

Mosque Tourism Certification in *Waqf* Management: A Model by Ukhwah Samara

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ABSTRACT

This study proposes a model of a mosque tour guides certification programme to promote religious tourism and *waqf* management as developed by Ukhwah Samara, a non-profit organisation. The certification programme would begin with training to up-grade the knowledge of existing registered tour guides and include basic understanding of Islamic history and civilisation. A practical training and assessments for the certification would be conducted in participating mosques following the completion of the initial training. Ukhwah Samara together with four other bodies, namely, the respective mosques, State Islamic Religious Council, Sabah Tourist Guides Association (STGA) and World Federation of Tourist Guide Association (WFTGA), would be involved in this international certification process. In addition to generating *waqf* revenues for the mosques, the outcome of the proposed training model is to educate tourists in the unique social and cultural diversity of local ethnic communities. The study contributes to current literature, which is limited, on religious tourism and *waqf* management in Malaysia, and provides recommendations to improve the financial sustainability of mosques through religious tourism certification.

Keywords: Mosque certification, religious tourism, Ukhwah Samara, *waqf* management, World Federation of Tourist Guide Association

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INTRODUCTION

Waqf represents voluntarily donated assets by Muslims that are intended to be consumed or developed for the benefit

of the community. *Waqf* institutions operate similar to trustee institutions, and in Malaysia they are governed by state regulations and enactments under the auspices of the Head of State or Sultans. To a great extent, sustainability of *waqf* institutions such as mosques relies on continuous public confidence and financial support. As mosque activities expand and their demand for financial resources rise, these *waqf* institutions ought to plan for economic activities in line with the current business trend to generate continuous income.

One of the growing industries with the potential to be managed by mosques as an income-generating activity is tourism. Without reference to any particular faith, the origin of tourism as it is called today is rooted in the spiritual practice of pilgrimage. The current estimate of the annual religious travel market worldwide is reported to be US\$18 billion (Religious Travel, 2015). While this may probably be a conservative figure, it reflects the significance of religious tourism internationally. Thus, many countries today perceive tourism to be an increasingly important source of income, employment and foreign exchange receipts.

Prior research including by Ihsan and Adnan (2009), Said, Mohamed, Mohd Sanusi and Syed Yusuf (2013) and Masruki and Shafii (2013) on *waqf* mainly focussed on management aspects (e.g. governance, financial management and accountability). However, the rise in *waqf* activities and the establishment of new

waqf institutions in recent years require a close examination of issues related to *waqf* revenues. Currently, in Malaysia, Sabah is one of the states with the highest number of *waqf* properties. However, most of them are left unproductive and suffer from lack of public exposure and in some cases, total neglect. One of the main reasons is that the *waqf* institutions mostly operate as non-governmental organisations (NGOs). As with most NGOs, the main challenge is to generate sustainable revenue to cover operating and project costs. To achieve this, an NGO named Ukhwah Samara was established in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah with the vision of promoting mosque tourism. Its mission was based on the philosophy that humankind, regardless of their religious background, is entitled to happiness and equitable living to pursue a life of dignity and fulfilment.

The purpose of this paper is to introduce an international mosque tourism certification process as a potential source of income for *waqf* institutions. A model developed by Ukhwah Samara in Sabah is presented and discussed. Currently, there are 24 mosques in Sabah listed under the State Religious Affairs Department. The certification is intended to improve the professionalism of tour guides within the local communities and produce income for the mosques for their *waqf* management. The study suggests a systematic approach to managing *waqf* institutions such as mosques and contributes to the limited literature on religious tourism in Malaysia.

Ukhwah Samara

Ukhwah Samara (US) is a non-profit organisation (NGO) that was established in February 2014. In line with public interest and the recent growth of *waqf* activities in Sabah, three enthusiastic founders of US donated their own assets, including cash, to start charitable activities. The US office is currently located in a rent-free premise in Kampung Likas, Kota Kinabalu and managed by volunteers. The office space was rented and paid for by a local teacher who in turn invited US to operate at the location at no charge. The teacher also serves as a volunteer together with her students, friends and family members. These volunteers can be categorised into two main groups. The first are Muslim working adults whose roles are to plan and monitor the activities of US. Most are in their early forties and fifties. The second group is represented by Muslim and non-Muslim students enrolled in tourism studies at local universities in Kota Kinabalu. These students usually work voluntarily at US during weekends and term breaks.

