



the Hollings Center
for international dialogue

INDEPENDENT UNIVERSITIES IN THE MUSLIM WORLD: A NEW APPROACH, PART I

CONFERENCE REPORT

Organized by the Hollings Center for International Dialogue
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

From December 9-11, 2005, the Hollings Center convened a conference in Istanbul to explore a significant trend in higher education in many predominantly Muslim countries: the emergence of independent, or private, universities where for many decades education has been under central government control. The meeting brought together 20 presidents, senior administrators and faculty from private universities and colleges in Indonesia, Jordan, Lebanon, Malaysia, Morocco, Pakistan, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the United States. Nearly all the non-American participants represented institutions with curricula patterned after American models; several institutions use English as their language of instruction. Participants discussed the appeal of private universities to students and parents; the curricula and governance of these universities; and their role in globalization, economic development and civic awareness. The impact of American-style education on independent universities and opportunities for partnership and exchange between private American universities and colleges and their counterparts in Muslim-majority countries were also central topics of discussion.

INTRODUCTION

From December 9-11, 2005, the Hollings Center convened a conference in Istanbul, Turkey, entitled “Independent Universities in the Muslim World: A New Approach.” Bringing together some 20 senior university administrators from Indonesia, Jordan, Lebanon, Malaysia, Morocco, Pakistan, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the United States, the conference marked the first gathering of its kind.

The selection of the conference topic emerged from a consideration of recent socio-cultural developments in Muslim-majority countries. Many of these societies face significant population growth, and a resulting demand for educational and employment opportunities from their youth. In these countries, education has been a monopoly of the government for most of the twentieth century. But state university systems are overburdened and under-funded and not always successful in preparing students for employment in a globalizing economy. These shortcomings have stimulated a growing demand for quality higher education. As a result, private universities have begun to proliferate in many countries. Notably, many of these universities acknowledge the influence of American higher education both on their development and their aspirations. At a time of considerable difficulty in relations between the United States and many Muslim-majority countries, a dialogue focused on independent universities may offer an opportunity for positive engagement and cooperation. In that spirit, the Hollings Center convened the conference. This report provides a synopsis of the conference proceedings.¹

SUMMARY OF PROCEEDINGS

Challenges Associated with Higher Education in Muslim-Majority Countries

The conditions of higher education in the Muslim-majority countries represented at the conference are far from uniform, but several common themes became apparent during the discussions. In most of these countries, state universities constitute the majority of institutions in the higher education system. Yet, as participants from different countries explained, higher education is not a funding priority for national governments, and the funds allocated are not always spent wisely. Repeatedly, participants described dilapidated physical plants, underpaid faculty, and antiquated curricula—conditions that had become widely known by high school students aspiring to attend college.

Funding shortfalls were described as something more than a simple matter of inadequate resources. They also reflect the state’s determination to keep universities on a short leash. Within autocratic societies, university independence is often something to be prevented, not nourished. With a decided preference for centralized decision-making, governments often use tight budgets as a means of asserting bureaucratic control over university administrators. This intent is reflected in many state university charters, which were written to emphasize the subservience of universities to education ministries or other government agencies. Although

¹ This report was prepared by Clifford Chanin, consultant to the Hollings Center and organizer of the conference.

governments pay lip service to the needs of higher education, state universities are sharply constrained by budgetary and legal limits.

None of these obvious problems, however, has diminished the growing demand for a university education. Quite the opposite is true: all of the countries represented at the conference have experienced a dramatic expansion in the number of college-age students. In Turkey, for example, 300,000 places are available annually for incoming university students. Yet the annual demand for university placement—determined by the results of a national exam—was several times this number. Of these available spots, some 20,000 are considered competitive by international standards. As a result, many of Turkey's best students—some 40,000 young people—are currently studying abroad, roughly half of whom are based in the United States. Likewise, in Pakistan, one report cited at the conference found that by 1997 some \$300 million had been spent on educating Pakistani students at foreign universities.

Given the scarcity of quality placement, opportunities to study abroad are sought most avidly by two groups: 1) top academic performers and 2) wealthy students. In both cases, the advantage of foreign study—and with it, the mastery of a foreign language—has become obvious to students and parents. Increasingly, they are willing to pay for it.

