

Issues and Challenges in the Current System of (Islamic) Education in the Caribbean

Faheem Mohammed

Professional Alliance Network (Caribbean) Ltd.
Arthur Lok Jack Graduate School of Business – University of the West Indies
Markaz al Ihsaan Institute of Islamic Theology
Majlis ul Ulamaa (Council of Scholars)
fmohammed@pancaribbean.org

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Opening Remarks and Protocols

Technological Disruption

We are today in a transitional state worldwide when it comes to education models and methods. With the advent of the Internet diffusion – especially in the developing world – the global south – we are more and more exposed to issues and conversations regarding the future of education. (Robertson 2005)ⁱ. Indeed, in the post-industrial world, where intangible assets such as knowledge and brand perception represent the highest value in terms of market share and equity, market-oriented education and related competencies represent the primary resource for wealth-creation.

From international policy by institutions such as the World Bank, OECD, UNESCO and others, we are seeing both the importance of education as a vehicle through which we can improve the lives of citizens globally, and the projections in terms of development of education access, technologies and the accompanying

methodologies that can accommodate the mass diffusion of opportunity.

Traditional institutions are required to change – indeed, many of them have responded through the online portals allowing open enrolment and self-study. From MIT to Harvard to Stanford and thousands others – many institutions have gone this route and are trying to balance monetization and access to continue to preserve their market influence and standing. Others have emerged to deliver entire online programmes to online students, with study groups loosely defined within countries, by language or by other demographic and psychographic parameters.

We can easily recognize that the global instantaneous access to information via the internet means that persons anywhere, at any time and through any device can access the content to which they can refer / infer meanings and use as a guide. But this is in absence of the conditionalities that would have accompanied guided in-depth study in the field – usool of fiqh, tafseer and hadith, for example, which typically

would have been transmitted from teacher to student in an unbroken chain from the source.

We can also readily recognize the fact that in this global compendium of information it is increasingly difficult to discern the sense from the nonsense, the positions of one paradigm from that of another. More and more inquiries into Islam using the Internet expose us to alternative influences – some of which would look very similar to what we identify with, and others offering radically different propositions that can fundamentally alter our equilibrium.

Some espouse the need to censure the Internet and content, others believe it should be regulated within some ethical system or the other, while even others believe the focus must be placed on strengthening ourselves against this ubiquitous platform that has some good and some not-so-good.

Equally of note on the topic of technology are the accompanying behaviours and expectations that we exhibit – instant gratification in terms of insight and external validation via social media are skewing behaviours and as a result the form and purpose of education, the impact and potential reach to platforms that boast of a global audience.

It is in this context that education is viewed as being in a transitional state, and which we would need to reconcile as we project for its development moving forward.

Philosophy

Although Islam was a significant contributor to the development of the scientific methods that we are familiar with today, and at its peak Islamic civilization represented the Golden Ages of human development and intellectual pursuits, what has emerged in the industrial and post-industrial era are markedly different from the foundations set by Islam in the 8th century onwards. The contemporary dichotomy of the

rational vs. the empirical are all set in the context of scientism and materialism – the tangible and the physical world which we can know for certain. What it lacks is an ethical framework that incorporates exploration and research towards a particular focus – today what we see is research for research's sake, and any attempt to question the direction and resulting impacts of such research are seen as either regressive or opportunistic. It is ironic that – in trying to move away from God-consciousness we have come up with such constructs as Nietzsche's Superman, Adam Smith's Guiding Hand or Karl Marx's Invisible Hand.

On the other hand, Islam has preserved an ethical context for development, which is not to say that is necessarily superior from a position of inquiry, but that it is different. Research is emphasized, and directed into different spheres and disciplines, but is tempered by regulations embodied in jurisprudence, sourced from the Quran and Ahadith. For example, the Quran 20:114 reminds us to pray for increase in knowledge, but we are told in the ahadith to pray for salvation from useless knowledge.

The fragmentation that accompanies a specialization paradigm affords development in a field without much concern for other disciplines – for example advancement in plastic surgery can have positive impact on restorative needs of accident victims, but bears little concern for other social impacts. On the other end of the spectrum, the focus solely on human development may bear with it the opportunity cost of developments that can have far-reaching contributions to humanity and quality of life. In Islam, research is consoled by the innate intentions that the researcher would bear, for which we would be individually held accountable on a day so fixed, and accountable directly to the Almighty.

What is stark, however, is the variance in the approach and interpretation of the sources of

knowledge which we have at our disposal. Whilst we believe the Quran as the word of Almighty Allah is unchanging, we differ on what verses are meant to be literal or allegorical. Relatedly, ahadith are, in some cases, contradictory to historical analysis, and there is the underlying perception held by many of the infallibility of ahadith, although we can appreciate it is based on a chain of narration and bears with it some measure of subjectivity. These issues, amongst others, have proven to be the bane of Islamic Scholarship over its history, and has resulted in many ideological splits that are reflected in the fragmentation of the community. So while some are considering the ethical impacts of bioengineering, others are in a quandary about sighting of the new moon.

