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Revisiting the Core and Cover of Quality in Higher Education

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Abstract

Member states of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) have committed themselves to promote a program of action to improve and reform their educational institutions and curricula on the basis of the "OIC Vision 1441". As part of this commitment, a process has been initiated to review current international university ranking systems and to create a specific mechanism for ranking universities of the OIC countries. In this study, we explore the criteria that emerged as an outcome of this process and have been adopted for the purpose of ranking OIC universities. We raise the challenge that, although the idea of an OIC-specific ranking mechanism is a potentially valuable initiation for the Islamic countries to converge and cooperate, the whole endeavor tends to deal only with rudimentary issues in science, education, and research. The core conceptions, taken for granted and almost left untreated, continue to exist under the disguise of the newly fabricated criteria. For each one of the five major sets of criteria (Research, Education, International out-look, Facilities, and Socio-economic impact) we discuss why we believe they deal with the 'cover' rather than the 'core' of quality in higher education and research. We further discuss that truly alternative practices in the context of specific socio-cultural values, require revisiting underlying and taken for granted understandings of science, research, and technology. To walk our own way and to challenge the dominant mainstream global forces, we need a fundamentally alternative view of the quality and value of knowledge and basically of the value of the human being.

Keywords: Higher Education Quality, University Ranking, OIC Universities.

Introduction

Recently, a science and technology news item was reported by the Iranian student News Agency ISNA about the graduation of the first doctoral candidate of Flight Dynamics and Control in a leading Iranian university. His thesis project was reported to be designing software for controlling the return of spaceships into the atmosphere. The justification for this project was apparently based on the criticality of the atmosphere

entrance phase due to high energy and speed and high aerodynamic load. According to the researcher, this complex research problem now studied by scientists all over the world, could serve the purpose of preventing disasters like the explosion of the American space shuttle Columbia (ISNA, 2007). Findings of this project were reported to have been published in several international ISI journals (IRNA, 2007).

The story of this news item, the announced research problem, findings, and resulting publications of the project will appear throughout this study. Several aspects of the project, including issues of education, research, and journal publication are referred to in the challenges that we raise about the criteria, procedures and mechanisms that have recently been adopted by the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) for the purpose of ranking universities of the Islamic countries.

Background

Following the third extraordinary OIC summit in Saudi Arabia (December 2005) and in line with the "OIC Vision 1441" on science and technology, OIC member states initiated a "Ten-Year Program of Action". In the domain of higher education, science and technology the vision reflected in this program involves a commitment to reform and improve educational institutions and curricula in Islamic countries with the aim of promoting creativity, innovation, and research (OIC Report, 2007).

To fulfill part of the requirements for this commitment, as a first step a number of preliminary actions were identified in a coordination meeting among OIC organizations and specialized affiliated institutions in March 2006. Following this early meeting and alongside the third meeting of OIC Ministers of Higher Education and Science and Technology in Kuwait (November 2006), in an informal gathering of the ministers, it was decided that the currently available university ranking systems be reviewed and adapted for application in the OIC countries.

A meeting of technical experts was held in Tehran (February 2007) with the announced objectives of reviewing current university ranking criteria and proposing improvements to them with the aim of constructing a new mechanism for ranking OIC universities (OIC Report, 2007; TEM Report, 2007). Ironically, however, the meeting was also meant to propose procedures for pushing twenty selected OIC universities into the list of the so called top 500 universities of the world (OIC Report, 2007). The meeting proposed five sets of criteria to be applied for ranking universities of the OIC countries.

As a final step, the general secretariat of the OIC convened the "Seminar of the OIC Member States on University Ranking" in Tehran (April 2007) with the support of the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Islamic Development Bank (IDB), and the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural

Organization (ISESCO). The seminar led to a final document containing proposed criteria, procedures and mechanisms to be applied for ranking of OIC universities by the member states (OIC Report, 2007). The document is available on the official OIC website as the "Report on adopted Criteria, Procedures and Mechanisms for Ranking of Universities". The following table, adapted from this report (p.9), illustrates the adopted criteria and indicators.

