ACQUISITION AND MANIFESTATION OF COMPETENCE AMONG MUSLIM PROFESSIONALS IN MALAYSIA

MOHAMAD SHAH BIN KASSIM

UNIVERSITI TEKNOLOGI MALAYSIA

ACQUISITION AND MANIFESTATION OF COMPETENCE AMONG MUSLIM PROFESSIONALS IN MALAYSIA

MOHAMAD SHAH BIN KASSIM

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Dedicated to:

Untuk Abah dan Emak. Hutang budi di bawa mati.

Untuk isteri, terima kasih atas sokongan dan pengorbanan.

Untuk anak-anak, ceria selalu.

Untuk ahli keluarga yang lain, terima kasih di atas sokongan moral dan spiritual.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis reports a study on acquisition and manifestation of competence among Muslim professionals in Malaysia. Muslim professionals have a significant role in developing a nation's socio-economy. They must be professionally competent and well versed in Islamic rules and regulations regarding their services to the society. However, information on Muslim professionals' understanding of competence concept based on empirical evidence is still insufficient and is not well addressed in the Islamic literature as compared to the Western literature. The main aim of this study was to develop a model of competence acquisition of Muslim professionals. The objectives were to investigate issues relating to the process of acquiring competence based on their professional experience; to determine the methods in acquiring competence; to understand the obstacles to the development of competence; and to suggest improvements to the existing professional development programmes. The overall design of the study was qualitative and applied the nonhomogeneous purposive sampling method and adapted two types of data collection techniques: focus group discussions and in-depth interviews. Data collected were analyzed using content analysis and grounded theory analysis. A total of six Muslim professionals participated in two separate focus group discussions. For in-depth interviews, fifteen Muslim professionals were interviewed. Findings from Muslim professionals' understanding on the meaning of competence are simplified in two dimensions. Firstly, competence refers to the process of acquiring knowledge, skills and abilities to perform professional roles and tasks with amanah and takwa. Secondly, competence is a personal endeavour for an individual to transform internally and externally as a Muslim. Issues relating to the process of acquiring competence are classified into two contexts which are the individual conditions and external situational conditions. Within the individual conditions, three main issues emerged which are strong religious value, self-determination, individual learning strategies and self-reflection. In the external situational conditions, findings indicated four main issues which are the underlying Islamic values and the vicegerency concept of a man, professional standards and regulations and supportive organizational culture. The professionals adopted various strategies in acquiring competence which includes learning from others, nurturing orientation, continuous learning strategies and getting more from the hands-on experience. This study has contributed to the understanding of Muslim professionals on their concept of competence and their strategies in acquiring competence. This study has contributed to the development of a model of competence acquisition amongst Muslim professionals in Malaysia.