The underlying philosophy of US is to enhance the livelihood of mankind, locally and across the globe. It is guided by compassion and seeks to aid all to prosper culturally, financially and intellectually. The stated vision of US is, "To become the best training, consultancy and certification centre for mosque tourism and culture in Asia Pacific." Its unique agenda is to promote mosque tourism and is dedicated to providing "a flexible training and

certification model for mosque tourism, which may be localised to accommodate all unique cultures and practices."

The idea to form the NGO was mooted on 28 March 2013 in Kota Kinabalu by three very close friends. They were surprised to observe the low level of and variations in the practice of Islam especially among the various ethnic groups in Sabah. This pioneering group was also disturbed to see the poor living conditions of the people particularly in a place called Sook. The observation is common in most areas in the interior of Sabah; the difficulty of finding mosques in most of the locations was a further concern to them. These factors were among the elements that energised them to establish the NGO in Kota Kinabalu. The name 'Ukhwah Samara' is a combination of two Arabic words: *ukhwah* means 'united' and *samara* is derived from *sa* (from the word *sakinah* or 'peace'), *ma* (from the word *mawaddah*, which means 'love') and *ra* (from the word *rahmah*, which carries the meaning 'compassion'). The name reflects the vision of the founders, who truly believe in promoting harmonious and borderless living in unity through love and caring.

Fig.1 presents the current organisational structure of Ukhwah Samara. The president is assisted by an advisory body that comprises experts from the industry, government agencies and local community. The selected industries that are represented on the board are tourism, hotel, media and culture while the appointed advisors from the government

and community are prominent religious experts and leaders. Its top management is made up of the president, vice-president, treasurer and corporate secretary. At this introductory stage, Ukhwah Samara's activities are focussed on three main areas. Each area is strategically positioned under one of the organisation's three divisions.

Headed by a director, the divisions are: (i) Tourism, Education and Community; (ii) Media, Cultural and Heritage; and (iii) Lodging and Recreation. At present, the Media, Cultural and Heritage (MCH) division receives the most resources and is very active in promoting mosque tourism.

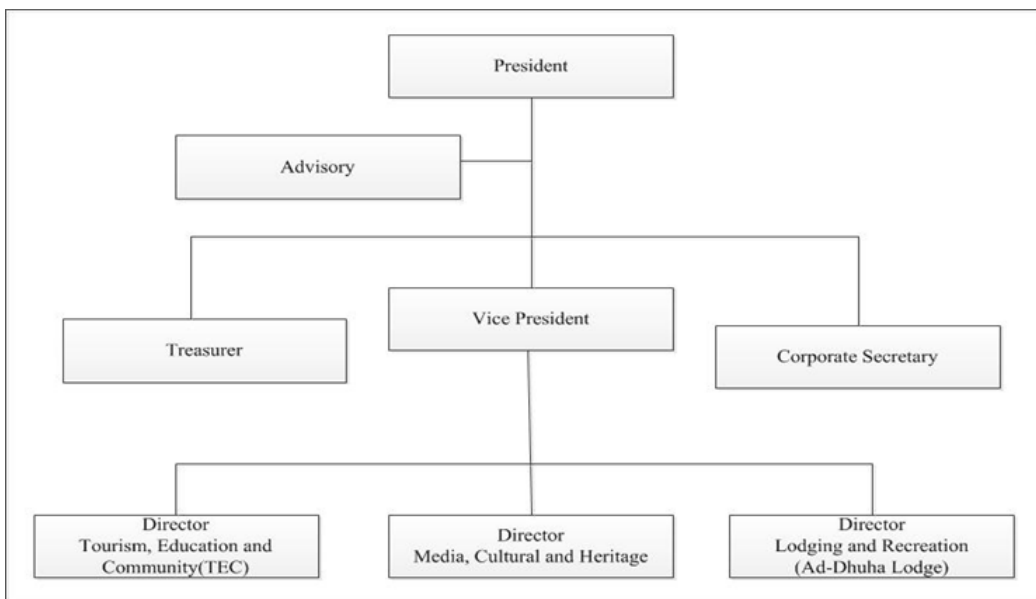


Fig.1: Organisational structure of Ukhwah Samara.

