

Educational Institutions of Umayyad's and Abbasid's Period; A Historical Document Analysis

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Abstract

The paper explores the configuration and key features of educational institutions and system of their financial management during the medieval Islamic period. The purpose of this study was to explore the organizational and managerial structure of the institutions in order to get an insight for the improvement of current system. The overall strategy of the study is a qualitative research based on an extensive document analysis. Data has been collected through self-administration from available resources in the libraries. The collected historical data has been analyzed to explore the key features of infrastructure and educational management. The study classifies a number of educational settings during the Umayyad's rule that eventually converted into proper institutions of formal, informal and professional education during the Abbasid's period. The study also takes an account of the curriculum and financial management of these institutions and recommends some key factors for the improvement of education system in Pakistan.

Key Words: Educational Institutions, Medieval Muslim World, Curriculum, Financial Management.

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Introduction

Islam claims upon the admiration and gratitude of mankind. This Islamic spirit produced a radical transformation in the Arabian Peninsula, as well as among countries where Islam took firm roots in the immediately succeeding centuries during the Medieval Period. As a result of rigorous and dedicated efforts of the Muslims in the field of education, a truly scientific outlook was developed. The Muslims developed glorious scientific institutions such as teaching and research hospitals and observatories in both of which instruction for a professional cadre was extensively carried out. Islam constructed a number of sciences which, while being profoundly Islamic, at the same time integrated in an unprecedented manner the scientific heritage of many different civilizations which had gone before. In order to transmit these sciences to the local people an extraordinary piece of translation work was carried out. As a result, in a period of less than two centuries ranging from the end of the 1stAH / 7thAD to the 3rdAH/ 9th AD, an immense corpus of learning was translated into Arabic, making the Arabic language the most important scientific language in the world for several centuries and a major depository for the sciences of antiquity to this day. The Islamic sciences stood for some seven centuries as the most developed among the sciences cultivated in the different civilizations. The basic fact to note is that Islam was able to create a system of educational institutions and a scientific tradition which produced this knowledge of the world of nature and mathematics.

These institutions, over the centuries produced those philosophers, scientists, jurists, the men of letters and experts in every field of knowledge, who had made incredible contributions to art, literature, poetry, philosophy, medicine, astronomy, geography, physics, alchemy, mineralogy,

politics etc. These rich contributions which Islam has made in the various branches of science served as a basis for the development of the modern science. None of these achievements would have been possible but for that devotion to learning and education which has characterized those people throughout the history.

Research Question

The purpose of this study is to analyze authentic historical documents to probe into the classification of educational institutions with respect to their nature, curriculum of studies and their management system in the Medieval Muslim-World specifically during Umayyad's and the Abbasid's rule in the Arab Peninsula.

Subsidiary Questions

The study would also answer the following subsidiary questions through an in depth investigation and analysis of collected data.

- What was the structure of elementary and higher education at that time?
- What was the curriculum of these institutions?
- How far the state had a control over these institutions?
- How far the state was responsible for providing grants to meet the financial needs of these institutions?

Methodology

The data was collected by self-administration from the available resources in the libraries. *Bait al-Hikmah* Research Institute (Central Library of Hamdard University) and Liaquat

National Public Library have been used largely. Collection and analysis of the data have been manually administered. An eclectic approach has been utilized to appreciate the phenomenon under consideration. The process of triangulation thus has been adopted to ensure the internal consistency of the collected data. During the process of analysis, different themes have been identified within the rule of both Umayyad's and Abbasid's period. These themes have been compared between the two dynasties to investigate the key themes prevailing and responsible for the academic excellence flourishing at that time. Since the study is based on an analysis of historical records, for which precise documental evidences were necessary to be listed. Therefore

the resources have been listed as end notes in Turabian Style, which will be helpful for the reader.

Review of Literature

The review of extensive historical literature reveals the classification of educational institutions that is discussed in the following sections of the study.

