

# INSTITUTIONS OF (MUSLIM) HIGHER EDUCATION FACING THE FUTURE: A REVIEW

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## ABSTRACT

Institutions of higher learning in the Muslim world are generally underpinned by an Islamic ethos; but, despite this, they have encountered numerous challenges from various stakeholders inside and outside their structures. This article undertakes a review of Bakar, Eric Winkel and Amran's co-edited conference proceedings titled *Contemporary higher education needs in Muslim countries: Defining the role of Islam in 21<sup>st</sup> century higher education* (2011). The reason is basically twofold: the first is that there are few English publications that have dealt with themes that the conference set itself out to explore, and the second is to assess whether the set of papers in this publication satisfactorily succeeded in addressing the themes.

**Keywords:** institutions, universities, higher education, Muslim world, Islam



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## INTRODUCTION

Institutions of higher education where Islam is being taught have come under the spotlight during the past 25 years and more; apart from conferences, workshops and seminars that have been organised in order to investigate 'Islam' as a religious tradition and explore 'Islamic studies' as a discipline in the higher education sector, some countries conducted special surveys to assess and evaluate this sector (Haron 2014, 153–156). Some time prior to this, a group of scholars explored the idea of 'Islamic Education in America' at Georgetown University during 2006 and a few panels scrutinised the status of Islamic studies in higher education. In fact, one of the most recent conferences that devoted its attention to a related theme in the higher education sector was 'The Teaching of Islamic Civilisation in Today's Universities and Colleges: A Review for New Strategic Educational Goals'. Though this conference, which was held between the 3 and 5 of November 2014, was hosted by the University of Brunei Darus Salam's Sultan Omar 'Ali Saifuddin Centre for Islamic Studies (UBD-SOASCIS), it was co-organised along with six other academic institutions, among them was Oxford University (OU) and University of Technology Malaysia (UTM).

Now when turning to the surveys that were completed in the United Kingdom, the following two texts may be mentioned: Siddiqui's (2007) *Islam at universities in England: Meeting the needs and investing in the future* and Anon's (2008) *International approaches to Islamic Studies in higher education: A report*. Complementing these reports and surveys, one comes across an array of academic articles and edited works. Since it is beyond the scope of this review to mention them all, the reviewer takes the liberty of only mentioning three publications to underscore the extent to which the theme has been addressed by some scholars. The three texts are the co-authored *The teaching and study of Islam in western universities* (Morris, Shepard, Trebilco and Tidswell 2014); the co-edited *The state of Islamic Studies at American universities* (Nyang Ahmad and Bukhari 2009); and the co-edited conference proceedings titled *Islamic Studies in world institutions of higher learning* (Musa, Baharun and Abdullah 2004).

Taking into account these rich and informative contributions, it becomes quite obvious that *Contemporary higher education needs in Muslim countries: Defining the role of Islam in 21<sup>st</sup> century higher education*, which is being reviewed here, is but an additional text to the plethora of publications that have entered the higher education market. This text, as a matter of fact, is based upon the proceedings of the International Conference on Islam and Higher Education that was held at the International Institute of Advanced Islamic Studies Malaysia (IAIS) on the 8 and 9 of November 2010. The main objective of this review is to assess to what extent the presenters at this conference contributed to, among others, the debates regarding the status of 'Islam' in the higher education sector.

## THE TEXT

### Foreword, objectives and structure

Bakar, who was IAIS's Deputy Chairperson and the key organiser of this gathering and is currently the director of UBD-SOASCIS, wrote in his foreword (Bakar et al. 2011, 1–2) that he and his co-editors 'hope that the discourse on the place and role of Islam in higher education in the first few decades of the twentieth century will receive a new impetus and chart a new course as a result of the conference'. One wonders whether the main editor did not mean to say: 'the last few decades of the twentieth century' or perhaps 'the first few years of the twenty-first century'; the reason for raising this is based upon the fact that many (Muslim) higher education institutions only came into existence towards the latter part of the twentieth century and, during the first decade of the current century, a great deal of academic activity has taken place as already indicated in the afore-mentioned introduction. All these academic activities contributed towards assessing the state of 'Islam' or rather 'Islamic Studies' in the higher education sector. Nonetheless, the IAIS conference proceedings should be viewed as yet another additional contribution to this recurring theme.

