

IIIT's Advancing Education in Muslim Societies Initiative

Designing relevant and meaningful theoretical and empirical social and educational research for Muslim societies

BY AHMED ALWANI AND ILHAM NASSER

WHAT ARE THE GOALS OF EDUCATION? THE ensuing answer, the source of constant dispute among politicians, economists, educators, parents and students themselves, naturally gives rise to other heavily politicized questions: Why do young people need schooling? What knowledge is critical to becoming successful citizens?

To contribute to the global debates about education and reform efforts, especially as they relate to education systems in Muslim societies, the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT; <https://iiit.org/en/home>) recently refocused its efforts in this field by launching the Advancing Education in Muslim Societies (AEMS; <https://iiit.org/en/research>) initiative. Its sole goal is to respond to the assertion that global collaboration initiatives in education for employment and global citizenship haven't been enough or, in many cases, suitable for Muslim and other societies. After all, what else can explain why the billions of dollars spent on learning have shown little, if any, change in the state of education in so many countries?

The challenge is even greater in Muslim societies due to the disconnect between these initiatives on the one hand and the Quranic values, the people's cultural traditions and the lack of stability and/or resources on the other. AEMS' research agenda highlights the importance of holistic development in terms of learning, especially as regards the socio-emotional aspects of education for a meaningful life. This doesn't negate the importance of academic performance, citizenship and education for employment, but rather refocuses our attention on a holistic approach to human development.

Since its inception in 1981, IIIT has been an agent as well as a leading academic and research institution for renewing Islamic thought by reforming education and integrating Islamic knowledge and the social sciences. The idea that Muslim societies need to reform their educational systems through

an integrated curriculum, one that no longer views the social and natural sciences as purely secular disciplines but as those that lead to a strengthening of faith and values, has dominated its intellectual discourse for more than three decades.

The institute's "Integration of Knowledge" (IOK) discourse is rooted in an Islamic epistemology that gives credence to the Quran and Sunnah as the constitutive and methodological sources of knowledge, respectively, in addition to human knowledge in general. To close the circle from theory to applied research and thereby share the accumulated knowl-

THE CORE OF THE AEMS EMPIRICAL RESEARCH PROGRAM IS ALIGNED WITH "LEARNING TO BE," IDENTIFIED BY UNESCO AS ONE OF THE FOUR IMPORTANT PILLARS OF EDUCATION. THE OTHER THREE ARE "LEARNING TO KNOW," "LEARNING TO DO" AND "LEARNING TO LIVE" WITH OTHERS.

edge widely and acquire a voice in academic fields, IIIT recently expanded its focus in order to investigate the manifestations of IOK in education. This newly added empirical research agenda — AEMS — will not only build on, but also complement and test, IOK's theoretical discourse with data-driven research that represents the highest levels of intellectual integrity.

To realize its vision, IIIT is currently adopting an agile organizational structure as well as introducing new research units in policy, leadership and governance, curriculum, pedagogy, evaluation and assessment to guide its departments of publications and translation, strategic engagement, the AEMS policy center and its teaching arm: The Fairfax Institute. The initiative's primary mission is to have a positive

impact on youth and educated Muslims and thereby produce a new generation of Muslim intellectuals.

These aspirations will be accomplished via policy recommendations based on empirically generated data; strategic partnerships with universities, school systems and research institutions worldwide; teaching programs that will provide sustainability to our initiative and create a pipeline of researchers and intellectuals to carry on its mission; as well as a rigorous publication and translation program.

RESEARCH PROGRAMS

The core of the AEMS empirical research program is “learning to be,” identified by UNESCO as one of the four important pillars of education. The other three are “learning to know,” “learning to do” and “learning to live” with others. Our own review of international organizations and their reports, as well as of most of the international research conducted in those countries in which we are interested, indicates that the “learning to be” component is lacking. In fact, UNESCO itself is going back to the notion of “learning for life,” in which we also strongly believe.

AEMS’ contribution is twofold: (1) identifying and highlighting the aspects of “learning to be” in Muslim societies and their educational systems and (2) providing evidence to support our assessment(s). Another core element is the further examination of the “learning to be” component’s Islamic underpinning and the empowerment of a new generation of Muslims who are ready to participate fully and effectively in the 21st century.

Our research department began with a pilot study that sought to map the existing educational terrain in Muslim societies. Launched in the summer of 2018, it provides a baseline that may answer some of the questions that continue to perplex scholars. As a data-driven initiative, the study is investigating the conditions of education in 16 Muslim societies to formulate evidence-based recommendations and address the information gaps in terms of the well-being of Muslim learners. The target groups are K-12 students, teachers, administrators, parents and university students.