Institutions of Elementary Education

a) Mosques

The first place in Islam where education was started was the mosque. As there were no special buildings for educational institutions during the early days of the Umayyad dynasty, most of the mosques were used for educational purpose. Mosques were used for education due to shortage of buildings on one hand, but on the other hand, they were used deliberately because the center of education was predominantly of religious doctrine. The principal focus of education during this period was on the religious knowledge but the interaction with other nations due to expansion in the Muslim empire diverted the center of attention towards the other fields of

knowledge as well. These mosques were used as places for elementary education with the Holy Quran as the reading text book. Although Ibn-e-Khaldoon had opposed¹ to use the Holy Quran as a text book in the elementary level, however this practice was continued in different parts of Islamic world. He is of the view that a child should learn reading and writing first before to start learning the Holy Quran.

This elementary education was mostly oral in nature where the students were supposed to learn the Holy Quran by heart (*Hifz*) after being able to read the text and obtaining an ordinary level of writing skill. They were also being taught the basic principles of the faith, methods of worship and the traditions of the Holy Prophet. This was done in the form of *Halqa* (circle) around a teacher in the mosques. Only male students were allowed to join a circle of study.

Teachers had been used to make their circles at particular timings in different corners of the mosques. Mosques were the gathering places for the Muslims five times daily; as there was neither a restriction of age limit nor any other criteria to attend these circles, people coming to pray also started joining these circles. After completing an elementary course of reading and writing in a particular circle the students were allowed to join the circle of the other teacher in the same mosque at some other timing or in another place for further studies. These circles² were operating like classes in a school.

b) Kuttabs

Before the rise of Islam there were a few persons who used to teach the art of reading and writing by sitting at their private houses. These teachers were mainly Christians and Jews who were doing this job in their capacity on a limited scale, after Islam this practice continued and extended to a large scale. Instead of their own houses, teachers started using separate houses for this purpose. These houses were called Kuttabs³(elementary schools). With the increase in population of the Muslims, the number of these schools increased and mosques were also used a Kuttab. There are evidences available about some Kuttabs having an astonishing number of students during the Umayyad period⁴. The core curriculum of these schools was also the development of reading-writing skills and penmanship. The students were taught the Holy Quran, the tradition of the Holy Prophet, grammar and other religious knowledge⁵.

These schools were also boy's schools as there is no evidence available in the historical literature which shows about the girls being taught in these schools. These Kuttabs were solely independent private institutions run mostly by their founders. A large number of schools were of single teacher schools but there were several schools having more than one teacher. The financial requirements of these institutions were fulfilled by the fee of the students. The fee of these teachers was reported to be very modest. Some prominent Muslim personalities are reported to be the teachers of these schools before playing the part in the state affairs and getting recognition⁶.

c) Palaces

Palaces of the rulers and other state officials were used for the education of their children. This was a home-based education in which a teacher was appointed as a tutor on high remuneration and other facilities. The curriculum⁷ of this type of education was usually designed by the father of the child. Although the principal premise of the curriculum in both Kuttabs and palaces was the same but being the ruling class, a little additions or subtraction in it was done by the father of child⁸. Usually swimming, horsemanship and good poetry was advised by the father as an addition. The tutor had to stay in the Palace till the completion of studies of the child, for which a separate portion of the building was either allotted or specially built.

Institutions of Higher Education

a) Mosques as an Institution of Higher Education

During Umayyad period mosques became the center of education and served as institutions not only for the elementary education but for higher education as well. Circles for higher education had been arranged in these mosques by distinguished scholars. It is reported that a very large audience had been used to attend these classes coming from different parts of the Islamic world. Classes of various subjects were held in these circles. Lectures on literature, rhetoric, lexicography, grammar, theology, jurisprudence and even medicine had been delivered in these circles⁹. Discussions on various academic questions were often held among students and between prominent scholars as well, for whom massive audience had been observed. Some mosques became such an important institution of education that scholars take it as a sign of prestige to teach in these mosques¹⁰. The number of circles in these mosques increased with the increase in the subjects of study. It had been observed that some mosques had more than forty educational circles for various subjects.

b) Higher Education in the Houses of Scholars

Houses of learned scholars were also the center of higher education in different fields of knowledge. As there was no distinction between a teacher and a non-teacher, every learned person had to contribute to pass on his acquired knowledge or skills to others.