ABSTRAK

Tesis ini melaporkan kajian mengenai pemerolehan dan manifestasi kompetensi di kalangan profesional Muslim di Malaysia. Profesional Muslim mempunyai peranan yang penting dalam memajukan sosioekonomi sesebuah negara. Mereka sewajarnya berperanan sebagai profesional yang kompeten dan memiliki kefahaman yang mencukupi mengenai undang-undang dan peraturan Islam khususnya di dalam perkhidmatan mereka kepada masyarakat. Walau bagaimanapun, maklumat kefahaman profesional Muslim ke atas konsep kompeten berdasarkan bukti-bukti empirikal di dapati masih kurang dan tidak dibincang secara mendalam di literatur Islam berbanding literatur Barat. Tujuan utama kajian ini ialah untuk membangunkan model pemerolehan kompetensi di kalangan profesional Muslim. Objektif-objektif kajian ini ialah untuk menyelidiki isu-isu berkaitan cara mendapatkan kompetensi berdasarkan pengalaman profesional mereka; untuk mengetahui kaedah memperoleh kompetensi; untuk mengetahui halangan-halangan dalam pembangunan kompetensi dan untuk mencadangkan penambahbaikan kepada program pembangunan profesional semasa. Keseluruhan rekabentuk kajian ini bersifat kualitatif dan menggunakan kaedah pensampelan bertujuan bukan-homogen dengan menggunakan dua jenis kaedah pengumpulan data: diskusi fokus temuduga mendalam. Data yang dikumpul telah dianalisa berkumpulan dan menggunakan kaedah analisa kandungan dan teori grounded. Seramai enam orang profesional Muslim terlibat di dalam dua sesi berasingan diskusi fokus berkumpulan. Untuk temuduga mendalam, seramai limabelas orang profesional Muslim telah ditemuduga. Hasil kajian daripada kefahaman profesional Muslim mengenai maksud kompetensi diringkaskan kepada dua dimensi. Pertama, kompetensi merujuk kepada proses memiliki pengetahuan, kemahiran dan keupayaan untuk melaksana peranan dan tugas profesional dengan amanah dan takwa. Kedua, kompetensi adalah usaha peribadi seseorang untuk berubah secara dalaman dan luaran sebagai seorang Muslim. Isu-isu berkaitan proses memperoleh kompetensi terbahagi kepada dua konteks iaitu konteks individu dan konteks persekitaran situasi. Dari segi konteks individu, tiga isu utama timbul iaitu nilai keagamaan yang kuat, sifat kesungguhan diri, strategi pembelajaran individu dan refleksi diri. Di dalam konteks persekitaran situasi, hasil dapatan menunjukkan empat isu utama iaitu nilai asas Islam dan konsep sebagai khalifah, amalan dan peraturan profesional, dan sokongan budaya organisasi. Profesional menggunakan pelbagai strategi di dalam memperoleh kompetensi iaitu belajar daripada orang lain, orientasi pemupukan, strategi pembelajaran secara berterusan dan pengalaman di lapangan. Penyelidikan ini telah menyumbang kepada pemahaman terhadap profesional Muslim mengenai konsep mereka mengenai kompetensi dan strategi-strategi mereka dalam memperoleh kompetensi. Kajian ini telah menyumbang kepada pembangunan model pemerolehan kompetensi di kalangan profesional Muslim di Malaysia.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Research Setting

The Global Competitiveness Report for 2014-2015 and the Corruption Perception Index 2014 portrayed an unfavourable scenario about the state of Muslim countries in the world (World Economic Forum, 2014). Based on the competitiveness report, only three Islamic countries made up to the top 20. The countries were United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Malaysia. In contrast, some members of the Organization for Islamic Countries (OIC) were classified as most corrupt nations while other members are struggling to overcome the corruption issues as reported in the Corruption Perception Index (Transparency International, 2015). This scenario serves as an indicator of lack of competitiveness of Islamic countries, i.e. Muslim professionals than the rest of the world. In addition to the corruption index, the report also highlighted the ineffectiveness and inefficiency of governance in those countries.

Incompetent and misconduct of the professionals contribute to ineffective management which cause waste of fund, bad image and reputation to the profession. It was reported that incompetent professionals in public and private organizations are responsible for waste of fund amounting to billions of dollars (Jabatan Audit Negara, 2013; Riedl, 2010; KPMG, 2013). They were also responsible for tarnishing the image of their profession when failed to behave ethically.

This is due to the dynamic professional environment that keeps changing and requiring professionals to be competent from time to time (Willis and Dubin, 1990). However, most of the written works regarding competence has been predominantly written by the Anglo-Saxon scholars across the US and Europe. Islam on the other hand, has its own interpretation of competence, and these concept can be traced in the Quran and the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and his companions.

Post Sept 11, 2001, the interest towards Islamic knowledge, culture and heritage has increased. Besides the lame stereotyping that all terrorists are Muslim, more individuals are keen on learning about Islam, its religion and influence on culture, society, economy and politics. Such interest came not only from the non-Muslims but also Muslims who feel obligated to clear the image of Islam and those who want to learn more about the religion and be able to contribute towards human civilization (Morgan, 2007; Lyons, 2009).