The Emergence of Independent Universities

Does a student have to go abroad to get a foreign education? One may seek to obtain the experience of living abroad and to imbibe the fullness of a foreign culture. Yet the proliferation of private or independent universities in Muslim countries (and in the developing world at large) indicates that certain elements of a foreign education can be re-packaged in domestic universities in ways that combine the challenge of new experience and many advantages of education abroad with the comforts of home.

In discussing the emergence of private universities, conference participants highlighted several key factors.

- First is the decline of the public university system, as described above. While public universities remain the first reference for higher education in most countries, growing disenchantment has created a demand for a new and better encounter with higher education.
- The creation of independent universities reflects the somewhat expanded opportunities for private initiative within many Muslim-majority countries. While independent universities generally must win the approval of state authorities, they have a greater margin of maneuver than their public counterparts. In part, state authorities welcome new initiatives that will relieve some of the stress on the public system. Additionally, educational planners are beginning to recognize the benefits of a different approach to higher education. The training of national elites remains a concern, and independent universities may help to reduce the 'brain-drain'—the ongoing consequence of so many students studying abroad.

- As a result, entrepreneurs or independent associations have emerged to fill a market niche: students able to pay for university studies that provide value comparable to a foreign education, but at significantly lower cost.
- To define their market niche, independent universities consciously position themselves as preparing students for participation in the global world professionally, culturally and intellectually. Thus, their education may include many of the following elements: incorporation of new technologies, English-language instruction, or liberal arts or critical-thinking based curricula. In practice, there are sometimes tensions between a vocational/professional training approach and the liberal arts/critical-thinking approach to education.
- The category of “private” or “independent” universities refers to higher educational institutions created outside of official state systems. Such universities may be run on a for-profit or not-for-profit basis; they may be created by business groups, religious or civic associations or even governmental initiatives, though with protected independent status. They differ widely among themselves in legal status, mission, approach and quality.
- The image of American higher education looms large over many of the initiatives to create private or independent universities. American universities are widely considered the gold standard of global higher education. Seen from abroad, they manage to combine critical thinking, professional training, and instruction in English, the language of global exchange. Even acknowledging its problems, American higher education is, in critical ways, becoming a model for many of the independent university initiatives emerging in Muslim-majority countries.
- These impressions of American higher education are drawn from the experience of prominent educators in many Muslim countries, many of whom were educated at American universities and have risen to leadership positions in governmental or business institutions in their home countries. They are thus well positioned to pursue new educational initiatives.

The Substance of Education

In developing independent universities, educators draw from many sources. The pursuit of quality education raises important questions about local and foreign attitudes toward learning.

What is quality education? Among the participants, there was widespread agreement that critical thinking and whole student development were essential elements of a quality education. While these elements might be realized in different ways, they reflect an approach that encourages intensive and challenging classroom interactions between students and faculty, as well as a campus life that allows students room for socializing, community involvement, and developing special interests. However, this model challenges traditional educational paradigms, and has to be explained fully to students and parents as central to the independent university’s mission.

Several participants were concerned that this approach to quality education—which requires both time and resources—could not fit easily into many of the societies where it was being introduced. Students face economic pressures, and the decision to pay tuition at an independent university entails sacrifice. As a result, they want to see their decision pay off quickly in professional training and job opportunities upon graduation.

This practical urgency, however, could not easily fit a learning approach that requires an extended commitment of time. Parents in particular, it was argued, need to understand that quality education is not intended to prepare students for their first jobs, but for an economy in which students would frequently be faced with the challenge of new jobs over the course of their careers. Ideally, their education would prepare students for their best jobs for the rest of their lives. This is not always an easy sell, but it was important for the development of independent universities that they be able to adjust parents' and students' expectations of the university. If expectations are not adjusted, a number of participants argued, the growth of independent universities might further enlarge the gap between the haves and the have-nots, between those who could focus on the value of learning—rather than on job preparation—and those who could not.

In Europe, the Bologna Process is underscoring the tensions within university systems. (The Bologna Process is an initiative to streamline the higher education system in the European Union. To achieve compatibility and transferability among European universities, it would reduce the time to obtain the equivalent of a Bachelor's degree to three years. Countries outside of Europe are interested in adopting these reforms so that their universities will be compatible with the European system). It is not clear how this compression of the time-to-degree would affect student-centered educational approaches.

Independent universities are under constant pressure to demonstrate the value of what they offer. In Morocco, the Foreign Ministry had been so pleased with the performance of the independent university graduates they had hired that the Ministry has created a Royal Academy of Diplomacy at Al-Akhwayn, a leading independent university.