In order to generate awareness and significance of mosque tourism the TEC division is currently preparing a handbook on guidelines, which includes a comprehensive explanation of mosque tourism. Through TEC activities, volunteers have the opportunity not only to assist in the building of civil society but more importantly, in promoting the mosque as a major tourist destination and attraction. In promoting mosque tourism

this NGO has prioritised its main activities into four major roles: (i) to identify and invite local travel agents to participate in mosque tourism in Sabah; (ii) to certify participating travel agents as being fully compliant with the standards for mosque tourism; (iii) to identify and invite selected mosques to participate in mosque tourism; and (iv) to endorse qualified mosques for international certification.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Waqf is an Islamic term that refers to a religious endowment. It is a permanent dedication through the transfer of one's wealth to receive the blessing of Allah. The ownership of the asset is thus returned from the person making the *waqf* to Allah, the supreme creator. This implies that the ownership of the property or asset declared and transferred as *waqf* is withdrawn from the donor and used for public interest. In Islam the practice of *waqf* first started in the early years of Islamic civilisation when Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) offered a well of Bahruya' in Medina for purchase and opened it for public use. As cited in Kahf (2003), following that, Saiyidina Umar Al-Khattab also donated his property in a place named Khaibir as *waqf*. Today, the most prominent example of a *waqf* institution is the University of al-Azhar in Cairo, which started as a *waqf* and has been operating using endowment funds contributed by Muslims around the globe.

Waqf in Malaysia is governed by state legislature. Every state has its own religious council, which sets the *waqf* procedural matters and monitors *waqf* affairs. According to existing *waqf* procedures, every *waqf* property started as a private possession and must have a legal owner(s). After the act of *waqf*, the asset is placed under injunction from any form of further transaction and the property is transferred to a *waqf* institution, which acts as a permanent trustee to the asset. As such, it cannot be sold, inherited, granted (*hibah*) or preserved in a will (*wasiyyah*).

The property is then used for the purpose of community services that are *syariah*-compliant (complying with Islamic law) (Sabit & Hamid, 2007). Generally, agricultural or vacant land represents the main type of *waqf* asset. Such land is usually intended for education, health or religious teaching purposes.

Waqf Land for Mosque

Generally, *waqf* development results in the building of mosques, educational institutions, libraries and lodging. At present, according to the statistics provided by the Sabah Islamic Religion Board (SIRB) a total of 2743 *waqf* properties are registered with the agency and 945 (34%) of them are specifically dedicated for construction of and use as mosques. The highest number of *waqf* sites for mosques is in the district of Semporna (170 or 18%) followed by Tawau (154 or 16%). On the other hand, Keningau, Pensiangan, Kudat, Tambunan and Sandakan have among the lowest number of *waqf* land intended for the building of mosques. Kota Kinabalu, the state capital city, has only 55 (5%) of *waqf* land for this purpose. Other major categories of the uses of *waqf* land in Sabah include for the building of *musalla* (37%) and burial sites (16%). Similarly, Tawau and Semporna districts register the highest number of *waqf* sites for the building of *surau*. The number of *waqf* sites may reflect the dominance of Muslims in the areas, their religious commitment, the level of *waqf* knowledge, the awareness of the community and their social and economic status.

Once developed, the benefits of *waqf* properties are not restricted to the Muslim community alone. Rather, they extend beyond religious, cultural, racial and sectarian boundaries (Sabit & Hamid, 2007). Any revenue or income derived from activities using *waqf* properties is a *sadaqa jariya* (recurring, continuous or on-going charity) for the donor. The role of the mosque to Muslims is not limited to a place of gathering for daily prayer. Equally important is its role as a symbol of unity and a centre for peaceful activities where everyone is welcome and loved.

Mosque Tourism and Waqf Revenue

Mosque tourism represents a form of religious tourism. Religious travel or faith-based travel is evident in studies by Mazumdar and Mazumdar (2004), Al-Munajjid (2009), Bhuiyan, Siwar, Ismail and Rabiul Islam (2011), Timothy (2011), Betsy and Teri (2012) and Jafari and Scott (2014). The development and growth of tourism in Islamic countries has witnessed the recent innovation in promoting the mosque as a centre for tourism. The mosque has become one of the popular destinations among local and international tourists as part of attractive tour packages (Shafaei & Mohamed, 2015). The growth in the number of Muslim tourists suggests the need to evaluate the current branding and marketing strategies of Malaysia as a preferred Islamic destination. This country, with its multi-ethnic and multi-cultural setting, traditional cuisine and unique Asian heritage is already established as a top tourist destination in

Asia. As Malaysia has these advantages, the effort to promote mosque tourism should be taken seriously by Muslims as a means to generate *waqf* revenues and to sustain mosque activities. According to Mohd Hussin *et al.*, (2014), mosque activities are healthy for the economy and accommodate the needs of society.

