

Publish and Cherish

In the academic world, or academia, one frequently hears dispiriting comments to the effect that since not many people read academic research papers, articles and books, most of them should not be embarked on and produced in the first place. It is a waste of time, energy and resources.

As a remedy, some suggest that standards be lowered somewhat, and others that teaching and, possibly, community service only be made universities' *raison d'être*. Research and publication should be optional.

However, this is a cliché. Needless to say that many academics use that as an excuse to paper over their serious academic shortcomings and underperformance.

Universities as educational and research institutions of the highest level are places where knowledge is as much used and consumed, as discovered and produced. It is principally there that the boundaries of knowledge and innovation are expanded, and that new horizons are opened up.

It is right there, additionally, that curiosity and abstract intellectualism should be cultivated, sometimes for their own sakes, irrespective of how they may be perceived by others, including students and prospective employers.

While most educational systems and institutions turn towards real-world problems and practical vocations, ample avenues should also be provided for atypical inquisitiveness and philosophising. Indeed, intellectual eccentricity is an important path to new knowledge horizons. So much so that Bret Stephens, a columnist in the New York

Times, believes that ostensibly useless and impractical knowledge begets new horizons. He based his arguments on an article titled "the Usefulness of Useless Knowledge" written in 1939 by an American educational reformer, Abraham Flexner.

When intellectual and educational ingenuity, farsightedness and curiosity, coupled with diligence and proficiency, become hindered or manipulated, that spells the beginning of the end for all academic sophistication and excellence. It further spells the beginning of the end for the integrity of entire educational systems and their academic cultures. Whole societies, as a consequence, will suffer immensely, in that education is the quintessence of their overall wellbeing.

It is owing to this that no sooner does creativity stop than civilizations start declining. If they and their people do not reinvent themselves quickly, they soon become a spent force and hence, doomed.

The significance of academics' duties

It is unconceivable that a university professor, in whose long academic journey an incredible amount of time and money has been invested, ends up using and consuming other people's knowledge only, without generating some of it himself (today's educational degrees, together with substantial research projects, are so expensive that most people are able to complete them only because of certain generous scholarship and funding opportunities).

A university professor's status and career are something special - not in terms of self-aggrandizement, but in terms of serving others and so, giving back to society. Therefore, something commensurately

special is to be expected from him as well, in terms of his intellectual concerns and output.

University professors must not behave as though they are somewhat advanced secondary school educators. In an ideal world, they stand at the forefront of countries' human and social development and economic progress. By the same token, when things go bad and trying times arrive, they are in the firing line, too.

Being an unproductive university professor, or not doing what is expected from him, amounts to a crime against the nobility of knowledge and education. Whereas being scarcely read is not as bad as some people would like to project it. When all is said and done, a university professor's main task is knowledge discovery, creation and dissemination, notwithstanding the reaction of the outside world. He is supposed to try to convince and influence the outside world, not the other way round.

The notion of not being widely read might be offset by the profundity of limited impact academic works often generate. Many such works are original, innovative and even pioneering. Therefore, they tend to deeply influence minds and sometimes even souls. Some works yet change a person's life orientation and purpose. Reading them becomes a life-changing and career-defining experience.

Genuine academic works are never read offhandedly and nonchalantly, like general news, comments, political events and scandalized stories, celebrity gossip, fairy-tale books and love novels. Many academic works are exceptional. They are thus not found everywhere and in everyone's hands. They are measured in terms of that unique class, not in terms of statistics. Their benchmarks are truth, honesty and purpose.

Academic works are not junk either. Their worth, more often than not, lasts and keeps getting better with time. They are inexhaustible treasures. That likewise should counterbalance the idea of them being scarcely read at one time. Some works become popular and accepted after years of lying dormant.

If academic articles and books do not attract a wider readership, such is by no means the fault of their authors. They have done their part. The onus is on students, professionals and general public.

Academics' obsession, however, should never be financial gains. As a sage once said: "Whoever wants to be rich should not approach the province of academia (education)." Materialism and academia are not compatible. One inevitably corrupts the other. Unfortunately, in most cases, it is materialism that contaminates and ruins academia.

An academic output may not be widely read because of the absence of a strong reading and erudition culture, because of the narrow scope of its readership, or because the time of its full relevance and applicability is yet to come - none of which, though, is academics' fault. None of the reasons given should make academics downhearted either. Fulfilling their noble tasks to the best of their abilities, and doing so on account of the supreme principles of goodness, honesty and integrity as categorical imperatives - to borrow Immanuel Kant's term - should be rewarding enough.

Rewards for academic work

But there should be nothing more alluring and flattering for Muslim academics than seeing the academic world and everything it entails as an opportunity to be engaged in the best and most remunerating domain in Islam, which is the domain of production (research and innovation), acquisition, dissemination and application of knowledge.

Certainly, that is one of the prime battlefields wherein Muslim academics can be involved as soldiers of truth, given that Islamic epistemology and education denote the most sought-after targets by the adversaries of heavenly truth and virtue. Every authentically written article, conference paper and book represents an addition to the defensive armoury of transcendent righteousness and morality and their ways. It is vital that one know on whose side exactly he is, and that he stand up and be counted.

Doing so qualifies academics to become immediate servants and defenders of the Islamic faith and Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him). Some will yet secure the accolade of being heirs of the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) and prophets in general. Hence, what could stand as a better reward and incentive for doing the stipulated job devotedly than this?

By increasing and diversifying the academic output, Muslim academics can help governments and other Muslim institutions to gradually pin down the realm of Western knowledge and values as a dominant means that pollute and corrupt the Muslim mind. Muslim youth and their fragile minds and souls should be aimed to be rescued first and foremost, as they are most vulnerable. And what could be today a better form of *jihad* (a meritorious struggle or effort to make the Word of Allah supreme) than this?

If Muslim academics do not perform their expected intellectual and social duties, their indirect contributions to the proliferation, as well as perpetuation, of Muslim predicaments will be definite. Due to their inactivity and indolence, finding feasible Islamic alternatives to the rampant western cultural and epistemological paradigms, will be rendered all the more difficult.

For example, without appropriate Islamic references and all-purpose materials in various fields of knowledge, students, professionals and public at large will be obliged to have recourse to the western counterparts which, more often than not, advocate dubious moral standards and spiritual values. That will create a vicious circle whereby, as regards the prospect of solving the Muslim problems, the situation will be that of one step forward and two steps back.

It just goes to show that Muslim universities and other Muslim institutions of higher learning are most vital for the future of Muslims and their societies and civilization. It is therefore high time that their roles in human and socio-economic development be significantly widened and enhanced.

The current prevalent tendencies according to which certain superficial political and corporate factors, as well as shallow agendas, dictate the dynamics of Muslim higher education, ought to stop once and for all. It is rather the latter and its institutions that should influence and guide society, including the political and corporate spheres.

Finally, education should be academics' life mission, rather than a mere profession or career. Academics have a duty to aim to produce not only right professionals, but also good, righteous and well-rounded men and women ready to face life with all its challenges. Under no circumstances should academics compromise their values and standards.

The Qur'an says: "And say (O Muhammad): 'Work (righteousness), soon will Allah see (and appreciate) your work, and His Messenger, and the believers'" (al-Tawbah, 105).

"And be steadfast in patience; for verily Allah does not allow to be lost the reward of those who do good" (Hud, 115).