To date, Islam has one of the biggest followings in the world (PewResearchCenter, 2009). Following the latest development, there is a high demand for Islamic finance, halal foods, Islamic tourism and education across the globe (Zeinelabdin, 2008; Monger and Rawashdeh, 2008). Business boundaries and challenges are far greater now than they were in yesteryears. For Muslim professionals, this phenomenon provides ample opportunities to participate in businesses and other activities (Bakimli, 2008). Therefore, professional Muslims are required to improve their level of professionalism and remain competent from time to time in order to prove to the world that Muslims are not as bad as what have been portrayed in the news. Consequently, there is a need for professional Muslims to acquire necessary competence not only as an obligation to the professional bodies but to the larger part of the societies.

1.2 Background of the Study

Within the Western perspectives, the origin of the term competence is said to have its origin in law, but the term competence and competencies are now widely used by a variety of groups such as psychologists, management theorists, human resource managers, educationists, politicians, legal practitioners and industrial psychologists (Hoffmann, 1999). According to the author, competence not only refers to various applications, but competence itself has various interpretations and meanings. Differences in interpretations of competence are evident between the US and the UK literature. For example, the meaning of competence in the US literature demonstrates a person-oriented focus, whereas in the UK literature, the meaning of competence is about the functional analysis of the job specifications (Moore et al., 2002). For the past two decades, many attempts have been made by authors to provide a precise definition of competence and competencies. However, such attempts contribute to further unsettling unified understanding of the overall concept of competence. In one aspect, competence is defined as an individual's capabilities or abilities (Boyatzis, 2008a) or else known as underlying characteristics of an individual that is contributing to effective and/or superior performance in a job or situation (Spencer and Spencer, 1993).

Authors like Iversen (2000), Cheetham and Chivers (2005) and Idris (2008) provide detailed descriptions of several approaches of understanding competence. The main approaches are behavioral or personal competence, functional/standard competence and the situational approach. Other approaches include the technical-rational, the reflective practitioner, meta competencies, phenomenography and holistic.

Within the civil service in Malaysia, the Public Services Department (Jabatan Perkhidmatan Awam -JPA) classifies competence into two categories, which are generic

competencies and functional competencies (JPA, 2004). Meanwhile, Junaidah (2008) in her study identifies three categories of competencies, which are communication, managerial and job knowledge competencies.

From the Islamic perspective, the literature offers several explanations on the competence concept (Sharfuddin, 1987; Ali, 2005; Nik Mutasim et al., 2014). A review of Islamic literature suggests the application of competence can be classified into several perspectives namely in Islamic law, Islamic philosophy and workplace competence. All these perspectives are discussed in detail in Chapter Two.

More recent Muslim authors such as Sharfuddin (1987), Shaharom (1997), Ali (2005), Nor 'Azzah (2006), Junaidah (2007), Ilhaamie (2009), and Nik Mutasim et al. (2014) gave their views on competence concept from the Islamic perspectives which have similar meanings to the competence elements as highlighted by the Western and contemporary literature. The concept of vicegerency (khalifah) in the Quran serves as the basic principle which introduces the concept of competence.

In the Quran, a verse in *surah* Al-Qasas: 26 introduces the word *al-qawi*, which literally means strong, powerful, might, and potent and as such these meanings are very close to the competence concept (Al-Mawrid Dictionary, 1999). Other evidences in the Islamic literature concerning competence can be traced from the traditions of the Prophet (pbuh), and his companions. Researchers such as Shaharom (1997), Ali (2005), Noor Azzah (2006), Junaidah (2007) and Ilhaamie (2009), provide further evidence on the essential characteristics of competent individuals. According to these authors, some of the essential characteristics of competent individuals are piety, good *akhlaq*, team work, honesty, gratefulness, just, trustworthy, responsible, well-experienced, decency, good historical family background, sound ideas and good management. In summary, the

competence concept in the Western perspective is developed mainly through the experiences and knowledge of professionals and also through the value of thoughts and cultures of the authors discussing the topic, whereas in Islamic perspective, the competence concept is based on the divine principles of Quran and hadith (Nik Mutasim et. al. 2014).