All over the world, the al-Haram Mosque, the holiest mosque for Muslims and prominent mosques such as the cathedral-mosque of Córdoba in Spain, which symbolises the grandeur and spirituality of the Christian and Muslim periods (Suárez, Navarro & León, 2005) are visited daily by tourists. In Malaysia, the Zahir Mosque of Kedah is well known for its profound Indo-Saracenic architectural style. Other mosques of great attraction in Malaysia include the Putrajaya Mosque, the Kuala Kangsar Mosque in Perak and the Kristal Mosque in Kuala Terengganu. The Sultan Mosque in Singapore, which is among the top ten most beautiful mosques in the world, is another example of must-see mosques in this region. Religious tourists may not be motivated by spiritual motivation alone but might be interested to study the religious heritage of a culture. According to Smith (1992, p.386) “cultural tourists, or ‘secular tourists’ visit sacred sites as part of a broader itinerary. These people tend to visit sites that are holy to others, out of curiosity or an interest in culture.”

In Malaysia, mosques are under the trusteeship of the state religious council. The expenditure incurred in operating

mosques include the salaries of *imams* (mosque leaders), teachers and preachers while the basic utility costs of water and electricity are subsidised by the state. Without sufficient and consistent cash flow, the operations of mosques may be limited to only the basic religious activities. On the other hand, if each mosque were able to conduct activities that can attract visitors and generate revenues, it could reduce its reliance on state funding and public donations. From the economic point of view, *waqf* is a powerful mechanism to develop the nation (Pitchay, Meera, & Saleem, 2014). The large accumulation of *waqf* properties signifies the generosity and concern of wealthy individuals in up-lifting the economic and social life of Muslims. *Waqf* can be in cash, land and other properties. One of the most common development projects on *waqf* land is to build mosques, usually using cash *waqf*.

METHODOLOGY

This research uses a case-study approach. Masjid Bandaraya, one of the largest mosques in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah was selected as a subject of the study. It is located in an area named Likas and is well known as a tourist attraction for religious tourism in the state. The methods used in data gathering include reviews of the literature, open-ended interviews, observations, electronic data search and document reviews. Additional information was obtained from a briefing organised by the World Federation of Tourist Guide Association (WFTGA) and the Sabah

Tourist Guides Association (STGA) on 17 April, 2014. The session was organised in conjunction with an official visit of the WFTGA to Sabah and attended by one of the researchers. The main agenda of the briefing was to highlight the current concerns of WFTGA on tourism potentials and challenges in Sabah. The session was held at the main campus of Universiti Malaysia Sabah in Kota Kinabalu.

Following the briefing, a dialogue session among the researchers was organised to deliberate on the implications of and the action plan for US based on the WFTGA's resolutions on tourism development in Sabah. As a result of the dialogue, a special interview session was held with the State Mufti on 12 May, 2014 from 2.30 to 5.30pm. The session took place in Kota Kinabalu at the office of the State Mufti and was attended by three of the researchers. The main objective of the session was to gather the views of the Mufti regarding mosque tourism and request state support in the promotion activities.

A semi-structured approach was used to allow for informal discussion and flexibility in the dialogue. The interview started with a 30-minute presentation by one of the research team members on a proposed certification model for mosque tourism. Prior to the presentation, the proposal was discussed and amended three times in a monthly meeting with Ukhwah Samara. The main purpose of the presentation to the State Mufti was to provide the overall procedure, responsibilities and possible

challenges to be addressed at the state level relating to Islamic and cultural matters in mosque tourism certification.

Following that, the Mufti was invited to comment and provide feedback on the proposal. Specific questions were also addressed to the Mufti regarding the role of the State Islamic Religious Board on the development of commercial businesses on *waqf* property. The Mufti was very supportive of the initiative and gave assurance of his commitment to the project. His main concern was the fee that would be charged for the mosque certification and how it would be distributed among the parties involved. He suggested that a special meeting to discuss the financial implications should be held. The interview ended with an invitation to the Mufti to visit the office of US.

