Muslim world's universities: Past, present and future

Mohsen Rezaeian

Correspondence:
Professor Mohsen Rezaeian, PhD, Epidemiologist
Epidemiology and Biostatistics Department,
Occupational Environmental Research Center
Rafsanjan Medical School, Rafsanjan University of Medical Sciences
Rafsanjan, Iran
Email: moeygmr2@yahoo.co.uk

Abstract

Muslims account for 1.7 billion of the world's population and Islam is now considered as the fastest growing religion. Since Islam hugely supports science, the Muslim world's universities and scholars especially during the Islamic Golden Age (IGA) have contributed to a large extent to the progress of different branches of science. Despite this Golden History, the present situation of universities in the Muslim world is not as it should be. If universities within the Muslim world wish to reach the position which they deserve they should take into account a number of strategic initiatives. Some of these strategic initiatives are discussed within the present paper.

Key words: Islam, Universities, Higher Education, Scholars

Introduction

Muslims account for 1.7 billion (23.4%) of the world's population; a preponderance of them live in the Middle Eastern countries (1). Furthermore, Islam is considered as the fastest growing religion which makes it the second most prevalent religion after Christianity (2). At the moment there are 57 countries with a Muslim-majority population which form the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) (3 & 4) (See below).

Since Islam hugely supports science, the Muslim world's scholars and then universities, especially during the Islamic Golden Age (IGA), have contributed in a large extent to the progress of different branches of science. Despite this Golden History, the present situation of universities and scientific productivities within the Muslim world are not as it should be (5-8).

The chief aim of the present article is therefore, to take a look at the past and the present situation of the Muslim world's universities. The article then goes on to provide some strategic initiatives in order to promote the current situations of these universities. However, let us start by taking a fresh look at the geographical distribution of the OIC countries.

The geographical distribution of the OIC countries

The countries that shape the OIC are In Africa: Algeria, Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Comoros, Chad, Djibouti, Egypt, Gabon, Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Libya, Mali, Mauritania, Morocco, Mozambique, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, Togo, Tunisia and Uganda. In Asia: Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Brunei, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kuwait, Kyrgyzstan, Lebanon, Malaysia, Maldives, Oman, Pakistan, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, the United Arab Emirates, Uzbekistan and Yemen. In Europe: Albania. In South America: Guyana and Suriname (3 & 4).

Past situation of the Muslim world's universities

It is worth emphasizing that the very first word of the Quranic revelation to Prophet Muhammad was an order to read. Furthermore, the word "'Ilm", which is equivalent to "knowledge", and its derivatives takes place 880 times in the Quran (9).

As a result, Prophet Muhammad by stating that: "Seek knowledge, even as far as China" has established a strong mandate for Muslims. This mandate has two vital components: firstly, the responsibility of Muslims to look for knowledge in diverse fields, and secondly to seek knowledge as far as they can reach (10).

Based on this mandate, gradually Muslim scholars and then the established Muslim world's universities, especially during the IGA, have contributed to a large extent to the progress of sciences. Muslim scholars established empirical inquiry, by precise observation, measurement and experiment, and before drawing any conclusions they learnt how to take into account contradictory views (11).

It is no surprise that at the beginning of the IGA in 859 AD the University of Qarawiyyin i.e. the "world's oldest continually operational university" was established in Morocco (8). And even 500 years earlier than that and during the reign of Shapur II (309 to 379 AD) the academy of Gondi-Shapur was founded in Iran which was then called Persia. This academy consisted of a university, a library with more than 400,000 books and a teaching hospital. By the Islam conquest of Iran in 638 AD the academy supports the foundation of the Islamic School of Medicine (12).

This clearly explains why even nowadays the works of top Muslim scholars especially within the field of medicine such as Zakariya Razi or Rhazes (865 to 925 AD) and Avicenna or Ibn-Sina (980 to 1037 AD) are still remembered and respected (12).

Present situation of the Muslim world's universities

If everything had gone based on the established mandate the Muslim world's universities and scholars should now stand on top of today's academic ranking. However, it seems that after the IGA and by the birth of dictator governments, wars and armed conflicts, social unrest and even poverty etc. the critical-minded scholarship gradually has been restrained (10 & 13).

Therefore, it is no surprise that as of 2012 whilst the OIC countries have nearly a quarter of the world's population they have only 2.4% of its research expenditure, 6% of its publications, and 1.6% of its patents (7).

It is also not astonishing to realize that there are only three Nobel laureates in the sciences from OIC countries. Furthermore, OIC countries host no university in the top 100 of the many world rankings (8).

One of these academic rankings is called Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) or Shanghai ranking. Within the 2013 released of ARWU, there are only 8 universities from OIC countries on the list of world top 500 universities with the best position i.e. 160th, achieved by King Saud University (KSU) (14).