Table 1

The Adopted Criteria and Indicators for the Ranking of OIC Universities (Adapted from OIC Report, 2007)

Criterion	Indicator
Research	Research quality
	Research performance
	Research volume
	Rate of growth for research quality
	Rate of growth for research performance
	Patents
Education	Faculty members with awards
	Faculty highly cited researchers
	Ratio of faculty members with Ph.D. to total number of faculty
	Alumni that did win awards
	Alumni that become highly cited researchers
	Ratio of faculty to students
	Ratio of post graduate students to total number of students
	Rate of growth of post graduate students
	Students winning international Olympiads
International Outlook	Ratio of international faculty to total faculty
	Ratio of international students to total students
	Ratio of faculty members with foreign Ph.D. degrees to total number of faculty members with Ph.D. degrees
	International conferences organized
	International exchange programs
Facilities	Number of book titles per student
	Number of journals/periodicals accessible
	Number of university research Institutes
Socio-economic Impact	Contracts and consultancies
	Life learning courses
	Entrepreneurship programs and industrial linkages
	Number of incubated projects and spin-off companies

The apparent logic behind the OIC university ranking initiation seems to be based on criticisms raised against the worldwide ranking systems (Toure, 2007) and an attempt to create a specific ranking mechanism for the specific socio-cultural and political context of the Islamic countries, as communities that value knowledge. In the final document of ranking criteria, procedures and mechanisms, it is stated that: "The quest for knowledge is a pillar of the Islamic Faith... This is the time that we as Muslim Ummah should accord more attention to the promotion of quality higher education in our societies" (OIC Report, 2007, p. 2). Moreover, the ranking initiation is also meant to be a means of creating unity and cooperation among Islamic scholars and constructing interactions among Islamic countries (Toure, 2007).

We would, therefore, find it admirable that the OIC university ranking experience is attempting to bring Muslim countries together to walk "their own" way rather than being part of what "others" have fabricated. We also do view this experience as an initiation that can be a move towards an alliance of communities and nations that are purposefully marginalized and sabotaged in many ways by the dominant so called global and globalizing forces. However, in spite of the enthusiasm that we feel about this experience and initiation, we would treat it only as an "experience and initiation"; potentially promising to be fruitful but ironically tricky and hazardous. The details of the application of the final adopted ranking criteria seem to be seriously questionable. Taken for granted assumptions seem to be the main pitfall that may distract this apparently alternative initiation and force it to focus only on the "cover" of issues of quality in higher education, research, science and technology, rather than the underlying "core" conceptions. This is the main challenge that we elaborate on in our Study.

The Core and the Cover Discussion

The idea of an OIC-specific university ranking system seems to have emerged from the problems that were believed to exist in the global ranking systems. A special community of nations like the OIC needs to avoid these pitfalls through creating their own mechanisms. Nonetheless, the OIC set of criteria tend to only scratch on the surface of the ranking issue and the proposed university ranking is fundamentally trapped within the global mainstream trend of university ranking procedures. The core conceptions, taken for granted and almost left untreated, continue to exist under the newly fabricated and friendly looking disguise.

Specifically, we focus on the five major criteria that emerged as the outcome of the April 2007 "Seminar of the OIC Member States on University Ranking" in Tehran to raise the challenge that such alternative practices need to question the core of the understandings that construct the very basis of dominant global perspectives rather than to merely deal with the cover. For each one of the five major sets of criteria for ranking

OIC universities we will discuss why we believe they deal merely with the cover and we pose a number of questions that need to be addressed if the core of quality concerns in higher education and research is to be dealt with.

Before discussing the detailed criteria, a general challenge may be raised about an apparent contradiction in the overall stated purpose of the whole OIC ranking initiation. The major goal among the multiple purposes of the whole movement, as reflected in the theme of the final seminar in Tehran, appeared to be *repositioning the OIC universities in the global ranking* (OIC Report, 2007; Toure, 2007). It was proposed that twenty OIC universities be selected and injected with financial support to enter the list of the so called best globally ranked universities. Questions that may be raised with regard to this overall objective include: Who decided about the *position* that is being planned to be changed? What are the criteria that have been used for *positioning* universities into their current positions? Would it not mean to basically accept the global ranking system when *repositioning* is set to be the goal? Would it not mean to take for granted the underlying criteria of the so called global rankings?

Research

The first set of the newly adopted criteria refers to Research, with the following six subcategories: Research quality; Research performance; Research volume; Rate of growth for research quality; Rate of growth for research performance; and Patents. A look at the detailed procedures of the calculation of ranking indicators shows that these criteria are regrettably simplistic copies of the so called *international standards* that are taken for granted and adopted as given indicators. It is reported in the OIC document (p. 10) that: "According to the international standards, only the journals classified by the Institute for Scientific Information (ISI) and covered by the Science Citation Index (SCI) and the Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI), should be used both for counting publications and citations".

If we are to simply adopt the so called international standards and, for example, obediently accept that "it is internationally admitted that the quality of a given published article can be measured by the number of citations it receives" (OIC Report 2007, p.11), then what is the logic of initiating a separate ranking system? What is the local, alternative, and specific dimension of this apparently alternative attempt, ironically based on *the international standard*?

