
AREAS OF ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE FOR THE FILIPINO MUSLIMS

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The Filipino Muslims waged centuries of warfare against foreign colonizers in order to practice their religion and preserve their cultural heritage and fought decades of secessionist armed confrontation against their government to enable them to have a greater role in the affairs of the government that affected them. Their efforts bore fruit when the 1986 Constitution mandated that the Philippine Congress shall pass an organic law granting an autonomy to the Muslims within one year after its opening session. President Aquino signed into law in March 1988 a bill passed by the Philippine Senate creating the Regional Consultative Commission. The President launched on March 27, 1988 the Regional Consultative Commission in Cotabato City. The launching of the Commission was a big step towards the Muslims quest for self-governance.

The autonomy will rapidly change the social landscapes of the Muslim areas which will bring about arduous challenges and formidable problems. The Muslim can respond well to the challenges and cope with the problems by assessing the resources and programs of the government available to them and planning on how best they can be put to effective uses to meet the challenges. One such important challenge is to achieve academic excellence.

The government established Mindanao State University (MSU) in Marawi City in 1961. It was a part of the overall program to provide the Mindanao, Sulu, and Palawan region with accessible educational opportunities for all. It upgraded in the 1970's the agricultural college in Kabacan, Cotabato in Central Mindanao and the teacher's college in Zamboanga City in Western Mindanao to the University of Southern Mindanao (USM) and

Western Mindanao State University (WMSU), respectively. Mindanao State University also established six collegiate and research campuses in all four political regions in Mindanao. The MSU campuses are (a) MSU-Iligan Institute of Technology in Iligan City in Central Mindanao (b) MSU-Tawi-Tawi College of Technology and Oceanography in Bongao, Tawi-Tawi in Western Mindanao, (c) MSU-Maguindanao in Dinaig, Maguindanao in Central Mindanao, (d) MSU-Sulu Development and Technical College in Jolo, Sulu in the Sulu Archipelago, (e) MSU-General Santos Unit in General Santos, South Cotabato in Southern Mindanao, and (f) MSU-Institute of Research and Fisheries Development in Naawan, Misamis Oriental in Northern Mindanao.

In addition, the government created the Central Mindanao University in Valencia, Bukidnon in Eastern Mindanao and the University of Southern Philippines in Davao City in Southern Mindanao. There are now two universities in each of the Muslim and Christian regions. MSU has campuses in both regions. The rationale behind the creation of the universities and the external MSU campuses were: (a) the national concern of industrializing Northern Mindanao and exploiting the vast marine resources of the Sulu Archipelago, (b) a research breakthrough in aquaculture which triggered a strong interest in the discipline in the country, and (c) the need to provide the Maranaos, Maguindanaons, and Tausugs on one hand, and the Muslims and Christians on the other hand with equal number of academic institutions so that they would have equal access to higher education.

This paper discusses areas where the Muslims can attain academic excellence in higher education and identifies their thematic concerns.

AREAS OF ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE

The crucial challenge to the Muslims today is to achieve academic excellence by exploiting the distinctive characters and programs of the universities in their midst. Academic excellence is achieved when the Muslims have excelled in their fields of

specialization. Some of the potential academic areas where the Muslims have advantages in excelling over the rest of the Filipinos in addition to the Muslims' distinctive fields of competence are social change, conflict resolution, majority-minority relation, Arabic language and Islamic studies, and "Shariah," Islamic laws.

Distinctive Fields of Competence

There are vast land, water and marine resources in Central and Western Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago. There are also good programs and facilities of the universities in the Muslim areas that the Muslims could take advantage of in order to attain academic excellence. Some of the fields of specialization where the Muslims can have distinctive fields of competence are in agriculture, aquaculture, fisheries, oceanography, marine biology and engineering. Moreover, they could also pursue several disciplines that are not yet fully developed in the Philippines but they could contribute much to the welfare of the Filipinos. An example of this is oceanology which is defined as a science that deals with the study of the coastal waters and oceans.

Like any Filipino, a Muslim could pursue excellence in his distinctive field of competence.

Social Change

The social landscape of the Muslim society will soon be changed. Although rapid developmental changes are taking place in the rest of the country, the social and economic changes in the Muslim areas are slow. The rate of change will accelerate when the Muslims are granted their autonomy. Moreover, Muslim scholars on social change have accumulated a wealth of knowledge through their exposure to countries that experienced rapid societal changes. They have "firsthand" knowledge in the transformation of some Middle East countries from traditional to modern states: Iran from monarchy to an Islamic country and Pakistan from a republic to an Islamic nation, to name a few.