How is quality education delivered? All universities, it seems, face the problem of determining whether or not they are delivering on the quality education they promise. Where possible, external review by accrediting agencies or professional associations can provide a useful assessment of a university's progress. In other cases, an internal effort to evaluate curriculum and faculty policies may provide some insight. Overall, it seems important to have ongoing interactions with professional colleagues—not to follow their advice blindly, but to adapt their methods or standards to a university's particular needs. The effort to translate these standards into local terms is an opportunity for institutional self-definition.

The development of faculty is also essential. Are faculty teaching and student learning mutually comprehensible? Are faculty encouraged to do research and publication, to keep in touch with the leading edge of scholarship in their fields? How are standards for teaching and work ethic inculcated in faculty? Is there a proper mix of faculty with local and international degrees? Or

are faculty members educated abroad to be given preference in hiring? New private universities must consider all these questions.

Institutional autonomy remains an important concern for independent universities. The struggle to remain distinct from the state system was a paramount concern for many conference participants. For some, there is assurance in the fact that private universities are now proliferating, and that the state is aware that it can not fully meet the demands of its college-age population. Additionally, some participants argued, economic pressures are forcing education ministries to adapt to global trends in education, which the best of the independent universities are already engaging. For other participants, independent universities are still threatened by educational systems that will not tolerate autonomy and flexibility. In this view, control remains the paramount concern of state agencies.

The issue of educational policy raised questions of political and cultural openness within the societies represented at the conference. At various points in the discussion, participants spoke of an educational approach that would produce “change agents” or an “avant garde” within their countries, and generate “critical thinkers” whose impact on their societies would be “subversive.” By this, they did not mean to create a generation of political revolutionaries, but rather young people who could challenge the social constraints that had kept their countries at a distance from the global economy. At the same time, participants recognized that an educational approach that sought to challenge the status quo would not fit easily into their traditional societies. This tension will not disappear any time soon.

Independence and Tradition

In speaking of “the Muslim world,” one must take care to avoid giving the impression that this is a homogenous community, a single entity with a common approach to questions of practice, identity and the proper place of religion in the public sphere. While there can be no doubt that an upsurge of religious sentiment is a factor in the life of Muslim-majority societies, how they each balance the particular and the universal differs greatly. Neither are their answers to these questions set in stone; the dynamism of “the Muslim world” is such that change is a constant, as is an ongoing engagement—sometimes quite charged—with the global community, in particular with the United States.

Conference participants reflected this diversity, both in their views and in the institutional approaches they took to establishing independent universities. Spanning countries as different as Saudi Arabia and Turkey, and including representatives of private Christian universities (which admit students on a non-sectarian basis), the conference engaged broad social and cultural issues which helped shape the environment in which educational institutions functioned.

Repeatedly, participants sought to link university development to the social and religious framework of their societies. Many universities face the problem of recruiting students from traditional backgrounds, and then educating them in ways that might lead them to raise questions about their traditions. For one participant, Islam sets the parameters for the learning and questioning that go on within the university. This was not seen as a constraint, but rather as another proof of Islam’s adaptability to the conditions of modern life. For another participant,

the very question of harmonizing faith and education puts too much emphasis on religion. In this view, education requires an intellectual process that sets the terms of its own inquiry; anything else reflects an over-attachment to religion that is holding back many Muslim societies.

In practical terms, independent universities—particularly with their emphasis on student-centered education—are dealing with the maturation of young adults from traditional backgrounds. Often, these students are facing for the first time issues of money, time management, independence, and sexuality. Some of the schools emphasize traditional campus environments—including, in some cases, gender-segregated dormitories—in order to reassure parents that conservative social mores would be respected. For some parents, this more conservative social atmosphere gives independent universities an advantage over study abroad. Even if independent universities push some limits, they are nonetheless set in a traditional culture. Overall, participants agreed that students are increasingly observant, and that this was shaping campus life.

