contributions. Moreover, he argues, Muslims need to become far more familiar with their own tradition in order to devise alternative views and engage in a genuine course of reform. He also cited Fazlur Rahman's "us vs. them" view as being necessary after colonialism but potentially harmful later on. Universal values are the crux of a society, and we need to engage at the global level in our attempt to reform our own societies. Anwar closed by stating the need for formulating conceptual framework for educational reform, identifying what Muslims want to reform, pursuing knowledge that will widen our horizons and make us better people. He called upon Muslims to realize their own disadvantages such as lack of resources and quality teachers, poor infrastructure for higher education, little money being spent on primary education, and a weak ethical foundation and discipline in Muslim societies. He suggested that IIIT should support a small team to focus on educational reform and stressed that it is time to study new issues because much of the relevant work has already been done.

Dr. Heidi Hadsell started off by saying that, based on her long-term association with Muslims and study of Muslim world affairs, educational reform is needed in the Muslim world, where there is a "growing gap between students and their life-world and the education that they are offered. She provided the example of the Hartford Seminary as an attempt to fill this gap. The Hartford Seminary is a small school focused on the Abrahamic faiths and Islamic-Christianity relations, but has many international students, and mainly from Muslim countries. It is also a seminary that prepares students for practical jobs. Eighty percent of its students are religiously observant. Professor Hadsell contends that a serious reform effort consists of four principles: (1) Critical thinking, especially for faculty members vis-à-vis their subject matter, and a cross-fertilization of disciplines (e.g., of sociology, anthropology, history) to understand religion from both the inside and the outside. Faculty members and religious authorities who know their religion need to be familiar with social science research methods and training as well as let their students think autonomously and reach their own conclusions; (2) Secular scholars must understand and honor their students' religious feelings, which is not always the case in American higher education; (3) Global minds need the resources necessary for global

education (e.g., access to graduate education, academic resources, and financial resources). International students often come here to access our global resources and experience diversity first hand; (4) Diversity is now the rule, and young people want to encounter it directly. Faculty members must work to develop future religious leaders and academicians and be able to relate to/with other traditions. Muslim students are often surprised to encounter "other" Muslims.

The ensuing discussion crystallized the notion that for educational reform to be real, it needed to start from within. Internalizing the need for change and equipping Muslim students with requisite skills are starting points on the path to reform. Traditional education needs to be liberalized from within, and not as a result of outside influences. The question of ethics is paramount, and it should lead to identifying commonalities between Muslims and others, and not focusing and dwelling on differences. Anwar mentioned his experience in Muslim-Confucian dialogue in Asia, and how it fostered the climate of trust between the two communities.

**Session two** focused on the experience of the International Islamic University in Malaysia and the core concept of integration and how it was implemented in curriculum development, in recruitment of students and faculty, and in campus life. The main speaker was Dr. Nizar Al Ani, Professor of psychology and Vice Chancellor of Motherhood University in the UAE.

Dr. Al Ani spoke about the founding of the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) and the experience of integration of revealed knowledge and human sciences which makes IIUM quite unique. In 1998, he said, IIUM recruited and admitted students from 92 countries, and integrated them through living and studying together. Malaysia, he argued, was the best environment for such an undertaking because it is a "cross-cultural" society. He then presented the experience of the university he founded in Ajman, UAE: University College of Mother and Family Sciences. It is owned by the Family Development International Company, a non-profit organization. Its curriculum was developed by a team of 11 men and 5 women. Its goals were to produce good mothers and then produce good professionals. Its founding philosophy is that women are the cornerstone of society. The university is unique, he contends, because it is the first one in the world to offer a BA in motherhood and family sciences.

The discussion compared the German and Japanese experiences in treating mothers and providing support for them. Dr. Esfandiari and Amaarah DeCuir questioned whether this approach contributes to women education and equality.

**The third session** focused on the 'Challenges of Globalization". The main speakers were Dr. Ermin Sinanovic, Research Director at IIIT, and Dr. Heidi Hadsell, President of the Hartford Seminary.