Scholars took this job as a religious duty and later on it became tradition of the learned men. The learning activity that generated in the Muslim society during the life of the Holy Prophet had taken a momentum during the mid of Umayyad period, people from far and wide from the Muslim territories rushed to join a learned person to acquire knowledge. Scholars welcomed these seekers of knowledge with pleasure and educated them in their best capacity¹¹.

c) Language Schools

The Arabs were great admirers of their language and culture. They inherited a rich culture of poetry, speech and proverbs. This appreciation for language produced a passion in the rulers and other notable figures of the society to preserve their language and culture which was under threat¹² due to constant intermingling with the non-Arab nations. The cities like Baghdad, Basra and Kufa had become cosmopolitan cities because people from all over the Muslim world were settling in these cities. These settlers could not speak pure Arabic thus a faulty language had been emerging. The Holy Quran was started being recited with different pronunciations. To counter this problem punctuation marks were adopted for the text of Holy Quran and a wave for learning language generated in the Arabs.

Syrian Desert, thus acted as a language school. People sent their children to this desert to learn pure language, eloquence, good poetry and ancient history from the native Bedouins of this desert. Some Bedouins settled in these cities and started teaching language skills in their houses¹³. This practice started with a need but continued in the later dynasties.

d) Home-Based Higher Education

During both Umayyad and Abbasid's period the arrangement for the education of the princes were held in the palaces where separate wings were built for this purpose. A prominent scholar had been appointed for this purpose who had been supposed to live in the palace to teach and train their pupils. It has been reported that a number of members of the ruling class had been attending the circles of scholars in the mosques and in their private houses along with their education in their own palaces. Whenever these princes had to attend the class of a teacher, they

had to obey the same rules and regulations which were adopted by the other pupils of that class. Scholars treated them equally like other member of their class and never gave them a favor due to their relationship with the rulers. Moreover rulers never demanded for an extraordinary treatment for their sons and appreciated this conduct of the teachers¹⁴.

Institutions of Professional Studies

a) Law Schools

The study of the law was itself based on the careful study of the Holy Quran and its commentaries (*Tafseer* and *Taaveel*); of the traditions of the Holy Prophet and of the sacred history of Islam. Therefore the main activity of law schools was in the religious sciences. These studies in turn required complete mastery of Arabic language and all the literary disciplines connected with it. During the whole Umayyad period these institutions had been working mostly in mosques or in the houses of scholars. The imam's of all the four orthodox sects in Islam contributed for the development of Islamic jurisprudence in the best of their capacity. They did this work as their religious duty without any monetary rewards. They also bear the harsh conditions from the rulers having different sects and beliefs. The laws of Islamic *Fiqh* had been developed in these schools. Most of these institutions had been founded and run independently without the patronage of rulers. However Abbasid caliph *Al-Mustansir* had been reported to build an institution named *Al-Mustansiriyah* having a law school each for all the four sects¹⁵. There were teachers for each sect whose salaries were paid from the government treasury.

b) Teaching and Research Hospitals

The hospital was also an important institution of higher education as most of the teaching of medical science was done in hospitals¹⁶. The theoretical part of medicine was taught in different place like mosques, houses of scholars etc. but students were supposed to complete their internship in a hospital before starting medical practice¹⁷. At the end of internship students had to write a treatise on any topic of medicine to get the certificate. This was an old form of the modern thesis. Many great hospitals were built by both Umayyad and Abbasid rulers. Some of which were specially built under the direction of eminent doctors. The role these medical doctors

were not only to teach the students but to treat the patients as well. These medical scholars had been also observed to teach medical students by forming educational circles in their private houses. Many non-Muslim doctors had also served in these teaching hospitals and earned a lot of respect and honor in the Muslim society¹⁸.