Despite the large body of literature in the U.S and U.K concerning competence, there is still little emphasis in investigating how competence can be learned and acquired. Whereas in the Islamic literature, there is a dearth of literature dedicated to the issue of competence and how competence can be learned and acquired due to the nature of the literature which inter-crosses and overlaps under the role and behaviour of vicegerence of man concept. According to Tayeb (1997) and Mellahi et. al. (2006) there is a gap in management research particularly in investigating the relationship between religion and management and the lack of role in human resource managers in facilitating training and development. Thus this study is dedicated to fill-up the gap by investigating the role of Islamic values and principles on the development of competence amongst the professional Muslims in Malaysia. Furthermore this study is dedicated to explore the training and development strategies adopted by professionals in acquiring competence.

While most previous studies on competence are mainly focused on top team management level and managers, there should be an equal interest shown towards professionals. The importance of professionals to be competent is also highlighted by earlier authors such as Willis and Dubbin (1990) and Watkins and Drury (1995). For example, a study on how professionals acquire competence has been conducted by Cheetham and Chivers (2005). Meanwhile, Idris (2008) conducted research on management trainees who are sitting for professional qualification, namely, the Chartered Institute of Management Accountants (CIMA). Cheetham and Chivers (2005) introduce a holistic model of professional competence in an attempt to identify the critical competencies for professionals.

This study, on the other hand, attempted to understand Muslim professionals and as attempt to provide an in-depth understanding of competence by illuminating Islamic values as an alternative to previous attempts made by other researcher such as Cheetham and Chivers (2005), Campbell (2007), Boyatzis (2008a) and Idris (2008).

In Malaysia, the emergence of Muslim professionals has been addressed by Welsh (2008). Welsh (2008), provides a snapshot on factors that contributed to the emergence of Muslim professionals in Malaysia. She presents the topography of Muslim professionals in which she argues that the nature and form of Islamic space have carved out by professionals within the society and the political impact that they brought in. Besides Welsh (2008), little is still on understanding how Muslim professionals view competence and how they acquire and develop their competence at the workplace.

1.3 Statement of Problem

The competence concept in the Western perspective is developed mainly through the experiences and knowledge of professionals and also through the value of thoughts and cultures of the authors discussing the topic, whereas in Islamic perspective, the competence concept is based on the divine principles of Quran and hadith (Nik Mutasim et. al. 2014). Despite the large body of literature in the U.S and U.K concerning competence, there is still little emphasis in investigating how competence can be learned and acquired. Whereas in the Islamic literature, there is a dearth of literature dedicated to the issue of competence and how competence can be learned and acquired due to the nature of the literature which inter-crosses and overlaps under the role and behaviour of vicegerence of man concept. According to Tayeb (1997) and Mellahi et. al. (2006) there is a gap in management research particularly in investigating the relationship between religion and management and the lack of role in human resource managers in facilitating training and development.

Acquiring knowledge in Islam is compulsory for each individual Muslim and it has become an important tradition within the Islamic society. The tradition of acquiring knowledge in Islam do not just produced obedient Muslims, but it has also produced competent Muslim professionals for the past many centuries. Al-Hassani (2006) reported that during the period 800 A.D. to 1600 A.D, there were Muslim scientists, engineers and architects who built buildings that defied gravity and mathematicians who created algebra and algorithms. There were Muslim doctors who founded new cures for disease, astronomers who paved the way for space travel and exploration, and writers who wrote thousands of stories. Their profound work became the source of civilization (via renaissance) for the western world.

It was estimated that during the golden age of Islamic civilization, there were around 150,000 million scientists and technologist where about 40000 of the scientist and technologists were engaged in research & development (R&D) activities (Shami, 2003). However, the golden period of Islamic civilization began to diminish during the Ottoman period due to various reasons. It was suggested that main factor was the due to the inability of Muslim to adopt scientific attitude and since then, the Muslim community lost their competence in the field of science and technology. According to Shami (2003), beginning the 18th century the retransmission of modern science to the Muslims occurred as a result of Western colonization; whereby the colonizers in Muslim lands utilize (through education and training) native workers to assist them in benefiting much needed raw materials.