Referring back to our introductory story we seriously question this view of what research means. As noted in the report of the shuttle return software news item, that particular research has been reported in some ISI journals. The challenge that may arise here is about the extent to which this research reflects real concerns of the context in which it is carried out and the extent to which it is aimed at improving the social life of

the community in which it is conducted. Where such a research problem emerges from is a serious concern that needs real consideration. The forces that lead to exploring such a research issue need to be critically explored. Of course this type of research might be a source of learning that can be put back into the context of local concerns, but the question is whether this actually happens or the research is merely viewed as enshrined and prestigious but out of touch scientific enterprise. As far as the shuttle return software researcher's own account of the story is concerned, the importance of the whole endeavor does not seem to go beyond the publication of the results in international ISI journals.

Real research, however, needs to be arised from the *pain* of the community in which it is carried out, rather than from the distracting forces of the taste of the so called international journal editors (Ghahremani, Ghajar, Mirhosseini & Fattahi, 2008). Of course, one might arguably ask what would happen to *frontiers of knowledge* with this kind of defying view, but we do believe that frontiers of knowledge are flexible and vast enough to be capable of more expansion and discoveries if we continue research triggered by our own pains and in our own context of life.

The questions that could address the core perspective of research quality underlying the global university ranking systems and could shape a fundamentally alternative set of criteria for evaluating research may include: Where do the research questions come from? What previous knowledge are they based upon? Who is supposed to endorse them? Who decides on the procedures and methodology of research? Who issues the patents? What are the problems that may be solved by research? Whose problems are they?

Education

The second major set of criteria addresses different aspects of the quality of education in universities such as faculty members with awards; faculty highly cited researchers; ratio of faculty members with Ph.D. to total number of faculty; alumni that did win awards; alumni that become highly cited researchers; ratio of faculty to students; ratio of post graduate students to total number of students; rate of growth of post graduate students; and students winning international Olympiads.

Although education could be viewed as one of the fundamental functions of universities, the proposed criteria need to be seriously doubted as criteria that are to assess the quality of education in ways other than the dominant world trends. Cultivating challenging learning experiences rooted in the culture of the specific communities where educational institutions are placed may be the major goal of educational endeavors. However the criteria under discussion simply rely on awards, highly cited publications, Ph.D. degrees, and quantitative ratios, and therefore tend to be

only scratching the surface cover of the dominant so called international ranking mechanisms.

Rather than dealing with the rudimentary concepts reflected in these criteria, the supposedly alternative OIC criteria could question the core of the globally dominant educational quality assessment procedures: What are the values that shape the basis of *awards*? What kind of writings tend to be cited more? Who cites them and why? What are the values and criteria in which the so called international Olympiads are based? To what extent does the number of faculty members reflect the quality of true challenging experiences that are founded on and may contribute to local challenges?

The story of the shuttle return software study may again be viewed from an educational point of view. The question that may be raised in this regard is about the type of educational experience that led to such a research problem. If rooted in the social context of the local concerns of the non-mainstream communities, educational practices can create learning experiences that construct an awareness of the needs and pains of the home society. Such practices would hardly direct students and researchers towards academic endeavors that are basically imported from other contexts and tend to serve the immediate purposes of those contexts.

Learning experiences and the abstract scientific gains of such research practices may have the potential to be later applied for the purpose of dealing with local problems. Nonetheless, it can hardly be argued that such advanced technical knowledge can not be gained if we start with problems of our own. Truly valuable learning experiences that are based on our own decisions rather than detached from our concerns and just pursued as prestigious frontiers of knowledge are the core goals that need to be pursued by higher education and need to shape the major educational quality criteria (Alvares, 2004).

International outlook

The third set of criteria is perhaps the most questionable among the adopted OIC university ranking criteria with many taken for granted concepts. The subcategories of this major criterion include: ratio of international faculty to total faculty; ratio of international students to total students; ratio of faculty members with foreign Ph.D. degrees to total number of faculty members with Ph.D. degrees; international conferences organized; and, international exchange programs.

Basically, one may ask what does the word *international* mean and why has *international outlook* been considered to be evidence of quality. Therefore, it appears that almost all the five subcategories of this set of criteria are taken for granted but we focus on a small aspect of these criteria to clarify our point. The ratio of faculty members with *foreign* degrees to the total number of faculty members is to be counted

as a factor contributing to a higher place of universities in the ranking system. Not unexpectedly, then, universities find no encouragement to rely on their own education and people graduated from their own educational institutions. They are even encouraged to employ people who studied in other social contexts and perhaps are also naturally more inclined towards those *foreign* values. It is to be strongly doubted that this is a contribution to unity among the OIC member states and we do believe that, though in a different cover, the core of such criteria basically serves the purpose of dominant international trends.

Facilities and socio-economic impact

The final two sets of criteria, concerned with Facilities and Socio-economic impact, include: Number of book titles per student; Number of journals/periodicals accessible; Number of university research institutes; Contracts and consultancies; Life learning courses; Entrepreneurship programs and industrial linkages; and Number of incubated projects and spin-off companies.