A Proposed Model for Mosque Tourism

The mosque as the epicentre for Muslims to pray and practise Islam is widely documented. However, there are growing numbers of non-Muslims who are becoming fascinated by mosques and are interested in visiting and seeing mosques. These are religious tourists or culture-and-heritage tourists. The historical and distinctive uniqueness of mosque structures and their architecture form the fundamental attractions for these tourists. In Sabah, for example, the State Mosque with its majestic dome and stunning gold inlay motif and the Bandaraya Mosque with its contemporary Islamic architecture represent two

outstanding styles of architecture. These well-known mosques have registered growth in the number of international tourists and the number is growing annually in tandem with Borneo numbers as Borneo becomes the new religious tourism hub. In general, these mosques receive a fair share of Muslim and non-Muslim tourists every year.

Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) said, "The most beloved places on Earth to Allah are its mosques, and the most despised places on Earth to Allah are its markets" (Sahih Muslim). Thus, it is not surprising to observe increased interest in mosque tourism including from international tourists, and the trend is expected to continue based on the current travel pattern. In Malaysia, even though allowing non-Muslims and international tourists to visit mosques is gaining public acceptance, to our knowledge, there is no specialised training or certification programme for mosque tour guides. The lack of training programmes affects the competency of tour guides, especially non-Muslims tour guides. This probably explains the observation that most tourists spend time taking photos inside and outside the mosque while some tourists remain in their tour busses, probably due to having no interest in mosque tour activities.

There are many issues faced by mosques in Sabah especially in Kota Kinabalu due to the recent influx of tourists to the sites. For example, almost all of the tour guides connected with both the

State Mosque and the Bandaraya Mosque are not professionally trained in specific knowledge of mosque tours. They are either volunteers or mosque personnel whose job description includes handling tourists who visit the mosque. At times no one is available to receive tourists and the simple solution is to assign security personnel to the job of guiding tourists. Therefore, Ukhwah Samara initiated a training programme for mosque tour guides catering for undergraduate students registered in the Bachelor of Business (Tourism Management) programme at Universiti Malaysia Sabah. As part of the course assignments, tourism students in their final year could choose to volunteer as tour guides for the Bandaraya Mosque in Kota Kinabalu. The students could gain practical experience and obtain credits as part of the industrial training requirement under this special arrangement between Ukhwah Samara and the mosque. The programme involves student presentations on the history, culture, heritage and varieties of interesting elements of Islam and mosques. The students have to equip themselves with the knowledge and understanding of Islam as preparation for the training. They also need to improve their confidence level and communication skills in order to efficiently perform tour guide activities.

This proactive project has revealed a number of weaknesses, and this has led to a model for the improvement of mosque tourism. In promoting mosque tourism, Ukhwah Samara prioritises

its main activities into four major roles: (i) to identify and invite the participation of local travel agents in meeting the criteria for handling mosque tours; (ii) to certify participating travel agents for compliance with the requirements for mosque tourism; (iii) to identify and invite the participation of selected mosques in specific districts; and (iv) to prepare for and certify the participating mosque as being compliant with mosque tourism activities and thus, authorized to engage in mosque tourism.

All of the training and certification programmes are planned to be offered in collaboration with MUIS as the major stakeholder, a local university as the training provider, the Sabah Tourist Guides Association (STGA) at the state level and the World Federation of Tourist Guide Association (WFTGA) at the international level. Fig.2 presents the proposed framework for certifying the tour guides for mosques. The programme begins with up-grading the knowledge of existing tour guides to include basic understanding of Islamic history and civilisation, mosque architecture, its traditional and contemporary functions and its roles in attracting tourism. This stage is followed by a second phase dedicated to practical training, which is to be conducted at the participating mosque. After the practical training period the trainees would be assessed and subsequently certified after complying with all the necessary criteria.