Ermin Sinanovic listed non-prioritized ideals and issues based on research and personal experience: (1) Students physical mobility has led to universities competing for the best students and a subsequent brain drain. What does this mean for the home country? (2) The concept of "university campus" is changing, for neither students nor teachers need to be there in person (e.g., a virtual Internet-based campus); (3) Who imposes and develops the standards? Who determines an institution's ranking, curriculum, research priorities, faculty promotions? (4) There are issues of culture and norms. For example, plagiarism is endemic in the Muslim world, and branch universities are divorced from the surrounding societies (e.g., transferring traditional American sport rivalries to the Gulf campus; LGBT rights). Can a branch campus really reflect the home campus' environment? (5) What is the future of online education and what does it mean for higher education? Students everywhere have online access to Ivy League courses that enrolled students have to pay

for. What is the impact of no face-to-face interaction? (6) How is the new curriculum to be developed? Can global and transnational approaches really succeed in Muslim countries, where education is commonly used to support the regimes in power? Is the cross-influence all one way? What does it mean to use American textbooks in the Muslim world in such "neutral" courses as electrical engineering? (7) Can Harvard, Yale, Princeton, and other western institutions with huge endowments influence their far poorer counterparts in the Third World? Can they set the agenda and terms of debate? This is basically a race to the bottom. How about private vs. for-profit universities? What about those left behind? In many Muslim societies higher education is elitist, which is not the case in America; and (8) Does globalized education help or hinder economic globalization?

The discussion focused on turn-key model, prevalent in the Arab Gulf, whereby foreign universities are transplanted to the region. The consensus was that such a model is not suitable and would not – in the long term – produce desired results in higher education. Datuk Seri Anwar stated that Muslims need to transcend particularisms and turn to universalism – as Islam is a universal religion. Muslims need to strive for excellence and fight against mediocrity in higher education.

Dr. Hadsell stated that contemporary education needs to be universal, not generic; cosmopolitan, but not uniform. Uniformity is a great worry now, for "generic" violates the essence of what a university is: an institute focused on the humanities (e.g., religion and philosophy and the social sciences). Their curricula are supposed to answer such questions as "Who we are?" and "Where are we going?" All people have to be diverse, so we know what each other means when he/she is talking. We can do this only if we are "grounded," as that will enable us to know what we mean. She cited Michael Walzer's Thick and Thin (University of Notre Dame Press, 2006).

**In session four**, Dr. Vanda McMurtry presented the American higher education template's features, a highly complex structure consisting of four elements: (1) Universities and similar institutions do two things for society: research and teaching. Research tends to collect in larger institutions because it is costly; (2) The issue of whether the curriculum should be multidisciplinary, or narrow is often addressed in the school's motto. Multidisciplinary universities are very costly; (3) Non-profit institutions are by far the most common. For-profits are organized as corporations, have a centralized management system, are mainly involved in teaching, and do little research. Their teachers are not involved with governance; and (4) Public schools are funded and overseen by state governments. Private schools are funded by private endowments and tuition. This divide is probably less important today than in the past.

For-profit institutions are responsible to the corporation's shareholders, highly dependent on student aid (mainly from federal government), and greatly supported by the federal government, especially in research. Tuition has been rising and is maybe reaching a limit, because student debt is now US$ 1 trillion, and many young people are unemployed and underemployed. Universities face other problems as well, such as the high cost of labor (professors), intense competition for smart people, commitment to expensive physical facilities, very expansive research enterprises (success leads to further higher-cost discoveries), and deeply ingrained customs (e.g., consultative management, accreditation, and tenure).

Currently, federal support for research is under great pressure. One solution might be collaborating with corporations (they do a lot more research). However, this would engender a major culture clash (e.g. patents vs. free access to information). Getting public schools to think about local job creation and local development will attract politicians' interests. Tax reform could also really harm endowment growth. Another solution

might be to allow students to pledge a portion of their future salary to pay for the high cost of their education, as is done in Australia. And then there is the Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) model, in which a perspective employer will "invest" in the student since the student might one day be an employee.

The discussion centered around tenure and its costs – both financial and in relation to research and teaching. Freedom of thought is crucial to tenure system, but such thing is lacking in many Muslim societies. Cost of education and research will continue to be high, so there is a need to develop a system of funding and sustaining such education.