Regarding these two sets of criteria we just raise a number of concerns that we believe address the core rather than the cover of these criteria. Rather than treating *books, journals, and research centers* as obvious concepts and simplistically relying on their quantity, a locally based and culturally specified approach would need to ask what is meant by these conceptions: What are the books and journals archived in university libraries? What are they about and why are these topics selected to shape the resources of the universities? Who are the writers and publishers? What are their views of knowledge and research and what problems are they concerned with? What are their underlying socio-cultural values?

Reflections and Conclusion

The news item referred to in our introduction to this brief note is in our view, an outcome of the type of perspective that lies behind the criteria provided for the ranking of the universities in the OIC member states. The core of the educational and research practices in universities tends to reinforce and reproduce the dominant global academic trend. Therefore, the outcome of such practices, exemplified by our exaggerated account of the shuttle return software research, tends to have a number of characteristic features such as researchers, places, and resources (that is, the cover) belong to a specific local context; educational processes tend to highlight issues that are apparently cutting edge scientific areas; research tends to focus on problems that are seemingly advanced, sophisticated, and prestigious; research problems and results are very appreciated in the so called international venues, including international journals; and the research findings are almost irrelevant to the particular context in which they are carried out.

A counter argument on many of the concerns that we raised here might be the claim of neutrality and universality of science. It may be argued that these criteria refer to the scientific aspects of the function of universities and socio-cultural considerations and local values would not be relevant, especially in a time marked as the *globalization* era. However, we would basically not view this as a viable justification.

The story of neutrality and universality of science that has long been employed as a strong imperialistic conception and exploited to domesticate diverse communities into *globalized* false sameness, is to be critically challenged as perhaps the most crucial taken for granted belief behind all these criteria. This is to be accounted for not only in the case of social sciences and humanities but also for the so called hard sciences, as well.

A very simple reason for the value laden nature of knowledge and educational practices of universities is the very endeavor of constructing an alternative OIC specific ranking mechanism. If the science, technology and research are universal and independent of local values and diversities, what is the logic of initiating a new ranking mechanism among a specific community of nations? This very attempt is clearly indicating that science and research are believed to be shaped by socio-cultural concerns and values. Otherwise it would not be meaningful to start alternative ranking practices and the global systems based on the so called international standards would suffice. Our overall concern in this article has been focused on the point that despite this felt concern by the Islamic countries, the actual creation of an alternative approach seems to have been trapped by the taken for granted assumptions.

Alternative initiations, like the OIC ranking experience, that are aimed at developing collaborations independent of the dominant globalizing forces, therefore, need to direct their attention to the core of the mainstream trends in science, research, and technology. Questions that may address the core of the mainstream global trends and may possibly create meaningful and a truly different type of practice reflecting a different type of world view need to be originated from the depth of the values in diverse communities. Presenting operational procedures for the type of alternative endeavors based on the core questions that we raised is beyond the space available here. However, we briefly mention a truly alternative view of the quality and value of knowledge and basically of the value of human being that could act as an example of dealing with the core of alternative initiations.

Munir Fasheh, a Christian Palestinian researcher involved in exploring aspects of learning in diverse communities, finds one of the most important discoveries of his life in a statement by Imam Ali: *قيمة كل امرئ ما يحسنه* (Every body's value refers to what he/she does perfectly). He believes that one should not rely on predefined meanings by authority, institutions, or professionals. This very statement could be the basis of

understanding the worth of people and practices on the basis of their lives and relations among them. In his own words,

According to it, the worth of a person is what she/he *yuhsen*. *Yuhsen*, in Arabic, has several meanings [...]:

- The first meaning refers to how well the person does what s/he does, which requires knowledge, skills, and tremendous mental discipline (*itqaan*);
- The second refers to how beautiful and pleasing what one does to the senses – the aesthetic dimension, which requires a high degree of sensitivity;
- The third meaning refers to goodness, in the sense of refusing to harm self, others, or nature, which requires tremendous self-discipline and high ethical standards;
- The fourth refers to what one gives of oneself, and not what one delivers as ready made from others, which requires valuing one's experience;
- The fifth meaning refers to how respectful (of people and ideas) the person is in discussions and interactions with others, which requires both humility and dignity (Fasheh, 2006).

To live this truly unique understanding of the worth of people is a challenging enough issue that is far more difficult than developing a mechanism for ranking institutions like universities. The wealth of light and insight in this perspective, nonetheless, may be an invaluable resource for facing the challenge of *defining and deciding* or *being defined and decided about*; a question that is perhaps our biggest challenge in revisiting taken for granted understandings of the quality and value of education, research and knowledge, and basically of the value of the human being.

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