Grooming the Next Generation of Muslim Researchers

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Abstract

The advancement of societies is dependent on the knowledge that they discover, generate, accumulate and share among the members. Knowledge does not come by itself, there should be groups of trained individuals to seek, uncover and package the knowledge to be utilized by the society for social, economic as well a spiritual advancement. History has recorded that there were many Muslim scholars who had very successfully discovered the many disciplines of knowledge that became the milestones for further research and development. This paper will discuss on why we should develop young scholars, example of two institutions working along this idea, the skills need to be acquired by the young researchers, and the support mechanisms that will expedite the development of young researchers. With the resurgence of Islam worldwide, it is more pressing to address the gap in fulfilling the needs of the Muslim ummah with regard to overall societal development and well-being.

Keywords: Muslim scholars, Islamic knowledge, researchers, collaboration, research skills

Introduction

Say: 'If the ocean were ink (wherewith to write out) the words of my Lord, sooner would the ocean be exhausted than would the words of my Lord, even if we added another ocean like it for its aid.' (Al Kahf: 109)

There no doubt that knowledge is very important in our lives. The advancement of societies is dependent on the knowledge that they discover, generate, accumulate and share among the members. Knowledge does not come by itself, there should be groups of trained individuals to seek, uncover and package the knowledge to be utilized by the society for social, economic as well a spiritual advancement. The purpose of this
paper is to share some thoughts on how to prepare and groom young scholars to become competent researchers that will bring about more knowledge, prosperity and well-being of the ummah. This is crucial because the recent trend has shown the ideology brought by the West has limited capability in sustaining societal development, especially among the Muslim nations. Moreover, Islamic system as in Islamic banking and finance had gained global acceptance as well as recognition. This phenomenon should be further expanded to other areas of living to show that Muslim and Islam can offer solutions to the global issues. As such, young corps of Muslim scientists needs to be trained to take up this challenge.

In order to better present the thought, this paper is presented in four main sections. The first section listed the reasons why this concern is very important to be dealt with as soon as possible. The second sections cited projects that are being conducted along this idea. The third sections elaborate on the knowledge, skills, and competencies that the young researchers need to master. Whereas section four suggests the support systems that need to be established in order to ensure the viability and success of this endeavor.

Why We Need New Young Muslim Researchers?

We cannot dispute the importance of knowledge to take us further into the roots of betterment in this world and the hereafter. Every one of us has an obligatory duty of seeking knowledge from the day we were born until we die. It is just impossible for us to know everything in 66 to 70 years of our lives. Thus, by having a group of dedicated researchers and scholars would help us in discovering more knowledge and making the knowledge more beneficial to the ummah.

There are many ways of getting knowledge. For example, Graziano and Raulin (1989) listed six common methods of acquiring knowledge:

1. Tenacity – willingness to accept idea as valid knowledge because that idea has been accepted for a long period of time
2. Intuition – knowledge is received directly without any intellectual effort or any involvement of sensory process
3. Authority – willingness to accept idea as valid knowledge because some respected source claims it is valid
4. Rationalism – willingness to accept that knowledge is developed through reasoning process alone
5. Empiricism – knowledge is gained through observation of real events, through personal experiences and our senses, and
6. Science – knowledge is generated through the elements of rationalism and empiricisms. It employs rational logic and check each step with empirical observation. It involves the continuous systematic interplay of facts and rational thought.
In Islam, we believed that all knowledge come from Allah and there are several layers of knowledge that not everyone would be capable to attain. However, we are encouraged to discover knowledge according to our capability. The first verse of the Qur’an sent down asked our Prophet (pbuh) to read that signifies seeking knowledge is a must.

As such, the main reasons of grooming young group of Muslim scholars can be seen in the following contexts:

- **Knowledge is power** – there is no substitute for knowledge, as the Hadith says “To be successful in this world, we need knowledge. To be successful in the hereafter, need knowledge, and to be successful in both, we need knowledge.” Without knowledge, the Muslim would be left behind as what is happening in many Muslim countries. In this context, knowledge encompasses all types of knowledge for human development and well-being, as well as those that bring us closer to Allah.

- **Agenda for Muslim ummah** – as Muslims we need to help one another. To date there are more than two billion Muslims in the world and the number is growing fast. Many issues are facing the ummah now and we need strong teams of experts and professionals to handle the issues, according to the teaching of Islam. This is in line with the verse in holy Al Qur’an that says, “…Verily never will Allah change the condition of a people until they change what is in themselves…” (Ar-Ra’d: 11).