In the publisher's introduction (Bakar et al. 2011, 3–5) – that was followed by separate messages (Bakar et al. 2011, 7–12) from the respective chairpersons of IAIS, IKIP and the conference organising committee – it was stated that the conference's objectives were, among others, to 'define the role of Islam in higher education policies in Muslim countries' and 'to reformulate the long term goals of higher education in the light of the 21<sup>st</sup> century human life and thought'; though these were indisputably noble objectives, one wonders whether these objectives were met by the conference's presenters. The edited proceedings, as a matter of information, were based largely upon the format of the conference that was organised into seven sessions; each one covering a specific theme. While the first explored 'Islam and Higher Education in Muslim Countries: An Overview', the second addressed 'Synthesising Traditional and Modern Knowledge Sharing Experiences in the Muslim World'.

Following upon these two sub-themes, the third was 'In Search of a Model for Higher Education Curricula: The Case of Specific Academic Disciplines', the fourth looked at 'Islam and Higher Education in Muslim-Minority Communities', the fifth discussed 'Higher Education Reforms in Muslim Countries', the sixth investigated 'Distant and E-Learning in Higher Education: Muslim Responses to New Challenges', and the seventh considered 'Islam and the idea of a Role Model University in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century'. Most of the mentioned sessions had an average of three panelists, except for two, and many – as expected – of the presenters hailed from Malaysia. The rest represented the following countries: Iran, Indonesia, India, Philippines, Nigeria and Tanzania; and those who were conspicuously absent were the North Africans, Southwest Asians and South Asians (except India of course).

Even though it is rather regrettable that these regions were not represented at this significant forum and despite the lack of representation from other parts of the world (for example, the Americas and Europe), the conference according to the organising committee's report (Bakar et al. 2011, 279–288) was a reasonable success.

The editors chose to keep the format of the proceedings to fall in line with that of the conference as such; what this essentially implied was that the 'chapters' in this publication follow the sequence as they did at the conference. Some presenters disappointingly neglected to transform their power point presentations into essays and this caused the editors to retain them as they were presented. This was rather unfortunate since the editors could have used their editorial 'rights' and could have intervened by either requesting those who only had power point presentations to have changed them into the essay format or they could have left them out altogether. From what has been ascertained, no editorial intervention was exercised. It was a real pity that the power point 'chapters' – if one may classify them as such – were not transformed into essays because when one reads them as they appear, there is no doubt that one finds it difficult at times to logically connect the ideas. If the editors had put in place a strict set of criteria, which they might have done, before accepting the papers, then one assumes a slightly different set of papers would have appeared in this publication. Alas, this was not to be and one should therefore be satisfied with what appears in it. Bearing these points in mind and for the purpose of this review, the reviewer opted to go through each of the sections (that is, the conference's sessions) and provide as many critical comments as possible. The one objective of this review is to highlight where possible the chapters' shortcomings, and the other is to illustrate how they could have been improved or in which way they could have added new thoughts to the discourse regarding the needs of institutions of higher learning in the Muslim heartlands and locating Islam's definitive position in this sector.

### The seven sections and their 'chapters'

The opening chapter by Bakar (chief editor: conference proceedings) reflected upon 'the Role of Islam in Higher Education Policies of Muslim Countries' (Bakar et al. 2011, 21–38). He underscored his contribution by trying to fulfill three aims: the first was to offer a critical evaluation of higher education in both majority and minority communities; the second was to assess Islam as a value system in this sector; and the third was to promote Islam as an intellectual tradition in order to advance its cause among Muslims in this area. It is assumed that he was well aware of the fact that he was covering a broad educational canvas and that it was well-nigh beyond the chapter's scope to adequately deal with the policies in each and every Muslim country. That being the case, Bakar nevertheless provided – an unsatisfactory – historical background; one that skimmed over large historical periods and one in which he conveniently used Khaldun's *The Muqaddimah* (1958) as a useful text that recorded the Muslim communities and institutions' rise and decline; a decline

of educational institutions that sadly lingered on into the late post-colonial era. He however noted that it was indeed during the post-colonial period that the world witnessed an evolutionary development of higher education (in Southeast Asia from whence he comes) and more specifically the inclusion of 'Islamic Studies' as a discipline alongside other disciplines within the secular national institutions of higher learning (in many Western universities such as the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London and as reflected in Morris et al.'s [2014] and Nyang et al.'s [2009] respective works).