c) Observatories

It was a distinct scientific institution in which observations were carried out along with the teaching of astronomy, mathematics and other allied subjects. This institution was first established by the Abbasid caliph *Al-Mamoon* in Baghdad. This was soon followed by a series of observatories, each connected with the name of an individual astronomer. After the fourth century the observatories began to acquire more general nature, it became a complex scientific institution in which nearly every branch of science was taught. It became the place where competent astronomers, mathematicians and famous scientists were assembled. Although the peak period of the observatory as a scientific institution¹⁹ was reached in the ninth century when they were equipped with the finest instruments possible but they had been attained a great momentum within the period of Abbasid. These institutions were always supported by the rulers. Research on latest issues of that time in different fields of science was held there. Many scholars completed their famous research works in these observatories²⁰.

d) Bait a-Hikmah (The first Islamic Academy)

A scholastic culture had been produced in the society due to long-lasting efforts of the scholars under the patronage of the rulers. This produces a great love for books and learning. Moreover the princes of the royal family also brought up in a literary environment and had special interest in education. They paid serious attention in establishing a system to collect and transmit the knowledge of the other contemporary and past nations in their society. The first Islamic academy, *Bait Al-Hikmah* was founded with a huge collection of books in this regard²¹. Many historians did not agree whether to consider it an academy or a library because of its large collection of books. In my opinion this was the first serious step in the foundation of modern

higher educational institutions (universities). The most celebrated universities which were established later in the Islamic world followed this model and built huge libraries within these institutions²². This practice is still going on in the entire world, every university and college is accustomed with a library.

Curriculum

a) Elementary Education

As elementary education was imparted in different settings, no direct outline about its curriculum has been found. However from anecdotes of the history a general sketch of the subjects taught during elementary stage has been traced. According to it;

- The first stage was the foundation of religious life of child with the recitation of *Kalimah* and words of the Holy Quran.
- The second stage was mastery of language (reading and writing).
- The third stage included teaching of the Holy Quran combined with important religious beliefs and procedures.
- The fourth stage was the education of arithmetic, famous proverbs and good poetry.

In home-based elementary education of the children of the ruling class the skills of horsemanship and swimming were also included.

b) Secondary Education (Madrasah)

The main activity of madrasah was the instruction in religious sciences (*Naqli* sciences) especially in divine law (*Al-Shariah*), its principals (*Al-Usool*) and jurisprudence (*Al-Fiqh*). Disciplines like logic, geometry, arithmetic, philosophy (*Aqli* sciences) have also been reported to be the part of the curriculum of madrasahs.

c) Higher Education

The following disciplines were the constituents of the curriculum in higher education.

1. Quranic Exegesis (*Al-Ilm al-Tafseer*)
2. The Sciences of Tradition (*Al-Ilm al-Hadith*)
3. Scholastic Theology (*Al-Ilm al-Kalam*).
4. Lexicography (*Lugha*).
5. Rhetoric (*Ilm al-Bayan / Ilm al-Khitabut*).
6. Literature (*Adab*).
7. Medicine (*Tibb*).
8. Optics (*Al-Ilm al-Ayaan*)
9. Astrology
10. Metaphysics

Informal Institutions

a) Royal intellectual forums

It was due to rigorous efforts of the scholars that scholarship became a symbol of status during the Umayyad period. Therefore rulers, dignitaries and notable figures of the society attracted towards learning activities. It is related that literary meetings were started to hold in the houses of wealthy people and palaces. In these circles people of a particular class were admitted and special rules and signs were adopted for the participants. Scholars of high reputation are recorded to be invited for lecture and debate. The rulers were the organizers and supervisors of these meetings in which poetical contests, religious debates and literary conferences were held²³. Precious awards and prizes were given to the winners and it was the platform for the learned class to perform and get fame and prosperity.