The experience of Muslim academicians on social changes in Southern Philippines and Muslim countries could make them outstanding scholars on social change.

Conflict Resolution

The Muslims lived and struggled for centuries against the foreign colonizers. Some of them waged about two decades of armed confrontation against their government. Others participated in numerous international and national conferences aimed at ending the conflict. They also helped implement programs designed to end the armed confrontation. They became privy to the successes, failures, shortcomings and strengths of the programs.

MSU established the Southern Philippine Center for Peace Studies, the only one of its kind in the country. The Center conducts studies, seminars and conferences on peace and order. It recommends programs and strategies to attain a lasting peace in the area. It also offers courses designed to understand the process of conflict resolution.

Their painful experience on armed confrontation and exposure to Muslim countries have rewarded the Muslim scholars with a body of knowledge on conflict. They can also use the facilities of the Center to pursue study on conflict. Conflict resolution is another area in which a Muslim could excel.

Majority-Minority Relation

The Muslims are the object of integration into the mainstream of the Filipino people since the American Occupation. The Commission on National Integration was established in 1959 to facilitate the integration of the cultural minorities, including the Muslims, into the national body politic. There were agencies created to implement programs which complemented the work of the Commission. After several decades, the integration process of the Muslims is far from over. Furthermore, some of the Muslims

have contacts with neighboring countries of Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia and Pakistan. These countries have Muslims as the majority, an opposite case to the Philippine situation.

Their first-hand knowledge (in most cases they were participants in the integration process) and contacts with countries with a Muslim majority are their enviable advantages over non-Muslim scholars in the field of majority-minority relation. If the advantages will be pursued vigorously, a Muslim could become an extraordinary scholar in the field of majority-minority relation.

Arabic Studies and Arabic Language

The Muslims have contacts with Arab countries since time immemorial. The contacts were generated by performing their annual pilgrimage to Mecca, Saudi Arabia and living in the Middle East countries either as students pursuing Islamic and Arabic studies or contract workers. Some of them are even proficient with the Arabic language and well-acquainted with Arab culture and lifestyles.

Mindanao State University has been offering Arabic and Islamic studies and Arabic language programs since the 1970's. Arab scholars are seconded to teach at Mindanao State University and other academic institutions in Southern Philippines. Moreover, the Philippine government has been implementing programs in Arabic language in the Muslim areas.

The contact and exposure of the Muslims in the Middle East countries and the programs of Mindanao State University and the government in the Muslim areas are uncommon advantages of the Muslims over non-Muslim scholars. A Muslim can exploit the advantages in order to become a renowned scholar in Arabic Studies and the Arabic language.

Shariah, Islamic Laws

There were no laws before 1972 that allowed Muslims to follow Islamic laws with respect to their personal and family relations. They are constrained to adhere to laws which are based on non-Islamic codes of moral constitution. A presidential decree created the "Shariah" Courts in the Muslim areas allowing the Muslims to be governed by the "Shariah," Islamic laws in their personal and family relations. The Supreme Court in cooperation with the universities in the Muslim areas embarked in a "Shariah" training program.

MSU established a "Shariah" Center on its campus in Marawi City. The Center conducts research, collects "Shariah" materials, translates them to English and disseminates them. It provides a forum for scholars to discuss "Shariah" jurisprudence and make recommendations on how to adapt "Shariah" to Philippine jurisprudence. It was assisted by the University Kebangsaan Malaysia. Malaysia is one of the countries in Southeast Asia that is implementing "Shariah."

"Shariah," therefore, is an area where a Muslim legal scholar could find his mark of distinction.

THEMATIC CONCERNS

The topic on academic excellence is not complete by just expounding on the areas where Muslims can excel. The discussion has to include academic programs that make excellent contributions in building the nation and Muslim communities. These programs are both inclusive and exclusive of the ones that are carrying out the traditional functions of the universities: providing quality education to students, supporting faculty members to explore the frontier of knowledge and make new discoveries, and assisting society to use the discoveries and scholarly findings for their own welfare.

It is within this context that Muslims should continually encourage, urge, and support the universities to address themselves to thematic concerns that better serve the Muslim-Christian unity and enhance the Muslim participation in nation-building. These concerns are placing the values and aspirations of the Muslims in the educational system, expanding the out-of-school youth training programs, offering ladder-type courses, matching the graduates with the manpower supply and demand, and implementing off-campus programs.