According to Bakar, these were significant developments since they formed part of the 'Islamization of knowledge' process that was underpinned by the *tawhidi* epistemology (as articulated by Professors Ismail Raji al-Faruqi [d.1986] and Sayyid Naquib Al-Attas [b. 1931]; two significant iconic figures whom he did not mention at all). Though he did not list some of the outcomes (for example, publications) of the 1977 Mecca Education conference that was organised by Prof. Sayyid Ali Ashraf (d.1998), he underlined that it was a key historical event that contributed towards these educational developments. When he commented on the healthy educational outcomes, he used Malaysia as an example to illustrate why it has become a global hub of higher education; this may be attributed to the fact that Malaysia's government created an open-door policy environment that permitted the steady growth of private educational institutions and especially the formation of an array of Islamic universities such as the International Islamic University of Malaysia (IIUM), the Kolej University Islam Melaka (KUIM), and the Kolej University Islam Selangor (KUIS) to be established and to make a vital contribution to Malaysia's image as an important educational hub.

As far as Bakar was concerned, the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (ISESCO) framework was also a positive spin-off because it set up the Federation of the Universities of the Islamic World (FUIW) in 1987. Unfortunately, in this reviewer's opinion the FUIW, which was established to support these Muslim managed and oriented institutions, has been far from effective as an academic body; it, in fact, needs to be overhauled in order to become a more representative body so that it may demonstrate its viability as a dynamic educational structure and a player in the higher education arena where it has to compete with similar other bodies. Bakar observed that while the numerical expansion of Muslim educational institutions has been on the rise, the challenge that they all encounter was and still is: how to become 'holistic' in terms of the practice and policies. In other words, in which way are they able to infuse the actual 'spirit' (of Islam) into their 'intellectual' agenda without losing their direction? Put differently, they need to maintain 'a healthy balance between continuity and change'. Bakar concluded by stating how Islamic epistemological teachings are able to play a crucial role in the (Muslim) educational system of higher education.

Bakar's paper was complemented by Mohamed Hashim Kamali's (Chairperson: IAIS) presentation. The latter gave his attention to the 'Classical and Contemporary

Approaches to Education: An Islamic Perspective' (Bakar et al. 2011, 39–63). Since there is a subtle linguistic difference between labeling it an 'Islamic perspective' as opposed to a 'Muslim's perspective', this reviewer would wish to argue that Kamali's paper was basically a Muslim's perspective to education. That being so, Kamali essentially did the following: he chartered the historical trajectories of education; he surveyed the scriptural, philosophical and institutional foundations; and he examined how the modern reforms have challenged and affected these foundations. Before he touched upon the respective classical and contemporary approaches, Kamali stressed that the Muslim educational agenda is naturally underpinned by Islam's two primary sources, namely the Qur'an and Sunnah; he, of course, tied the 'right to education' and 'academic freedom' to these foundational texts. As regards the latter, he highlighted the fact that it has been promoted and advanced through an *ijtihadi* process; a process that is indeed not a mere juristic exercise but one that may also be applied to the humanities and social sciences with the aim of protecting society's moral fabric; an issue that is undeniably overlooked in the western academic environment.

Apart from having briefly discussed the classical approaches by referring to a list of well-respected scholars such as Ibn Sina (d.1037) and al-Ghazali (d.1111), he shifted to the contemporary approaches and noted the encounter between the Muslim heartlands and the west. He succinctly clarified how Muslims understood the word '*aql*' and where/why the confusion of 'rationality' developed during post-Descartes phase. Based upon his insights into the relationship between Islam and Science, Kamali stated that the Muslim concept of rationality has been and is much broader than the way it is understood and disseminated in the western academic institutions. Western scholars, who based themselves on a different set of readings and interpretations of Islam, would naturally not agree with Kamali's assertion. Be that as it may, Kamali recommended, among others, the idea of a 'holistic' conception of education; reinforcing Bakar's thoughts on Muslim higher education.