These circles are recorded to have been working under the Abbasid caliphs as well. The other reason for the arrangement of these meetings was the need of time to answer the religious questions posed by some deflected sects of Islam based on Greek philosophy. Scholars of high reputation took part in these religious debates from both sides and presented their point of views

with logical arguments. As the arrangement of these meeting started to hold regularly and repeatedly, the need for prominent scholars and experts of different branches of knowledge was increased. For these rulers started accumulating the best brains²⁴ from far and wide, thus a sense for the support of learned people and the process of learning was generated in them.

b) Scholarly Gatherings in the Markets

This was another informal place of education during Abbasid period. These bookshops came out during early Abbasid. When literary activities increased in the society, the requirement for the production and supply of books also increased. To meet this need a number of books producing institutes were established. Bookshops were one of these book producing institutions, their basic responsibility was to copy the books and maintain their constant supply but this role was broadened to an important intellectual service due to two reasons.

- The first reason was that the Arabs had the ancient culture that when would gather in the fairs before Islam, they recite their poetry, deliver eloquent speeches and discuss on literary issues. The Arabs were Bedouins in nature, when they started living in cities and involved in teaching and learning activities, they found these bookshops a place where they can gather and follow their native culture as in cities they did not have the opportunity of the those ancient fairs where they themselves and their ancestors were used to gather in the past.
- The second reason was that the booksellers were also lovers of knowledge and scholarship, they did not take it as an industry but instead they took it as a service to education. They allowed their visitors to sit in their shops for discussion and debates on literary topics. They also provided them a facility to study a book of their interest by sitting at the shop without any charge.

Due to these reasons scholars and students flocked towards these shops and thus book markets became an informal place of education. This function of shops produces an intellectual effect²⁵ on both visitors and the booksellers and even on the family members of these booksellers. Moreover it became the place where students could meet prominent scholars having impressive social and economic status and experts of different skills. These visits and meetings sequentially created an incitement and inspiration among students and other customers of the market to become like them. This tradition of literary studies extended to other general shops.

There are records of some general shops where regular gatherings of students were held for academic discussions.

Institution of Translation and Book Provision

The first public institution for the translation was established by the Abbasids. In fact the first Muslim academy; *Bait Al-Hikmah* was used for this purpose. Translators from different parts of the world were invited to do this job on attractive terms and conditions. *Al-Mamoon* was himself a scholar; under his supervision this wonderful work of translation reached its peak. He promoted the intellectual activity in the society by translating ancient foreign knowledge into Arabic and succeeded in it finally²⁶. A huge treasure of foreign books were collected and translated with explanatory notes written by the translators to make them understandable for the common readers.

The work of translation was not limited only to this academy but a number of other public and private libraries were doing this work alongside.

The work of translation and production of books went side by side in separate units of the libraries. When a book was translated it was sent to the production unit where copyists made its copies and these were sent for binding in the binding section. The work of binding was very simple in the beginning but soon it became an art and books with beautiful pieces of fine art on the bindings were emerged. To raise the quality of binding and to increase the life the book, different types of binding material were introduced.

Competent and efficient staff²⁷ was appointed on high remunerations in these institutions which include copyists, binders, scribes, artists etc. These institutions were the backbone of education during that period as they provided the learning material to students in a variety of disciplines of knowledge in their local language in abundance.

Financial Management of the Institutions

The greatest achievement in the financial management of educational institutions was *Al-Mamoon's* idea of providing enduring resources to institutions. He did not want to leave educational institutions on casual donations of the rulers and wealthy people²⁸. That is why he built all educational institutions attached with permanent endowments for the continuous supply of money for their running at the time of their foundations. The idea of *Al-Mamoon* was adopted by almost all the supporters of knowledge and thus whenever a building for an educational purpose was planned to build first of all a source of income for its functioning was allotted to it.

It was the tradition during those days that an endowment ceremony was held in which judges, scholars and people of high standing were invited. The text of endowment was recited in front of them for conformation. These endowments were in the form of cultivated pieces of lands, shops in the markets, gardens; rented houses²⁹ etc. As education was free of cost and most of the institutions were boarding in nature, where students were provided with accommodation, food, clothing and stationary free of cost. A lot of money was required to provide these facilities, for this, institutions were observed of having more than one form of endowments for their different units. Financial experts were appointed to manage the funds of these institutions. Their responsibility was to make the annual budget for the institutions and to supervise their monthly expenditures. Besides permanent income people were used to give casual donations as well. Thus these institutions were reported to be fully capable to meet their financial requirements and even a surplus amount was often left in their funds at the end of the year³⁰.