But despite the retransmission of modern science to the Muslim community, the progress made by the Muslims are still not convincing as evidenced from the annual competitiveness report. To make matters complicated, the report on corruption index portrayed a very negative reputation of Muslim communities. Despite various educational and development programs, very little progress were made by Islamic countries neither in the field of science and technology nor in the socioeconomic activities. However, there are some Muslim professionals whom have made significant achievement in their professional career and recognized internationally. For example, in

the case of Malaysia Muslim professionals, Dr. Afifi al-Akiti became the first Muslim Malaysian to be appointed as a fellow at the Oxford University, in the United Kingdom. In 2014, three Malaysian Muslim scientists, namely Prof Dr Abdul Latif Ahmad from Universiti Sains Malaysia's School of Chemical Engineering, Prof Dr Ishak Hashim from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia's Science and Technology Faculty and Prof Dr Saidur Rahman from Universiti Malaya's Engineering Faculty were recognized as amongst The World's Most Influential Scientific Minds.

These are among the few listed in the major stream of media. The over emphasize of media over the Western professionals have undermined the achievement of Muslim professionals. In addition there are still other Muslim professionals whom are performing excellently within their own professional field. However, little effort has been done in understanding their competence. As an attempt to provide empirical evidence that could help to bring light upon Muslim professionals and Muslim community at large, this study was designed to fill in the gap of the existing literature.

The following were some of the questions that need to be addressed:
What is the meaning of competence to them?
What are the techniques that they adopted in acquiring competence?
What are the issues related to acquiring competence?

Thus this study was dedicated to fill-up the gap by investigating the role of Islamic values and principles on the development of competence amongst the professional Muslims in Malaysia. Furthermore this study was dedicated to explore the training and development strategies adopted by professionals in acquiring competence. This study was designed by adapting to a qualitative approach in exploring the phenomenon. The qualitative approach is chosen due to its suitability and strengths as described by Denzin and Lincoln (2003) and Babbie (2004). The qualitative approach would allow the researcher to understand the influence of Islamic values and principles on competence development, the organizational and social context that affects professional development of competence. Further in-depth explanations of the suitability

and strengths of qualitative approach can be found in Chapter 3. In line with the suitability of qualitative research nature, this study explored the understanding of competence and its acquisition with selected Muslim professionals in Malaysia.

1.4 Research Aim, Objectives and Questions

The previous sections have highlighted the little focus or work done on professional competence from the Islamic perspective. Hence, the aim of this study was to develop a model of competence acquisition of Muslim professionals.

1.4.1 Research Objectives

The overall purpose of this study was to form an understanding of how Muslim professionals acquire and develop competence, and this was achieved through the following research objectives:

- To investigate issues relating to the process of acquiring competence by drawing on the experiences of Muslim professionals.
- To determine how competence is acquired among Muslim professionals based on a case study on a selected number of Muslim professionals in Malaysia.
- To determine what tends to obstruct the development of competence with respect to professionals learning at the workplace.
- To make recommendations to Muslim professionals on ways to acquire competence.
- To develop a suitable model that represents the process of competence acquisition of Muslim professionals.

1.4.2 Research Questions

Based on the above objectives, the following research questions were outlined to address the research objectives:

Question 1: What are the issues relating to the process of acquiring professional competence and how might this be modelled?

Question 2: How competence is acquired based on a case study on a selected number of Muslim professionals in Malaysia?

Question 3: What are the challenges to the development of competence with respect to workplace learning of Muslim professionals?

Question 4: What types of development programs that could be suggested to improve Muslim professionals' level of competence?

Question 5: How can the work environments could be improved so that Muslim professionals can become professionally competent?