The recent "Report of Zakri Task Force on Science at Universities of the Muslim World" has also revealed that during the recent 20 years and among 57 OIC countries there are only 20 countries that together have produced more than 90% of OIC scientific outputs. From the period 1996-2005 to 2006-2015 some of these 20 countries have increased their scientific productions significantly with Qatar and Iran on top. However, for 2006-15 the average citations per paper were 5.7 for OIC countries, clearly much less than comparable countries such as South Africa, with 9.7 citations per paper (15).

Strategic initiatives for the future of the Muslim world's universities

If universities within the Muslim world wish to reach the position which they deserve there are a number of strategic initiatives that they should take into account. The most important of them may include:

1. There is no doubt that Muslim countries should shift their policy on to increase the quality of the existing universities.
2. One way to fulfill the first point is to increase universities' budgets especially research budgets and take extreme caution that the budget is spent in a proper way (16).
3. The other way to fulfill the first point is to revise universities' curricula to make teaching more up to date and relevant. Continuing education plus life learning initiatives should seriously be taken into account (8 & 17).
4. Paying more attention to female scientists considering their abilities and their wishes. It has been estimated that throughout the IGA there were more than 8,000 female scholars (18).
5. Collaboration with other universities in the Muslim world and beyond to carry out ground breaking research projects. Similarly, opening the door of the universities to other universities in the Muslim world and beyond by exchanging students and scholars at the very least for a short period of time.
6. Opening the door of the universities to the people, especially to high school pupils. This helps the public at large better understand how science is taught in universities and also high school pupils will make more informed decisions on what subjects they are going to pursue in the universities (19).
7. Similar to the previous point, universities in the Muslim world should take on a more socially accountable mission (20).
8. Paying more attention to English language as the official language of science in the current world (16).
9. Since research productivities are increasing in some Muslim countries and in order to avoid any type of research misconduct (21) paying more attention to the ethics of

research and publications are extremely needed.

10. Last but not least, Muslim countries should take a critical view towards their primary and secondary educational systems. They do need to revise primary and high school curricula to allow the intake of their universities, more fresh and open-minded students.

All this may not happen if the universities within the Muslim world are not managed in a meritocratic way (8). More importantly having meritocratic universities does not entirely fulfill the needs unless more democratic governments and peaceful circumstances will roll over the Islamic world (13).

Conclusion

Despite the Islamic Golden Age, the present situation of universities within the Muslim world in not as it should be. If universities within the Muslim world wish to reach the position which they deserve. they should take into account a number of strategic initiatives. The present article has articulated some of the most important of these initiatives.

References

1. Muslim world. Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muslim_world. Last accessed August 2016.
2. CNN. Fast-growing Islam winning converts in Western world. http://www.cnn.com/WORLD/9704/14/egypt.islam/. Last accessed August 2016.
3. Organisation of Islamic Cooperation. http://www.oic-oci.org/oicv3/home/?lan=en. Last accessed August 2016.
4. Organisation of Islamic Cooperation. Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Organisation_of_Islamic_Cooperation. Last accessed August 2016.
5. Giles J. Islam and Science: oil rich, science poor. Nature. 2006; 444(7115):28.
6. Fergany N. Islam and Science: steps towards reform. Nature. 2006; 444(7115):33-4.
7. Royal Society. A New Golden Age? The Prospects for Science and Innovation in the Islamic World Royal Society, 2010.
8. Guessoum N, Osama A. Institutions: Revive universities of the Muslim world. Nature. 2015: 29;526(7575):634-6.
9. Serageldin I. Islam, Science and Values. 2005. P 3.
10. [No authors listed]. Science and the Islamists. Nature. 2006; 444(7115):1.
11. Serageldin I. Science in Muslim countries. Science. 2008; 321(5890):745.
12. Modanlou HD. Historical evidence for the origin of teaching hospital, medical school and the rise of academic medicine. J Perinatol. 2011; 31(4):236-9.
13. Rezaeian M. Challenges of developing countries' epidemiologists in the 21st century. Acta Med Iran. 2016; 54(1):4-8.
14. Meo SA, Surayya F. Muslim world universities ranking in global science. J Pak Med Assoc. 2014; 64(6):724.
15. Muslim World Science Initiative. Report of Zakri Task Force on Science at Universities of the Muslim World, London and Islamabad. 2015.
16. Rezaeian M. Disadvantages of publishing biomedical research articles in English for non-native speakers of English. Epidemiol Health. 2015; 37:e2015021.
17. Pocock L. Rezaeian M. Medical Education and the Practice of Medicine in the Muslim countries of the Middle East. World Family Med J. 2016; 14(7) :28-38.
18. Dajani R. How women scientists fare in the Arab world. Nature. 2012; 491(7422):9.
19. Rezaeian M. How a medical school could establish a tie with local high school pupils: some practical approaches reporting from Rafsanjan Medical School. Middle East J Business. 2013; 8(1) :59-61.
20 Rezaeian M. Pocock L. Social accountability - a challenge for global medical schools. World Family Med J. 2011; 9 :15-19.
21. Rezaeian M. A review on the diverse types of research misconduct. Middle East J Family Med. 2014; 12(7) :43-44.