Institutional Structure during Umayyad Period

**Educational
Institutions**

**Higher
Education**

Mosques

Houses of scholars

Palaces

**Elementary
Education**

Mosques

Kuttabs

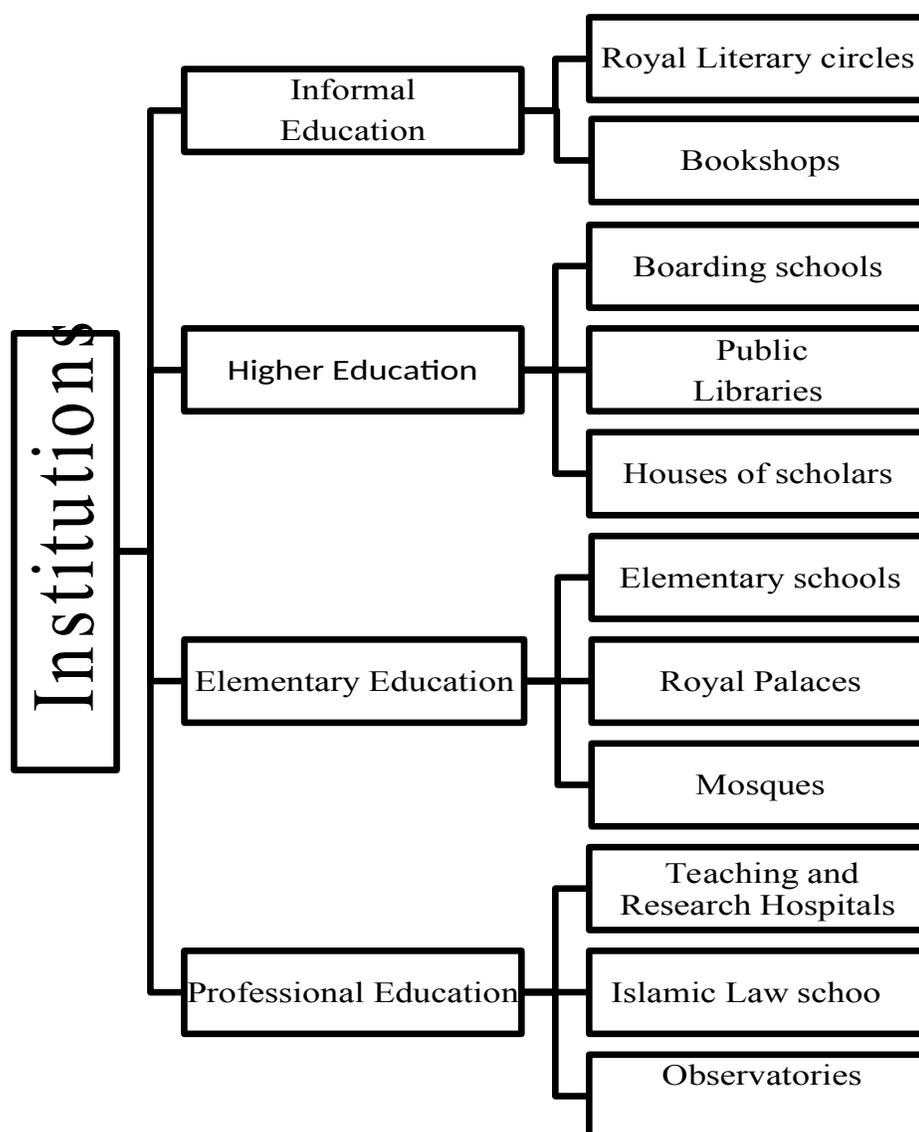
Palaces

**Professional
Education**

Houses of scholars

Private libraries

Institutional Structure during Abbasid Period



Discussion and Findings

The work of education was started in a very simple manner in the first religious institution of the Muslims which was the mosque but soon it took the shape of a proper educational institution of other disciplines of knowledge during the Umayyad period. Some other places had also been used as educational institutions formally or informally but the main educational institution of elementary and higher education during this period was the mosque. The most primary question arises in this regard is that why separate buildings for educational institutions were not built and only mosques were built and used for education during the Umayyad period? It was due to the reason that initially the main activity of education was entirely based on religious knowledge therefore no need was felt to separate it in another building specially built for it. Since most of the educational work had been done by religious scholars in their individual capacities during this period therefore they selected this public place to catch the attention of people towards learning. The impact of it was reasonably electrifying; people congregated in the mosques and got education in an astonishing number. More over when other disciplines of knowledge were included in the courses of study, still all these faculties were considered the part of religious education. The houses of learned people which were working on a limited scale for the art of reading and writing converted into elementary schools (kuttabs) with increase in momentum of learning activities in the society.

The respect and honor of the religious scholars among the common people was more than that of caliphs. This high-status of teachers inspired the rulers and other state officials and they started to involve in literary activities in their palaces. Thus palaces of rulers became institutions of formal and informal education.

The thematic analysis of the condition of educational institutions of this period can be summarized as

- Mosques were used extensively as educational institutions for various branches of knowledge.
- A proper set up for elementary education had been thoroughly developed at the end of Umayyad period.
- Learning became a sign of luxury and prestige with the involvement of rulers and dignitaries in scholastic activities.

Another important question is how education was transferred from mosque to madrasah? The reason for this change which happened in the Abbasid period was that; till this period the palaces had started acting as home-based educational institutions for the princes. The rulers were more educated now as they were brought up in a scholastic atmosphere and they inherited a tradition for the patronage of learning. Moreover they had a great deal of interaction with the other foreign nations and they adopted several customs and traditions of them. They transferred heaps of books on various branches of knowledge and there was a serious need for a separate building to do the massive work of translation, a number of translators were non-Muslims as well. Thus in the form of first Muslim academy *Bait Al-Hikmah* the first step was taken in the development of those educational institutions having their proper buildings.