- **Consolidation of knowledge capital** – presently there are many prominent Muslim scholars and researchers working in many well-established institutions of higher learning and research institutes all over the world. If we could pool these knowledge capital (professionals with high level of knowledge value), then we can channel the energy for the benefits of Muslim ummah. Subsequently, we would establish a directory of Muslim experts for reference of the young researchers as they would be able to identify from whom and where to gain knowledge and take them as mentors.

- **Revive the glory of Islamic knowledge era** – the contribution of Muslim scholars and researchers to the bodies of knowledge in all aspects of human civilization has been well documented. For example, Zulkifli Abd. Ghani et al (2011) had listed 20 Muslim geniuses cum scholars that were pioneers in the field of philosophy, mathematics, literatures and social sciences, and sciences. What is interesting about these geniuses were their multi-disciplinary command of the knowledge. Names like Ibn Ishaq Al-Kindi, Al-Farabi, Syezkh Abdul Qadir Al- Jilani, Al-Khwarizmi, Ibn Khaldun and Ibn Sina were among those listed had published their works that became impetus and landmarks for current knowledge.
Networking for greater impact – as the world today is connected and wired by the information and communication technology (ICT), it is possible to communicate with everyone on earth from any locality. This would facilitate the cooperation and sharing of information as well as resources for the benefit of ummah. Likewise, distance issues are well shared in the cyber world that make it possible for everyone to give opinion in tackling the issues and render support services.

There is no doubt that there had been several organizations that realized the need to develop the young talent to bring the Muslim ummah to the higher level of well-being. The upcoming section will elaborate on two examples of such undertaking.

**Current Initiatives In The Development Of Young Muslim Researchers And Scholars**

This paper would like to share two projects that are related to the development of young Muslim scholars and researchers. The first initiative is the Permata Insan Academy (www.permatainsan.my) at the Islamic Science University of Malaysia (USIM). This program is carried out in order to produce great future Islamic scholars/intellectuals based on al-Quran and Al-Sunnah. Permata Insan is defined as: An Ahqar individual that is highly skilled in understanding, interpreting, memorizing and applying the Al-Quran and As-Sunnah in his life. He/She is also able to nurture the Islamic knowledge-seeking tradition, thus awakes the development of knowledge and technology. This program caters students beginning 8 years old and they should attain a predetermined score in a series of assessment to be in the program. The program was started in 2009 and to date has 80 students that undergo learning modules.

The Permata Insan Academy has the following objectives:

- To identify brilliant students as early as possible so that their potentials and talents could totally be developed to the optimum level.
- To provide a conducive environment in fulfilling the needs of teaching and learning of PERMATA students continuously.
- To provide and develop supporting systems including for the parents in assisting the holistic development of PERMATA students.
- To build collaboration between USIM and the government agencies, NGOs, and local and international universities related to building and observing the PERMATA students education program.
- To create integrated learning modules that combine al-Quran learning with current curriculum.
- To train the students in mastering al-Quran language and some of the world main languages.
This is a long term project that monitors the students' progress through workshops, academic competitions, global seminars, summer camps during school holidays and online learning facilities. It is intended that the follow through will be done until the students enter the institution of higher learning.

Another initiative to develop young Muslim scholars and researchers can be found in the Federation of the Universities of the Islamic World (FUIW) (www.fuiw.org). In 2011, this Federation has 271 member institutions from 56 countries. Country with the highest members is Iran (32) followed by Sudan (20), Pakistan (17) and Jordan (16). Among the ASEAN countries, Malaysia has 10, Indonesia has 10 and one each from Brunei Darussalam and Thailand.

According to FUIW web page, the objectives of this Federation are:

- Enhancing the level of scientific researches in all fields, exchanging their findings, and linking them with the developmental and civilizational requirements of the Islamic ummah;
- Upgrading the developing higher education to address the needs of Muslims societies and benefit by the scientific and technological new developments in line with the Islamic ummah's civilizational constants;
- Furthering cooperation in such a way as to enhance the exchange of experiences, studies, programmes and visits in the field of education, science, culture and technology;
- Encouraging the teaching of the language of the Holy Quran and the Islamic culture in member universities;
- Stepping up the efforts of higher education institutions to address the current issues and entrench the values of understanding, co-existence and peace among the peoples of the Islamic ummah and the world as a whole;
- Upgrading member universities' knowledge and human capacities;
- Caring for the Islamic heritage by publicizing, translating and authenticating it, and shedding light on the contribution of its scholars to human civilizational building.