While Bakar's and Kamali's papers in this opening session were textually rich regarding Muslim higher education, Mohammad Mehdi Zahedi's paper titled 'The progress of higher education in the Islamic Republic of Iran' (Bakar et al. 2011, 64–71) was a disappointment to say the least. Since Zahedi was the former Iranian Minister of Higher Education, one expected him to have offered a fair insight and understanding of the progress in that sector. Zahedi provided a paint brush sketch of the state of affairs in Iran's higher educational arena. So instead of giving one a detailed and an in-depth view of the higher educational environment, he, for example, provided student enrolment statistics without commenting on them and he described the position of Science and Technology without inserting thoughts on where and how 'Islam' fitted into this important educational setting. If he had done so, then the first part of the proceedings would definitely have set the tone for the sessions that followed.

In any case, when turning to session two, Bashir Galadanci (Kano State's Minister of Science and Technology) was the first to present his paper. Galadanci



touched upon the sub-theme by reflecting upon ‘Synthesizing traditional and modern knowledge: The Nigerian experience’ (Bakar et al. 2011, 75–102). One of the shortcomings of Galadanci’s paper lies in the fact that it tried to cover a variety of aspects pertaining to the Muslim educational system, instead of confining itself to the Nigerian experience as indicated in the sub-heading. He veered off narrating the educational problems encountered in other Muslim countries such as Bangladesh and Saudi Arabia. Nigeria, it is well-known, has a very long and interesting Muslim higher education system that Galadanci could have devoted all his attention to in this paper; disappointingly, this was not the case. Sedik Baba, an IIUM professor of education, presented his thoughts on ‘The curriculum of Tertiary Islamic Studies in the era of globalization: The need for integration’ (Bakar et al. 2011, 103–116). Even though Baba’s title intended to reflect upon the integration of the Islamic studies ‘curriculum’ regionally (that is, the ASEAN), it did not satisfactorily do that. Nonetheless, Baba first reflected upon the Muslim educational system and human resource development, before he went on to theorise about the eclectic model as a viable one for the tertiary institutions. Baba thus mentioned in passing the proposed eclectic method prior to recording some of the models pursued in Malaysia; he made special reference to IIUM that is viewed as ‘The Garden of Knowledge and Virtue’. Baba’s paper, however, tied in somewhat with the next paper that appeared in the third session.

Mohd Aslam Mohd Haneef’s co-authored – with two other IIUM researchers – paper explored ‘The Quest for a 21<sup>st</sup> century Islamic economics curriculum model for Islamic universities’. Prior to tackling Islamic economics they, like others, first discussed the role of education in terms of human development and they showed how the higher education curriculum tied in with development; this discussion acted as an important backdrop for their focus on ‘a model of an integrated curriculum structure: the case of the Bachelor of Economics Program’. When they zoomed in on the issue, they somehow neglected to mention the critical role that textbooks play in seeing to the success of an integrated system for Muslim institutions. Zaid Ahmed’s presentation, which differed from his co-panelists’ paper, discussed ‘The teaching of Islamic civilization in Malaysian universities,’ a topic that was the theme of an international conference mentioned earlier in this review. Ahmed, in actual fact, described the present state of affairs with regards to the teaching of this course. Besides raising the question as to why teach this course, he outlined its purpose and explained what is meant by the term ‘Civilization’ and what its implications are as an academic discipline. After having described its status in the public universities in Malaysia, he reflected upon the ‘Islamic and Asian Civilization’ curriculum (as it was subsequently called) and he concluded with his thoughts on its future. On the whole, Ahmed’s reflections are welcome but these would have been enriched had he, for example, compared the teaching of ‘Islamic Civilization’ course to that which is being taught in Turkey at Fatih Sultan Mehmet University or Istanbul Medeniyet University (one of the co-organisers of the UBD-SOASCIS conference).