**Session five** was opened by Prof. Jonathan Brown who compared pre-modern and modern systems, by stating that they have much in common. The issue to him is pre-modern vs. modern, not Islam vs. non-Islam. The Greco-Roman and Islamic-Western education systems share two elements. The first one is paideia: education is emulatory pedagogy, and thus the teacher is the vessel for some wisdom/value. This system, which can be seen in post-Christian pagan philosophy and rabbinic Judaism (e.g., Akiva), has four attributes: It seeks illumination by God (religious activity); the emulation of teachers; the preservation of useful knowledge (that which leads to God"), not "knowledge" in general (data); and the exploration/development of ancillary fields (e.g., mathematics, geography, astronomy, and some of which are controversial, like logic and philosophy). These last two fields are touchstones of modernity. The second one is civitas: a person's acculturation/social integration into a specific culture. Education is about creating citizens who can function properly and eventually assume leadership positions within the existing system. This is very clear in the American system. This is not so much the case with contemporary "knowledge," however, because the Enlightenment basically stripped away paideia and thus focuses on individual self-fulfillment and critical thinking skills. A teacher can teach content but cannot be an exemplar. We see this today in vocational education, where skills are learned through apprenticeship (or today at a university): engineering, medicine, law, and other professions. In the West, this type of education was the result of indigenous processes: modernization and secularization. In the Islamic world, it is the result of westernization, colonization, the marginalization of "indigenous knowledge," and so on.

Dr. Mahan Mirza expanded by saying that so far this symposium has focused only on science: the individual is the means to build a road, for example. Vocational education is like a transitional verb, and the individual is only a means to an end. Traditional learning saw education as a means to cultivate oneself. Muslims need to think about the existing fragmentation in education. What is the end goal of reforming Muslim education? "Liberal" has "freedom/liberation" within it, and "Arts" are the tools to "liberate" oneself so that one can become a free human being who can think freely. This equals the training of the mind: logic, rhetoric, and reason. Which type of education do we want to see at the core of Muslim society? The traditional system of education was at the core of the madrasah system. Logic, rhetoric, and reason were applied to the revelation, and reason was used in the service of a "non-rational" course of conduct. Traditional education had a core language (viz., Arabic) and "great books" both taught society's morals and answered the "great" questions: Who we are? Why are we here? and so on. There is no conflict between the western and Islamic systems. I agree with Umar Faruq Abdullah that Muslims have to trust reason and respect dissent if they are to make any progress at all. Governance is a secondary issue. Also, Muslims need to reason together, not alone.

**Session six** focused on the case of African Islamic universities. Dr. Ismail Gyagenda opened his presentation with a brief account of how Islam and Christianity entered present-day Uganda, how the Christian converts benefitted under British control, and how the Muslims were marginalized. He then discussed his two studies. The first one focused on the elders (e.g., how they were raised and how today's youths are being raised by

informal education [viz., in the home, by the mother, etc.…]). He found out that the youth no longer respect their elders, that the traditional "it takes a village to raise a kid" is now invalid even in rural areas, that neighbors can no longer discipline kids (he said that the government was blamed for this because of its view that discipline violates the children's human rights), and that elders are ignored by the elite. The second one focused on establishing the Islamic University in Uganda. The OIC proposed this idea when Idi Amin was in power; it had to be set up quickly because Amin was on his way out and those involved would lose their posts and official support. How do Muslims establish institutions that care about the whole being? What kind of "product" do Muslims want? Muslims need the elders' knowledge, even though the latter did not attend any institutes of higher education.

Dr. Mbaye Lo continued by saying that there has been a lot of good scholarship on the institutional context of higher education. Many Muslim scholars, however, neglect such scholarship and thus do not build on them. Muslims need to follow "best practices" in the field of higher education. He recommends that Muslims should pay attention to George Makdisi's book on the madrasah's historical development. How do Muslims deal with knowledge and knowledge production? How can traditional institutions and methods of knowledge be used today? This latter issue has been neglected. Africa must decide how to allocate institutes of higher education there. Knowledge must be linked with the surrounding society and must be for humanity at large in order to be meaningful. Muslims have to study what makes a good education system, how to produce graduates who are good for society, and what makes a good university. Both the continuation of knowledge and funding are important. African universities face many problems, among them overcrowding and underfunding; the failure to address public health and environmental problems; the lack of technological advancement; and limiting the nation-state's "oppressive reach." The 1980s-90s was the period of the Islamization of Knowledge (IOK) and the upsurge of Islam, which engendered the desire for Islamic universities. The national universities were a legacy of colonialism and thus not really qualified to teach Islam. The historical connections between North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa need to be exploited. Muslims are now conducting studies to get data, make it understandable, and set up databases; however, the Muslim world's best minds are in America. How can we link them with their home countries so that these ties are not severed?