In line with these objectives, one of the main projects of the Federation is the FUIW Prize for Academic Papers which, directed related to the development of young Muslim researchers. In view of the decline of scientific research in the Islamic world in comparison to developed countries, as underlined by Dr. Abdulaziz Othman Altwaijri, Director General of ISESCO, Secretary General of the FUIW, in his address to the third Islamic Conference of the Ministers of Higher Education and Scientific Research held in Kuwait (19-21/11/2006) wherein he pointed out this alarming situation having huge impact on the present and future of the Islamic world. Thus, Based on the objectives enshrined in the Charter of
the Federation of the Universities of the Islamic World aiming at enhancing the level of scientific research in all fields, exchanging research findings, taking interest in applied research works which address the problems of the Muslim ummah, and linking research topics with comprehensive development, and on the resolutions and recommendations of the conferences and meetings urging specialized organizations and institutions to redouble efforts and develop the implementation mechanisms in order to upgrade research capacities in the Islamic world (www.fuiw.org).

As stated in the FUIW web page, the FUIW Prize aims to achieve, among others 15 objectives:

- To encourage Islamic university research to promote the religious, cultural and civilizational causes of the Islamic ummah.
- To promote scientific and technological cooperation among Member Universities.
- To link university education outputs to the industrial sector.
- To enhance the Islamic value reference in university research trends.
- To entrench the values of belonging and to immune research against alienation, deviation and extremist tendencies.
- To upgrade science and technology capacities of scientific research centres.
- To redress stereotypes against Islam and Muslims.
- To raise university awareness about the fundamentals of the Islamic ummah as well as new scientific and technological developments.
- To raise awareness about threats to natural resources.
- To develop science capacities and human resources as part of the Islamic vision calling for enhancing the value of labour and contributing to sustainable development.
- To upgrade quality and accreditation in order to compete at the international level while safeguarding Islamic specificities.
- To publicize the contribution of Islamic universities and their outstanding academic figures to the human civilization.
- To address current issues, problems and challenges from an Islamic perspective.
- To develop and update educational systems as well as teaching methods and tools in such a way as to effect excellence and creativity.
- To enhance cooperation and complementary between Member Universities and to exchange expertise between their teachers and staff working in their fields.
The projects organized by the FUIW should be given full cooperation and commitment by the member institutions as they will provide the platform for other projects. Besides this, other institutions of higher learning should become member of this Federation. Since we already have some sorts of proper and suitable organization to train and develop our young researchers as stated in the FUIW document, then we need to identify the skills and competencies to enhance the development of the young researchers so that they can deliver the aspirations of the Federations in the most meaningful means.

**Competencies In Developing Young Researchers**

Formal education is very important in developing researchers. They should undergo graduate training up to PhD level. The practice of American universities of having supervisory committee and the students have to take courses to fulfill the program requirement will equip the students with the required knowledge and skills. By following academic courses, the students will learn current knowledge and develop writing skills as the courses will require them to write term papers. Among the courses that they must take include theory course, various research methods and data analysis (in my case I had taken 12 courses related to research and data analyses). Likewise, when there is a committee supervising the graduate study, students would have more opportunities to learn from a team of professors. Of course, it is sometimes difficult to work with many supervisory members as they have their own strong ideas.

Nevertheless, during their course of study, the graduate students or the young researcher should acquire the following skills and develop their competencies accordingly as listed by Muna Abu Hassan (2012):

- Meticulous – they should be very careful, give attention to detail and aware about what they are doing, and through with their works
- Analytical and critical – they should be able to see things in different perspectives and not satisfied with the first impression, able to foresee the consequences of certain decisions, and able to argue and defence his/her stands from various disciplines
- Listening and reading – these are important for comprehension purposes. They must be able to pick up main ideas from listening to speech, viewing videos and from reading and at the same time able to relate to present issues or his/her area of expertise
- Presentation – researchers should be able to make clear presentation in order to be credible. There is no point of having good knowledge, but unable to share it with others through presentation. Good presentation not only convince audience, but also adds to our professionalism and authority
Interpersonal communication – as research involves many other people, a researcher must be able to work with others effectively. Good interpersonal skills will develop better networking and the chance for further collaborations.