Models of Education

It needs to be noted that the general models of contemporary education follow the precepts of the Administrative-Bureaucratic models imposed in the Victorian era of the global British Empire (Mithra 2000)ⁱⁱ These models were geared to ensure uniform (interchangeable) competencies across the various territories being governed. The outcomes / delivery / assessment components of pedagogy were all geared towards succession planning within a defined hierarchy of authority, to support continuing operations from global central headquarters. As effective as this was – and make no mistake – it was effective to the point where it still dominates the education domain today – it must subject itself to reinvention in a world where the access is easier than ever and the skills required have evolved towards entrepreneurship and innovation for development to be sustained.

Contrast this with the Islamic approach to education – referencing the sources of Quran and Sunnah as encapsulated in Ahadith, the models that were used were essentially pre-industrial, and followed an apprenticeship

approach that allowed persons to gain expertise under the ‘master’ craftsman or scholar, to the extent of their capabilities and potentials as identified by the master. This was manifest in the Near and Middle East, Indo-Pak subcontinent and Far East models of development.

Emphasis was not placed as much on succession, but rather the slant was a skew to legacy, with such factors being emphasized as pride in workmanship and representation of a brand. Pertaining to theology, it was common in the apprenticeship model that various persons developed in different aspects of the master’s craft, and if no one was worthy to continue the legacy the master would rather die with their secrets than compromise the brand. It is not uncommon that apprentices would deem themselves more qualified than the master and strike out on their own, with their own interpretations or approaches to subject matter at hand. In other instances, the children would be expected to carry on the legacy.

In reconciling or integrating these models, there are some lingering challenges that need to be met head on, although there is no certainty of compromise. The emphasis on credit-hours and formal assessment of affective outcomes versus the informal demonstration of internalization and inculcation of learnings are polar opposites of the spectrum. One only need look at the differences in the formal tertiary Islamic institutes against the madrassas that operate, to appreciate the variance in form and qualification.

Contemporary Considerations

What we are seeing more of are scholar-led institutions emerge that address Islamic content in a formal educational method. Structured syllabuses, prequalified delivery and formal assessments all feature – in varying degrees – as attempts to present a professional face to Islamic studies (to meet market expectations?).

However, the schools bear significant differences in their programmes, the approaches to the subjects, reference texts, etc. all subject to the preferences of the founder/scholar and administrators. It is also notable that these institutions fail to maintain levels of performance and attractiveness beyond the life-span of its founder/scholar. Others rise within different jurisdictions to fill the void and deliver some measure of continuity. But in the absence of any certifying accreditation body, it will all be contingent on the lingering perception of the scholars' institution from which students emerge.

It is also worth mentioning that there is need for caution in the influences of parties external to Islam, who seek to either control, manipulate or in absence of these define the research agendas of institutions. For example, some may view poverty alleviation or racial integration in society as much more pressing areas of social concern than issues of child-marriage. Yet too often what can be seen as less-pertinent issues rise to the fore and steer the conversation, and we seem still to be only too happy to follow this agenda and dedicate scarce resources to appease parties that cannot be content.

Looking Ahead

For the purposes of the development of Islamic Education, it is time that we work towards standardized syllabuses across ideological splits in specific subject areas – in particular Tafseer, Fiqh, Ahadith and Arabic Language, so that persons who have studied in these areas are recognized by all parties involved. In the same vein, an accreditation body, such as that of the

OIC, would auger well to further this cause. Significant outreach would have to be made to gain the buy-in of the scholars, whose institutions would be a key part of this development. By extension, other standardized elements such as dawah, social and natural sciences can benefit from a standardized base, from which point we would be able to launch deeper research and exploration of Islamic contributions and frameworks that can steer the development of our global society to that which is better.

In closing, I would observe that these measures are all meant to augment the current knowledge dissemination efforts that are manifest. In today's context of a knowledge-based, individual-oriented globally focused citizenry, Islamic paradigms to knowledge and education may prove to be best suited to effect social transformation. With some authoritative oversight and simple measures to support current efforts, we can be the catalyst for a new wave of human development – a Golden Age 2.0. Williams and Starbucks allude to the Islamic 'forcefield' approach which is currently being developed as a model for more universal applications. To this end, I am reminded of the hadith where the Holy Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) is reported to have said: "Acquire knowledge and impart it to the people." – (Sunan Tirmidhi, Hadith 107). May we all be able to support the acquisition of knowledge and its transmission for the betterment of all those in the generations to come.

Thank You. Assalaamu alaikum.

ⁱ Robertson, Susan L. (2005) Re-imagining and re-scripting the future of education: global knowledge economy discourses and the challenge to education systems, *Journal of Comparative Education*, Vol 41, 2005, Issue 2

ⁱⁱ Mitra, Sugata, *Minimally Invasive Education for Mass Computer Literacy*, Presented at the CRIDALA 2000 conference, Hong Kong, 21-25 June, 2000