

# Enriching Educational Products: Islamic Private Institutions of Higher Learning in Malaysia

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Islamic Private Institutions of Higher Learning (IPIHLs) are a new type of educational institution in Malaysia. Together with other institutions of higher learning, IPIHLs aim to establish Malaysia as an international hub for higher education. However, unlike other institutions of higher learning in the Malaysian educational system, IPIHLs have very definite and different philosophy, objectives and modus operandi. Based on a previous research, this article attempts to provide an overview of the philosophy, objectives, modus operandi and the current context of IPIHLs in Malaysia.<sup>1</sup>

## Defining IPIHLs

IPIHLs are administered and monitored by the Ministry of Higher Education under the same administration and regulation which oversee other private institutions of higher learning. However to date an official definition has yet to be formulated. Information gathered throughout the study reveals that IPIHLs can be differentiated from other private institutions of higher learning based on the following IPIHLs:-

- i Are owned solely or jointly by, individual Muslims, Muslim's organizations state foundations and state government subsidiaries.
- ii Have names that project some elements of Islamic image.
- iii Offer at least one course on Islam other than Islamic and Asian Civilizations (Tamadun Islam dan Tamadun Asia).
- iv Have campuses which project the educational and social environment compatible to Islamic teaching and spirit.
- v Uphold Islamic inspired philosophy and objectives.
- vi Are registered with the Private Education Department, Ministry of Education, Malaysia.

- vii Are recognized by the National Accreditation Board, Malaysia.

The above are the criteria that must be met for an institution to be identified as an IPIHL.

## IPIHLs in Context

### • The Development

Private education in this country began sometime in the 60s with vocational and technical skill courses offered to secondary school leavers who were unable to pursue further studies in public institutions. However by 1996, with the advent and the enforcement of Private Higher Educational Institution Act 1996 (Act 555), which allows private institutions of higher learning to independently offer degree programmes to the public, the number of private institutions of higher learning has been increasing drastically. The 1996 Act has affected the development of IPIHLs significantly. Prior to the Act, the number of IPIHLs in this country amounted only to eight institutions. This number has increased significantly after the stipulation of the Act. By 2001 Malaysia has 23 IPIHLs. It is believed that the number of IPIHLs is continuously increasing. Over the same period, the government has also increased the number of public institutions of higher learning. However these public institutions are still unable to accommodate the growing demand for tertiary education in this country. It has been argued that private institutions of higher learning in Malaysia is a mechanism for the private sector to capitalize on the very high demand for places in higher education in the country.

### • Objectives

The immediate objective of IPIHLs is to provide school leavers, particularly from religious schools, with choices for furthering their studies at higher levels and incidentally upgrading the standard of religious education in this country. However, as a long term goal, IPIHLs seek to

realize the Islamic concept of education and to produce highly able graduates, both in Islamic studies as well as in other professional courses. It is hoped that these graduates can contribute significantly towards spreading the message of Islam and at the same time providing the highly accomplished work force vital for sustainable development of the country.

#### • Ownership Status

IPIHLs are either fully or jointly owned by state governments, or state Islamic religious department, state foundations, private companies, political parties and individuals. From twenty three IPIHLs surveyed in the research, eleven are owned by state governments, four by private companies, four by individuals, three by political parties and one by a state religious department.

#### • Curriculum

The academic programmes that are being offered by most of the IPIHLs can be divided into three categories, namely pure Islamic Studies programme, double major programmes that are combinations of professional programmes with Islamic studies programme, and pure professional programme such as law, accounting, pure sciences, business and engineering.

The combination of courses on Islamic studies, incorporating other fields of knowledge, as offered by IPIHLs, could be considered as unconventional. However many would argue that this is an important move towards bridging the gap between Islamic studies and contemporary disciplines of knowledge and sciences. This has been advocated for so long by many Muslim thinkers and educationists, past and present. If conducted properly, programmes with such combinations could produce “encyclopedic intellects” - ‘ulama’ who are well-versed in religious doctrine and who are equally competent in fulfilling the demand of this challenging world with sound religious knowledge and has spiritual stability and strength. The double major programmes, as offered by some IPIHLs, appear to be opportune moves in meeting present-day demands as well as addressing perceived needs of the targeted school leavers. A study by IPPTN<sub>2</sub> in 2001 shows that 78.7 percent of students in Islamic religious schools prefer this type of programmes and 82.5 percent of the employers prefer to employ graduates of such programmes.

Some IPIHLs, which do not offer double major programmes, make it compulsory for their students who major in non-Islamic area of studies to take and pass a few Islamic studies subjects. Even though these students will not have sufficient training and qualification to qualify as ‘ulama’, they will have sufficient knowledge of the basic principles of Islamic teaching to guide them in their careers for the

rest of their lives.

Islamic teaching and norms are also inculcated through co-curriculum activities and is also embedded, subtly and explicitly, in the students’ social environment within the campus. These include activities such as daily congregational prayers, short religious talks, Qur’an recitations conducted every night after prayers, observing Islamic dress code and socializing mores, and similar Islamic cultural practices.

It is clear that IPIHLs have some peculiarities that may not be shared by other conventional private institutions of higher learning. In terms of the objectives, there are some specific motives that have been stipulated by IPIHLs that make them different from other private institutions of higher learning. Their paramount objective is to produce good and highly capable Muslim intellectuals and scholars (‘ulama’) who will consequently become ‘integrated’ into and competent mainstream workforce. This means that IPIHLs, from the very beginning, have been striving to realize the national educational philosophy towards preparing outstanding individuals, not only in terms of intellectual and mental capabilities, but also in terms of spiritual and emotional stability. This aim is most likely inspired by the Islamic world view on the status of human beings in this world as the servants and vicegerents of Allah.