Writing skills – this is another skill that must be acquired by researchers in order to get accepted to present seminar papers or get published in journals. At the same time, skill in popular writing is also important to share our knowledge with the general ummah.

Data analysis and interpretation – there is no doubt that researchers will deal with massive data that need to be organized and analyzed in order to answer the research questions or the research objectives. Researchers must be aware and skilful in the various data analysis tools for qualitative and quantitative research approach such as SPSS, Rasch Model, SEM, AMOS, nVIVO and SAS to name a few. Then, the researchers must be skilful in interpreting the data obtained as it would be more helpful in addressing the problems at hand.

ICT skills – in the era of information and communication technology (ICT), researchers must be able to use computers and its related application to upload information, searching and retrieving information from oceans of knowledge, saving the collected information as well as sharing what had been gathered with others.

Problem identification – as research should begin with problem, researchers should be able to identify issues or problems from the surrounding through their interaction with others or observations.

The skills listed above are not exhaustive. There are other skills that would develop the young researchers to be more competent. However, the skills listed above serve as a starting point that should be given due attention. After we have known the organization that can help to provide the opportunity for young researchers to develop and the skills they need to acquire, then the support mechanisms should be put in place to expedite the development of these young researchers.

Support Mechanisms In Grooming Young Muslim Researchers

To ensure this initiative of developing and grooming young researchers to be successful, urgent commitment from the various institutions and organization is sought. It would be strategic to let the FUW become the secretariat as the structure is already in place. The followings are some other works to be conducted to facilitate and expedite this endeavor.

- University declare niche areas – member universities of the FUW and other interested institutions should declare their niche areas so that the knowledge...
disciplines can be made known and we would know which disciplines had
been covered and listed by the institutions and the ones that are lacking. By
knowing the niche areas we would be able to coordinate collaboration or
start new areas in order to meet the present demands.

• Publication on research in progress – this is important in order to know what
research is being conducted and by which institution so that the Federation
would not duplicate the research and put the resources for other purposes.
Likewise, it would be possible for other researchers to collaborate or share
their inputs related to their expertise.

• Annual regional seminar and biennial/triennial Federation conference –
research findings need to be shared in order for them to be useful. One of
the effective means of sharing research findings is through seminars and
conferences. During the seminars, the researchers could exchange their
experiences and develop working networks for further undertakings. It is
believed that annual regional seminar would bring together neighbouring
researchers frequently and the biennial/triennial Federation conference
would make it more prestigious and valuable, as the World Cup and Olympics
are not an annual event.

• Journal in specific field of study – selected seminar and conference papers
presented would then be published in the Federation journals. It would be
beneficial to have journal specific to field of studies. This would provide
wider avenues for publication opportunities to the researchers. The
technological advancement makes it possible to publish journals on-line.
The more research findings published, the wider would be the sharing of
knowledge among Muslim scholars and researchers.

• Funding and research facilities – obviously the project to develop and
groom young researchers needs adequate funding and proper facilities that
would stimulate and provide conducive environment form them to nurture.
Md. Saleh Hassan et al (2005) noted that the Muslim scholars in the past
were provided with adequate facilities and support system that allowed
them to concentrate on discovering knowledge. Private and public research
institutions should be generous enough to contribute to this initiative.
Alternately, private companies involved in research would allow the young
researchers to do internship at their premise that can lead to the completion
of Masters or PhD. This win-win situation would enable the organization
and the researcher to garner for the real life and actual problem or issue facing
the ummah, as well as exploring the frontiers of knowledge.

• Roles of OIC – as a governing body of the Muslim world, the research arm
of OIC should work closely with FUIW. In the manner the urgent issues of
the ummah can be addressed by the relevant group of experts present at the
locality. Working together will enhance the strength of the organization and
encourage the institutions to play greater roles in developing the ummah. Certainly, funding is necessary for effective works to be carried out.

What Next?

This short paper has proposed a plan to develop and groom young Muslim researchers to handle the issues and problem of the ummah. Preparations to equip the group with relevant knowledge and skills fall for the cooperation and commitment of various parties. The existence of FUIW is very timely to coordinate this crucial task in bringing the ummah at par with other societies in this world. In addition, guidance to prepare the young researchers to bring the ummah to be close to Allah, the All Mighty and educate them for life in the hereafter should not be neglected too. InsyaAllah, with our noble intention and pure Niah, Allah will make it easy for us to achieve this ambition. DO OUR BEST AND ALLAH WILL TAKE CARE OF THE REST

References

Al Qur’an