**Session seven** focused on science and technology. Imrana Umar said that technology is pervasive, but oral transmission of knowledge remains important. He asked, how is technology transforming education? Now one can get the same content and faculty online. Technology encourages collaboration and cooperation, for it is like a railroad that delivers content and enables simulation, thereby lowering the cost of scientific research. It also makes it possible to skip certain stages (e.g., going straight to cell phones in the Third World). Harvard is now moving from case studies to simulation so that business students can learn by doing. How can the Muslim world benefit from this? Can the environment in which the university exists support the envisaged technology?

**Session eight** discussed the issue of women in higher education. Dr. Zainab Alwani asked, "What does the phrase 'women in higher education' mean?" Education is vital, but it is not the only reason for women's success. How does one measure women empowerment? Saudi Arabia has more women than men enrolled in its universities and also has the largest women's university in the Muslim world. But are Saudi women contributing to society at large? Is education making them better contributors? Do they have a say in the political process and/or mutual consultation? Do they have any significant public role in society? Are they creating agencies to help the weakest members of society? Is this part of higher education and a social contribution? Are they free to choose their major (e.g., can they study science and other traditionally "male"

fields)? What is the cultural attitude toward their education? How should familial responsibilities be balanced? These are some of the critical questions that were posed by Dr. Zaynab, and she believes most of them remain unanswered.

Dr. Alwani, then, turned to her own research on women in Muslim countries to find some answers. She started with her research on women's role in Egypt and Morocco, consisting of interviews with both men and women that showed that women have a tremendous role in society. Egyptian female professors work together to a significant degree and try to organize committees to help society based on their own research. When she asked them "Why don't you work with other women in other universities? Why don't you all work with al-Azhar?" they replied that they do but that most of their research ends up on the shelf. They work in small villages, sometimes even providing drinking water to village populations. Alwani is still trying to evaluate their social contribution based on the 50 interviews she conducted with them.

She is also researching the engagement of women as educators, students, and researchers. What do these women believe in? The feminist movement is good, at least to a certain extent in the West. But the Muslim world is a different story, due to its own unique cultural background and history. Muslim women, having concluded that they have to find their own way, have gone back to the Qur'an and Sunna and the main sources. They are very serious about their own research and may reach a different conclusion than their male colleagues. They study Prophet's wives, their models, how they educated themselves, how they used their education, and their role in preserving Islam. Muslim scholars say that women had a dynamic role not only with the Qur'an, but also as active transmitters and interpreters. Now, are they allowed to engage with the Qur'an and Sunna, the methodology, and how to approach the methodology? Women scholars seek to answer questions that men ignore. They are more nuanced and try to protect their rights and access – this is true of women across the Muslim world. They are very interested in gender equality and maqasid as regards their status in society and have formulated a discourse on equity and justice. They are asking for fairness, who decides, what are the criteria, what factors are considered, and whose interests are taken into account? If women are excluded from anything in the university, there will be problems. Women need the support of their male peers, have to produce a balanced discourse, and should receive support for their research.

Dr. Al-Ani stated that Muslims must first talk about and consider literacy, and then primary/secondary schools, and cultural and social realities. He pointed out three problems: there are more illiterate Muslim women than men, Arab universities attach almost no importance to scientific research, and the ongoing brain drain is serious.

**Concluding session** (Chaired by Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim)
It is suggested that relevant issues in higher education be broken into their component parts and narrow down the field of reform. The IIIT should arrange on-site meetings and understand the actual context in various regions of the Muslim world. Dr. Imad-ad-Dean Ahmad proposed five things: (1) Education is science; (2) We should develop interdisciplinary courses with science; (3) Muslims should insist upon understanding, not rote memorization; (4) Muslims should find out how to attract the best students, develop a strong curriculum, and (5) fund waqfs (endowments) to pay for schools. American Muslims – educators, university professors, community, and business leaders – should play a big role in advancing reform of higher education in Muslim societies. To that end, a database could be established to include people working on various issues so that they can identify potential research collaborators. The question of brain drain needs to be addressed: how can it be stopped? A list of the "great books of Islam" is needed so that people can learn from veritable sources. Finally, Muslims need to develop their human resources and encourage human interaction.

**Recommendations and proposals**

1. Starting with basics, developing a framework and a plan of action for the coming period
2. Integrating and working with other institutions, such as Wilson Center
3. Identifying main stakeholders in reform of higher education and working with them
4. Establishing networks with other scholars – creating databases
5. Examining potentials for online courses
6. Study of waqf as a source of funding for higher education