After Baba and Ahmed's presentations, the focus drifted to the Muslim minorities located in India, the Philippines and Thailand. Mohd Manzoor Alam (Institute of Objective Studies, Delhi) spoke about 'Islam and higher education in India: Opportunities and struggles' (Bakar et al. 2011, 165–174). Alam, like some of the mentioned presenters, did not touch upon Islam's role in the (Muslim) Indian higher education environment, even though he made brief reference to the well-known Muslim Aligarh University. Although Alam observed the struggles that are experienced in the higher education surroundings, he also noted the opportunities that are encountered. Alam took us back to the late nineteenth century before he returned to the contemporary period. He would have done the reader a great service had he zoomed in on two Muslim universities or two secular universities where Islam is taught as a course in order to demonstrate the nature of the problems and the prospects; it was a rather very general paper that did not really deal with the issues that it planned to discuss. Kamarodin Abas Abdulkarim (Western Mindanao State University) addressed a similar topic to that of Alam. Abdulkarim's 'Islam and higher education in Post-Marcos Philippines: The integration of Madaris curriculum for Muslim basic education' (Bakar et al. 2011, 175–178) was supposed to have dealt with Islam in the higher education sector, but shifted away, as reflected in the sub-topic, from looking at the integration of the curriculum at the *madrasa* (school) level and not at the higher education level! Chairat Siripatana (Walailak University) tackled a similar topic titled 'Islam and higher education in Thailand: Walailak University's Framework for Muslim Community Development' (Bakar et al. 2011, 179–186); while the spotlight was indeed on higher education using Walailak University as a case study, the presentation was not transformed into an essay as stated earlier in this review.

Siripatana's unsatisfactory 'chapter' seems to have spilt over into session five in which two papers tackled higher education reforms in Kazakhstan and Indonesia, respectively. Though Mesut Yilmaz (Vice Rector of Suleyman Demirel University) touched upon 'Development of higher education system in post-Soviet Kazakhstan' (Bakar et al. 2011, 189–201), he adopted a telegraphic style instead of presenting it in an essay form. Yilmaz, who described the state of higher education affairs from the time Kazakhstan achieved its independence from the USSR, did not clearly spell out where Islam features in Kazakhstan's higher education system; and he abruptly concluded with a brief mention of Kazakhstan's higher education sector's relations with those in Turkey and Malaysia, respectively. Syahrir Tanjung (Muhammadiyah University), who provided a download of 'Sharia economics and higher education: Post-Soeharto Administration' (Bakar et al. 2011, 198–202), gave, however, a more informative presentation. Tanjung restricted his rather brief presentation by discussing 'Sharia economics' – an awkwardly constructed phrase in the field of 'Islamic economics' – in Indonesia and how it has been weaved into the curricula of Muhammadiyah Universities after adopting the 2009 'Yogyakarta Commitments'. One would like Tanjung to have elaborated more on this model, and one would like



him to have indicated whether the ‘Islamic economic’s model’ has been successfully accommodated in the higher education sector, which has been and is still very much influenced by traditional western economics.

Higher education reforms were not confined to traditional residential universities; reforms have also taken place in the distance learning sector that has been further challenged by the e-learning educational model. On the one hand, Ansary Ahmed (President and CEO: Asia e University) spoke about ‘Distance education and e-learning in the Muslim world: An overview’ (Bakar et al. 2011, 205–209); regrettably, Ahmed’s paper, which intended to discuss both ‘distance learning’ and ‘e-learning’, contained a plethora of short notes without any solid insight into the status of these two types of learning systems in the Muslim world. And on the other, Ahmad Memariani Azizolah (Counsellor and Director of Iranian Students Affairs in Southeast Asia: Kuala Lumpur) reviewed as a case study ‘Payame Noor University Iran: A universal distance-based university in the Islamic world’ (Bakar et al. 2011, 210–213). Azizolah, who shared a few facts about this distance learning institution, did not narrate about its successes and failures. In addition, one would have wanted him to have briefly discussed how the ideas regarding Islam have been tailored to its programmes. Well, the absence of these bits of information does raise the question as to whether they seriously took into account the overall theme of the conference. Though their respective chapters fell short of doing that, the three chapters in the final part managed to address the theme, and these are the chapters I wish to look at.