The initial focus is on four universal Quranic values and constructs — empathy, forgiveness, moral reasoning and community-mindedness — all of which are important for living a meaningful life and critical for learning, in addition to being relevant to a value-based education. Subsequent phases will build on this pilot study and introduce themes that promote social and emotional learning, such as the well-being study of Muslim learners. These studies will dig deeper into the development process and how learners move from a self-centered stage of consciousness to higher states of being, namely, those that have a purpose and meaning relevant to living as Muslims. Currently, the AEMS team is researching designs, sampling plans and developing appropriate measures.

To bring out the authentic voices of education scholars around the Muslim world and build localized capacity, our research team is forging a funded research venue that will utilize the results obtained

(left to right) Saulat Pervez, associate researcher, Ahmed Alwani, vice president, Ilham Nasser, senior researcher, Nora Elbilawi, researcher, and Maryam Saroughi, associate researcher



► COVER STORY – EDUCATION

via the pilot study to highlight the specific successes and challenges in areas aligned with AEMS' goals. We encourage all scholars who are interested in using field research to support an Islamic education framework grounded in Islamic thought and evidence-based knowledge to submit their proposals. Further information can be obtained by visiting www.iiit.org or by emailing aemsresearch@iiit.org.

END-GOAL RECOMMENDATIONS AND DISSEMINATION

AEMS' agenda is collaborative as well as content- and process-oriented. Our multidisciplinary education team brings talents in both quantitative and qualitative research, along with expertise in education research and the knowledge and sensitivities necessary for meeting the needs and aspirations of Muslim communities and societies.

This initiative's work and research findings will be shared publicly and disseminated via education and policy conference presentations and publications in scholarly and academic journals. For example, our academic *Journal on Education in Muslim Societies (JEMS)* and book series — the first edited volume is on hope in education in Muslim societies — are already underway. Both projects are being done in partnership with Indiana University Press.

To further publicize its reform agenda, AEMS will distribute its *State of Education in Muslim Societies* report to all interested parties. At the end of a three-year research cycle, the team will share its findings in a comprehensive report in order to shed light on its achievements and activities in areas of educational growth related to curriculum, pedagogy, policy, and leadership as well as evaluations and assessments.

IIIT will also utilize its strategic engagement resources to promote an agenda of reforming and advancing Islamic thought and education. AEMS experts will recommend system-wide plans to support governments and stakeholders in promoting reforms that are authentic, rooted in local ecosystems and based on empirical data.

NEW POSSIBILITIES FOR NORTH AMERICA AND BEYOND

The institute will continue to support its North American constituencies by inviting talents and community members who support its mission to become involved in its research and educational programs. For example, negotiations are currently underway with recognized universities in the region about offering a degree that promotes the initiative's approach and research agenda, as well as certificate programs in research methods and other fields.

The goal here is for AEMS to influence policies and priorities in education in North America and Muslim societies while being open to responses and feedback from those involved in the field as well as

VISION: Thriving Muslim societies in which individuals can achieve their fullest potential through transformative learning, social development and personal growth.

MISSION: To conduct and disseminate theoretical and empirical research to empower Muslim societies via data-driven policy recommendations, while simultaneously fostering societal and individual development through transformative learning.

The AEMS initiative seeks:

- ◆ To contribute to the Integration of Knowledge (IOK) intellectual discourse and its interface with academic disciplines in Muslim societies' educational systems via a four-phase approach: Quranic epistemology and hermeneutics, enlivening the Sunnah, re-engaging the Islamic heritage and interfacing with Western thought. The initial interface will occur through adopting the "Universal Quranic Values" paradigm.
- ◆ To provide evidence-based knowledge on how to advance education in these societies initially through the above paradigm and eventually through other possible paradigms resulting from the interface of IOK's theoretical framework with AEMS' empirical aspects.
- ◆ To recommend policies that engage all stakeholders in discussions on ways to transform education systems and advance people's well-being so they can proactively help build both their societies and a civilization of peace and prosperity for all.
- ◆ To advocate for a holistic and developmental approach that is relevant to Muslim youth, schools, universities, families and communities at large.
- ◆ To support a new generation of Muslim intellectuals, educators and academics for research and teaching careers engaged with AEMS' major initiatives.
- ◆ To forge a universal intellectual discourse on the IOK and its "Universal Quranic Values" paradigm.

that of Islamic studies. AEMS is a dynamic initiative that offers a fresh, positive and hopeful direction while being fully aware of the numerous gaps, limitations and unanswered questions that continue to exist.

Engaging in an evidence-based dialogue on educational issues that concern Muslim youth and learners in general will allow those involved to have more meaningful interactions as well as some direction for action and transformation. Such goals may be achieved by highlighting policies and acting on recommendations in a systematic and intentional manner. ■

Ahmed Alwani, IIIT's vice president, has worked on reforming K-12 curriculum in Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Education and many other education-related projects.

Ilham Nasser, a senior AEMS researcher, has over 25 years of experience in teacher training and research in various American, African and Middle Eastern educational settings.