American Influence

The growth of independent universities in the Muslim world—and their frequent references to American higher education—comes at a time of considerable tension in relations between the United States and many Muslim countries. Yet political disagreements have not obscured the appeal of American-style education. Originally, the American Universities of Beirut and Cairo—founded by Christian missionaries in 1863 and 1919, respectively—established themselves as centers of excellence in the Arab world. In recent years, a number of local efforts have led to the founding of a new group of independent American universities, though unrelated to the original institutions. They include the American University of Kuwait, the American University of Sharjah, the Arab-American University of Jenin, and others. These institutions use English as the language of instruction and curricula patterned after American models. The American “branding” occurred despite the spread of anti-American sentiment across the Middle East. In explaining this interesting development, several factors were mentioned:

- The United States is seen as the dominant force driving globalization. While globalization is not accepted as uniformly positive, it is widely recognized as setting the conditions for economic and social success.
- American higher education, particularly the emphasis on critical thinking, is seen as essential to reaping the benefits of globalization. The flexibility and adaptability of American higher education are greatly valued.
- A number of participants asserted that their societies are capable of distinguishing between the things they liked and didn't like about the United States. In this, they sought to portray anti-American feelings as reflecting reactions to specific American policies, and not necessarily enduring. It was emphasized that those with direct experience with the United States and exposure to American education were best equipped to make these important distinctions.

- Universities taking on the “American” name in their title are expressing admiration for the American system of higher education, and are willing to make this statement in spite of differences with important elements of American foreign policy. Another participant put the point more sharply: “American universities are not simply the biggest public relations asset you have, they are your only asset.”
- Mastery of the English language remains a key to success in global dealings.
- The influence of American-educated leaders in many Arab and Muslim societies provided strong links to the United States. In this sense, alumni loyalty was serving the entire American higher-education sector.
- Even where the links to American universities were not explicit, the philosophy of American higher education is spreading widely.

At the same time, conference participants highlighted some potential challenges for American educational models:

- Australian, British and Canadian universities are moving aggressively to establish a presence in many Muslim countries, building collaborative programs, and drawing students away from the United States. They can all offer English-language instruction, as well as an approach that is not unlike American-style education, combining many of its prestigious and appealing elements without the potential “baggage” of the American affiliation.
- The challenge of obtaining a U.S. visa makes Muslim or Arab students increasingly likely to seek relationships with other university systems abroad.
- While American education emphasizes flexibility, American universities have been relatively inflexible in developing relationships with foreign universities, including those in the Muslim world.
- More work remains to be done on developing hybrid educational models. In the words of one participant: “We need to better understand how to integrate the American approach while keeping our own structures intact.”
- American university education is very expensive. Over time, this may limit its influence internationally.
- In particular, issues of governance—such as the role of the university president the development of a board of trustees—were not well understood.

Next Steps: Continuing the Dialogue

One participant commented that prior to the conference, the non-American participants had been apprehensive that they were being invited to hear what the United States thought about how they should conduct their business, and that therefore it was a most pleasant surprise to participate in genuine dialogue that led to such productive results. Echoing these remarks, participants endorsed the idea of higher education as a key element of a positive United States-Muslim world dialogue with practical outcomes. As one participant noted, “This reservoir of goodwill for the United States should be a starting point.”

The Hollings Center could serve as a central node for an ongoing conversation between independent universities in the United States and in predominantly Muslim countries that would lead to practical outcomes. The Center could support the exchange of preliminary ideas and convene meetings on specific themes. Suggested topics include:

- Development of senior administrators;
- Faculty-faculty exchanges;
- Developing a model of cross-cultural university assessment teams;
- Definition of a research agenda focused on development of Muslim-world universities;
- Identification of possible partnerships for managing short-term student exchange;
- Drafting of common statements on the importance of the issue in relations between the United States and the Muslim world;
- Briefings for relevant officials in concerned countries; and
- Re-direction of American assistance funds toward private university development.

ABOUT THE HOLLINGS CENTER FOR INTERNATIONAL DIALOGUE

The Hollings Center promotes dialogue between the United States and predominantly Muslim countries, opens channels of communication, deepens understanding, expands people-to-people contacts, and generates new thinking on important international issues. The Center was established as an NGO through legislation enacted in 2004 and 2005 by the U.S. Congress, particularly through the efforts of Senator Ernest F. Hollings (ret.); its official name is the International Center for Middle Eastern-Western Dialogue. The Center convenes conferences, typically in Istanbul, on a wide range of contemporary issues involving opinion leaders and experts in a variety of fields, and provides small grants and fellowships to selected program participants for collaborative projects that build on conference recommendations. For more information, please see www.hollingscenter.org.