In IPIHLs, the whole curriculum and the process of teaching and learning have been specifically designed to reflect the above philosophy. To achieve this, the students must not only be trained and taught professional subjects, but also subjects that make them understand the Islamic world view on human beings and this world at the same time seriously inculcating in them good values as enshrined in Islamic teaching. The survey conducted shows that although this objective has not been fully materialized, as it is not an easy task, particularly as the environment outside the campus is not similarly supportive, at least attempts have been made to find solutions for the acute problem of spiritual-vacuum among present-day educated workers. The IPIHLs philosophy towards education is still considered a new mode of higher learning within Malaysian education system.

Another important contribution of IPIHLs is their ability to supply places for a large number of school leavers from religious schools. The tendency among Muslim parents to enroll their children in religious oriented schools have been growing drastically, the availability of places for these school leavers for further studies in public institutions of higher learning has not grown correspondently. IPPTN’s study in 2001 shows that although students from religious oriented schools constitute more than 13.5 percent of the total STPM (Sijil Tinggi Peperiksaan Malaysia) candidates

in 1996, 1997 and 1998, only 3.7 percent obtained admissions into public institutions of higher learning. The small percentage of admissions does not mean that candidates from religious schools were not sufficiently qualified. The truth of the matter is that places for them in such institutions are very limited. Therefore, the fact that there are IPIHLs is opportune.

## Conclusion

With the economic boom in the early part of the second-half of 90s', the demand for higher education was very encouraging. The drastic increase in the number of places in higher education offered by the private sector is not inevitable but equally opportune. The establishment of IPIHLs is also in the wave of the increase in the number of private higher education institutions. At present most of those surveyed are still operating effectively. Some are facing a variety of problems, not least that of securing recognition for their programmes from Lembaga Akreditasi Negara (LAN). That may be so in some instances, however these IPIHLs together with other products of institutions of higher learning in this country, are believed to be continuously blossoming and must be strongly supported. IPIHLs have offered another product to our education system and arguably contribute significantly towards our quest in becoming an international center of excellence in education.

## (Endnotes)

This article derives from a study entitled "Islamic Private Higher Learning Institutions and the Supply of 'Integrated' Manpower" conducted under Intensification of Research in Priority Areas (IRPA). Besides the present author, other researchers involved in this study are Assoc. Professor Mohd Radzi Othman (project leader), Professor Muhammad Syukri Salleh, Professor Shukery Muhamed, Assoc. Professor Norizan Md. Nor, and Assoc. Professor Ismail Omar. It should be noted though that a substantial part of this article is based on the part of the above mentioned research report written by the present author himself.

This refers to a consultation report entitled "Kajian Kemasukan Pelajar-Pelajar Aliran Agama ke Institusi Pengajian Tinggi Awam Malaysia" prepared by National Higher Education Research Institute in 2001. This report was based on a research conducted by Professor Muhammad Syukri Salleh, Professor Dato' Abdullah Muhammad Zin, Assoc. Professor Fadhil Hj. Othman, Dr. Nailul Murad Mohd. Nor and Ku Halim Ku Ariffin.

*from page 1*

Personal qualities deemed highly important by employers are having self-confidence, being dedicated and committed as well as being responsible, reliable and trustworthy.

Ambigapathy points out that interviews with university lecturers and employers reveal that the abovementioned-sought-after skills are greatly lacking among local graduates. The fact that they do not have these skills may well have contributed to the difficulties faced by graduates in obtaining employment. The study demonstrates, in selecting applicants, employers gave more weight to soft skills and less weight to paper qualifications.

Ambigapathy believes that currently there is insufficient emphasis in the university curriculum on soft skills and that more needs to be done to help graduates become marketable and competitive.

The government's recent proposal to aid fresh graduates in finding jobs by making available special vocational training in vocational institutes and encouraging them into internship programmes are consistent with the results of the study. The study indicates that practical training is important. In fact, it reveals that graduates of foreign universities, who have worked whilst studying, have good work related knowledge. Similarly, local graduates, who have worked part time, also have the right work-related attitude.

The study highlights the role of universities in preparing graduates for employment. The findings indicate that the universities and industry must play their respective roles if graduates are to be prepared for employment. According to Ambigapathy, "It is the duty of the universities to generate general knowledge and knowledge related to the field of specialization, but it is the duty of the industry to provide practical training. This is because requirements for new skills are constantly and rapidly changing. The onus therefore lies with the industry to ensure that their employees are equipped with the required skills. The universities should not be seen like a supermarket churning out products as demanded."

While the public in general have vehemently accused the universities for producing 'learned' local graduates who lack the necessary soft skills for employment, it is clear from Ambigapathy's thoughts and his team's curriculum study that the role of preparing graduates for employment does not and should not rest solely on the universities. The problem of graduate unemployment is multifaceted and addressing it objectively and successfully requires the active involvement of various "interested" agencies. Perhaps only through mutual understanding and, concerted and appropriate positive approaches by the different agencies, that the central issue of local graduates' inability to obtain employment in the present economic climate could be successfully addressed and consequently resolved.