The question that confronts Muslims, who form part of majority societies and minority communities, is in essence twofold: whether a role model university exists or whether one can be constructed to tackle issues that are encountered in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In response to these questions, Dzulkifli Abdul Razak Science (Vice-Chancellor: University Science Malaysia), shared his insightful experience when he discoursed about ‘Islam and the future of international higher education’ (Bakar et al. 2011, 217–242). Besides having outlined the current status of higher education in which Abdul Razak drew critical ideas from among others Jack Goody, he remarked herein that ‘since it is taken for granted that the model of higher education is based on the western construct (which) is the best, its adoption is almost uncritically encouraged and accepted as part of the “historical myths” ... and ... intensified under the so-called banner of “internationalization” of higher education, engulfing even the Muslim world’ (Bakar et al. 2011, 222). Abdul Razak stressed that higher education should have been more inclusive by inserting the philosophies and worldviews of the non-western communities; this is indeed an important observation and a point he correctly re-asserted in his conclusion when he stated that concerted efforts should be made ‘to remove the socio-cultural biases that underpins the current education system in appreciating and enhancing diversity ... (and) (t)he uncritical import of frameworks of knowledge and education ... is no longer acceptable’. He further cautioned that the Muslim world should be wary of the soft power that the west exerts

through its educational systems and this means that its frameworks and knowledge systems should be challenged.

In dealing with the sub-theme, Sufean Hussin and Soaib Asimiran (University of Malaya) undertook a survey to highlight 'University governance and development autonomy' (243–265) in Malaysia's public tertiary institutions. For them, 'university governance' is setting guidelines for the institution in order to achieve its vision and various goals, and more importantly meet the different stakeholders' demands; and 'university autonomy' implies that the university leadership should possess a degree of independence (from the holders of power (e.g. the government)) and determine the institution's academic direction and its qualitative growth. They thus made use of established models and theories to view these two aspects before they revealed their findings. They concluded that an Islamic model based upon 'holistic' development – a point made by Bakar and echoed by Kamali – be emulated. On this up-beat but emotionally charged concluding remarks, Hamza Mustafa Njozi (Vice-Chancellor: Mogorogoro Muslim University) responded directly to the sub-theme when he titled his paper: 'In search of a role model Muslim university in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: Ideals and realities and the African experience' (Bakar et al. 2011, 266–278). Njozi returned to the 'glorious past' of Muslim history and repeated the causes for the 'backwardness' of Muslims, prior to shedding light on the 'role of an ideal Muslim University'. Njozi underlined the fact that the Muslim university's staff and students should on the whole be thoroughly conversant with *al-maqasid ash-sharia*, a legal term that was eloquently captured by Kamali's widely read text with the same title. Being aware of the realities of the African experience and concluding with 'a way forward', Njozi firmly stated that this institution should adopt an integrative approach of pedagogy and make research a central feature of its programmes.

## CONCLUSION

In drawing this review to a conclusion, I would like to point out a few additional shortcomings that the editors should have addressed when they compiled the proceedings. Firstly, they should have restructured the set of papers in such a manner that those that were presented in power point form could have appeared in an appendix with a brief note as to why this was done, and they could have selectively lumped all the good essays (such as those that featured in the first and last sessions) in the first part and the weaker ones could have been placed towards the end. Secondly, they should have requested all the presenters to have provided an abstract so that the main ideas in each chapter could have been neatly captured; only some were accompanied by an abstract. Thirdly, the editors should also have demanded that each presenter insert a set of references that he/she cited (and that could have been used for further reading). Fourthly, they should have standardised the references/bibliographies that appeared in some of the chapters; they could have either adopted the Chicago or the Modern Language Association style for this publication. And finally, the chapters,

except for a few, were not grounded in important theoretical frames. It is deplorable that all these shortcomings marred the text's general presentation.

Perhaps I should turn my attention to the proceeding's positive outcomes: firstly, there is little doubt that the chief editor's introductory chapter, Kamali's complementary text, and the last three chapters in this compilation provided it with the necessary intellectual ingredients. Secondly, though the publication contained a mixed bag of papers, it did to some extent deal with the themes that the conference organisers had identified. Thirdly, despite some of the chapters' intrinsic weaknesses, they managed to bring the reader's attention to issues and areas that needed to be critically assessed in the Muslim higher education sector. So despite the weakness of this publication, its contents will be of interest to many scholars who have an interest in higher education and more specifically with the critical role that 'Islam' as an intellectual tradition plays in the status of Muslim institutions of higher learning (in and beyond the Muslim heartlands).

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