Muslim Values and Aspirations in the Educational System

The feeling of alienation of the Muslims from the social and political life of the country may be clearly understood by the glaring omissions of their values and aspirations in the commonly accepted account of history. Recasting the national history and reorganizing teaching materials to give a proportionate place for the Muslims is an initial step to redress the omission, yet by itself a necessary measure, if only to assure them of the government sincerity.

It will foster goodwill and co-operation if concrete steps be taken to (a) include in the curricula of the elementary and secondary school and universities courses devoted to Muslims: their history, language, sociology, psychology, etc., (b) restructure the curricula of "madrasah" schools to allow their graduates to pursue college education, and (c) establish an institute, apart from the university program, that will provide training for Arabic as a second language.

Out-of-School Youth Training Programs

Recent statistics suggest that half of the population of the country is below fifteen years of age and many of them are out-of-school. This is more pronounced in the Muslim areas. Being located in a rural setting, where two-thirds of the population live, the universities are well situated near the target clientele of their programs for out-of-school youth.

The universities are offering short-term training programs to help provide skills for the Muslim out-of-school youth to find gainful employment. The programs will be expanded to include leadership training to help them become leaders in their communities. The expansion of the programs will alleviate the employment problem which breeds many social ills.

Ladder-Type Courses

Due to economic constraints and inadequate college preparation, substantial numbers of students are dropping out from college within the first two years. The drop-outs among Muslims are higher than among Christians because the former have poorer preparation for college work. This gives a situation where a sizable number of dropouts cannot land jobs because they have insufficient skills to earn a living.

The universities will offer whenever possible ladder-type courses so that even if a student fails to obtain a degree, at least he has learned some skills while in college. This will enable him to take advantage of job opportunities available in the government and private sectors.

Match the Graduates with Manpower Supply and Demand

Available statistics indicate that there is a glut of professionals in certain fields while a dearth of needed manpower exists in others. Clearly, there is a need to match carefully the number of university graduates with the projected manpower needs in the different fields and vocations. It is easier to make a manpower forecast, but matching the graduates and the manpower needs is easier said than done. It is impossible to produce graduates that match the manpower requirements of the government and industries at a given period.

The universities, however, can influence the students to pursue courses whose graduates are in great demand, regionally and nationally, by redirecting their scholarship and financial aid programs to jibe with the thrusts of the government. Given

current manpower and occupational data, they will offer more scholarship and financial aid grants in agriculture, teacher training and engineering; and fewer grants in commerce and business administration.

Off-campus Education Program

The twin problems of upgrading the competence of teachers at the pre-university level and accelerating the literacy rate, both in English and Arabic languages, for the out-of-school youth and adults continue to be the primary concerns of the universities. They will consider offering an off-campus education program for clientele who cannot leave their work stations for an extended period and spread over a vast area with poor and inadequate transportation and communication facilities. Under the scheme, radio will be utilized for lectures and selected high schools as centers for distribution of instructional aids. The students will be encouraged to stay for a few days every year on one of the campuses of the universities for the final wrap-up of the course and to get a feel of a university life.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The Muslims will encourage, motivate and support the universities in their areas to grow and maintain high levels of academic excellence. This pertains to all areas of instruction, research and extension services programs. It is necessary to continually strengthen existing programs and innovate new and relevant ones. Their libraries, laboratories and other facilities and equipment must be improved. Their faculty and administrative staff members and students, both Muslims and Christians, must be stimulated, cajoled and encouraged to strive for excellence. The programs of the universities are vehicles for the Muslims to academic excellence.

It may be concluded that there are academic areas that the Muslims could attain academic excellence. In the final analysis, it is up to them to use the agencies of the government and educational opportunities available to them to attain academic

excellence. The Muslims, therefore, must develop the attributes of being (a) steadfast in their quest for academic excellence and (b) resolute in surmounting the obstacles that come their way. The attributes are not inconsistent with Verse 53:39 of the Quran: *That man can have nothing but what he strives for.*

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The Muslims in Mindanao are striving to attain a high level of academic excellence. The attainment of this goal is dependent on the development of a sound educational system. This system should be based on Islamic principles and should be able to produce graduates who are not only academically excellent but also morally upright. The attainment of this goal is dependent on the development of a sound educational system. This system should be based on Islamic principles and should be able to produce graduates who are not only academically excellent but also morally upright.

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