A brief analysis of important themes involved in the institutional development is presented as

- Separate buildings for educational institutions were founded first time by the Arabs.
- An astonishing work of translation was done to transmit foreign knowledge in the society.
- Institution for the production of books was established that provided an opportunity for common people to benefit from all kinds of knowledge by purchasing books from the markets at a reasonable price, written in their native language.
- Institutions were made financially independent by allotting them enduring sources of income.

Summary and Conclusion

Within the perimeter of educational institutions, three types of institutions, i.e. informal, formal and professional institutes were developed ascribing a vast range of subjects as a curriculum of studies. Although all these institutions were not working under a prescribed system but the spirit of learning and teaching was same all around. It was to learn for the sake of getting a prestigious status of a scholarly person in the society through a contest of maximum contribution than the other contemporaries in erudition and scholarship. A deep understanding required to master a subject was developed in these institutions through a culture of scholarly speeches and debates. Moreover as the medium of education was the local language of students, they had no need to cram the stuff without understanding. A series of formative assessments along with a final examination were required to pass a certain course. Institutions instead of taking admission and tuition fee were providing free lodgings with food, clothing and stationery. An atmosphere of academic freedom was allowing the students to enter an institution without any admission test, select the subject and the professor from whom they want to study and move forward in the higher levels of their studies according to their own pace. Classification of students was not made on the basis of their grades in the final examinations and that never become hurdle in their further studies. Students not performing up to the standards were counseled to take some other field of their interest to excel in it. Concluding this it can be said that it was the vision and special interest of the rulers that an enunciated education was provided to the best brains of the society irrespective of their financial conditions through developing a number of institutions at different levels. Thus a culture of scholarship and an atmosphere of academic freedom were produced through these institutions that contributed in different fields of knowledge.

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End Notes

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