1.5 Significance of the Study

This study is significant from two perspectives, which are theoretical and practical. This study is significant theoretically because it attempts to build a broader understanding about professionals, in particular Muslim professionals in Malaysia, and how they acquire competence within the context of their work practices. In addition, indepth understanding of the meaning of competence from Muslim professionals would be later grounded to the Islamic literature in order to build up the substantive theory for the study.

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From the practical side, the information gained from conducting the focus group

discussions and in-depth interviews provided the principles in the development of a

model of competence acquisition for Muslim professionals.

1.6 **Definition of Key Terms**

The following terms are defined and used for the study:

Competence: Individual characteristics which include motives, traits, self-concepts,

knowledge and skills that differentiates superior from average performance or effective

from ineffective performance.

Muslim: A person who submits to Islam.

Professional: A person whose occupation is based upon a specialised study, training or

experience; the purpose of which is to apply skilled service or advice to others, or to

provide technical, managerial or administrative services to, or within, organisations in

return for a fee or salary.

Muslim Professionals: Professionals who submit to Islam and follow the Islamic

teachings and principles in offering and performing professional services.

1.7 The Scope and Limitations of the Study

This study adopted a non-homogenous purposive sampling method

recommended by Creswell (2005) based on two main criteria which are relevant to the

study. In this study, all participants must be professionals and Muslims.

This investigation was limited to a selected number of Muslim professionals who were involved in this study. The meaning of the word competence and their understanding of these issues was restricted to the individual's personal interpretations of the word and their abilities in reflecting to their own informal learning experience. The review of the Islamic literature and discussions were limited to the available resources which are written in English and Bahasa Malaysia only. Therefore, such writings are restricted and inconclusive of any material that may be available elsewhere which may have been written in Arabic.

1.8 The Organisation of the Report

This thesis is divided into six chapters. Chapter 1 serves to present an overview of the background of the study, research aim, objectives, research questions, limitations and significance of the study.

The literature review is presented in Chapter 2, and is divided into four sections. The first section provides a synopsis of the work on competence from the Western literature. In addition, it includes an overview of the main approaches of competence which are the behavioural approach, functional or standard approach and situational approach. Other approaches are technical-rational, reflective practitioner, meta-competencies, phenomenography and holistic. This is followed by a discussion of the literature on the acquisition and development of competence.

The second section provides a review of competence from the Islamic perspectives. This section also summarises the Islamic perspectives on training and development.

The third section of Chapter 2 explains the concept of profession and professional from the Western and Islamic perspectives. The Western perspectives on profession and competence cover the issue of professionals, environment, professional competence development and a model of professional competence. The discussion in this section continues with the Islamic perspectives on the professionals, professional bodies and ethics as well as an overview of Muslim professionals in Malaysia.

The final section of Chapter 2 is dedicated to learning theories. The first section describes the western perspectives of learning theories which include the social learning theory, situated learning theory and legitimate peripheral participation. The discussion continues to discuss the concept of communities of practice. The final section of this chapter discusses several concepts of learning according to Islamic perspectives.

Chapter 3 explains the research paradigm for this study, the research approach which employed focus group discussions and in-depth interviews. The following sections explain the selection process of participants for the focus group discussions and in-depth interviews. This section also explains the purpose, procedure and modus operandi for conducting the focus group discussions and the protocol and techniques involved for the in-depth interviews and the analysis techniques used. The final section describes the data management, the grounded theory approach analysis and the triangulation process.

Chapter 4 presents the findings from the focus group discussions and written exercises followed by Chapter 5 which describes the findings from the in-depth interviews.

Chapter 6 provide the summary of findings from the focus group discussions, written exercise and in-depth interviews. The chapter highlights the similarities and differences that arise from the three data collection techniques. It continues with the explanations on the contribution made by this study to the body of knowledge and its implication. This is followed by an examination of further literature that would shed light on the new findings based on the empirical findings.

Chapter 7 is the final chapter for this report. The first section of the chapter addresses the research questions for this study and offers some recommendations of the study. Subsequently, a model for competence acquisition of professional Muslims is presented. The final section describes the research contributions and implications of the study, and some recommendations for future research.

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