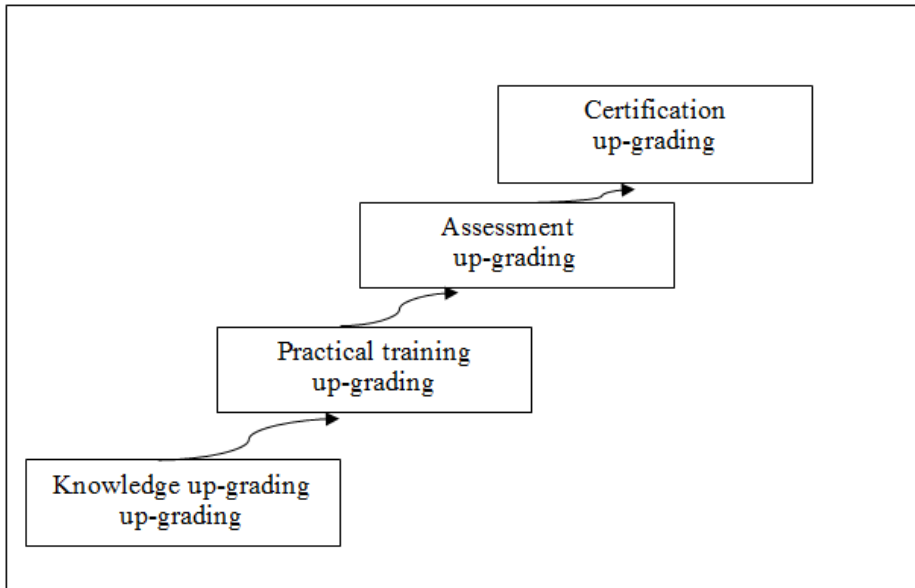


Fig.2: Certification model for mosque tour guides.

The certification is important to ensure acceptable standards of practice among tour guides and to meet the expectations of tourists. US would play an equally important role as the four other bodies, namely, MUIS, the mosques, STGA and

WFTGA, in the certification process as presented in Fig.3. This model for mosque tourism may be modified and localised to accommodate local cultures and their various unique practices.

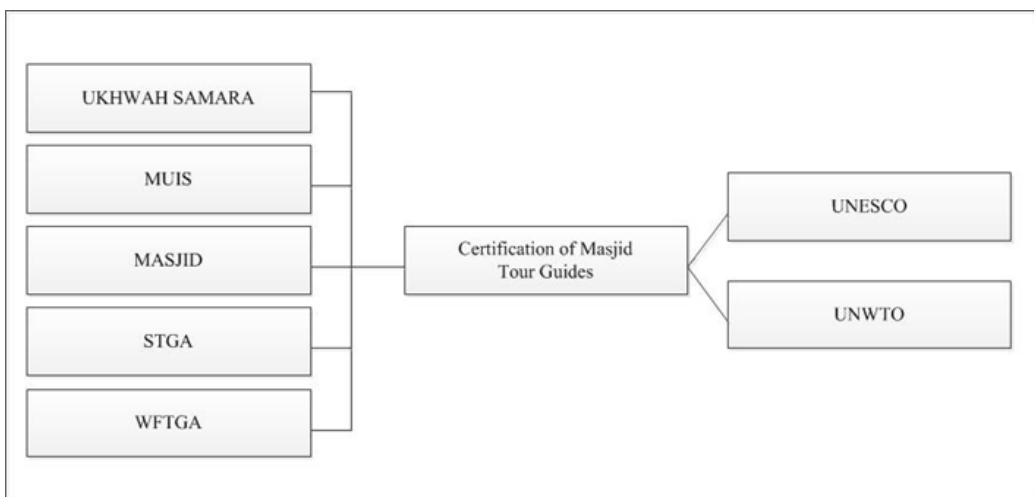


Fig.3: Agencies involved in mosque tour guide certification.

Achieving the recognition of and inclusion in the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and acceptance into the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) is the ultimate aim of this certification programme. This international standard certification provides added value to and enhances the Code of Ethic and Ethos of Malaysian tour guides. Countries with a Muslim-majority population, like Indonesia and Turkey, as well as those of a Muslim-minority population, like Japan or France, may be invited to participate in formulating the international criteria for the certification of mosque tour guides.

Tour guides are the human face of tourism. They interact directly with tourists and provide information about places that are visited, the local, the food and the culture. Every day, tourists travel to seek different adventures, attractions, destinations and experience. The entire experience is shaped by the personality, communication skills, knowledge and competency of the tour guide assigned to the group. The tour guide becomes the anchor or resource person and the key determinant for the tourists' satisfaction. Since the tourists may come from different countries where English may not necessarily be the *lingua franca*, the ability of tour guides to master other languages becomes an added advantage. Thus, the programme can be enriched by adding foreign language study. Currently, there exists a gap between demand and supply for German-, English-, Korean- or Japanese-speaking tour guides

in Sabah based on tourist arrivals from these countries. Training mosque tour guides in multiple languages would further enhance the value and quality of mosque and Islamic tourism.

CONCLUSION

Today, the main challenge of *waqf* management is to plan for revenue-generating activities in order to sustain their operations. Without a practical strategy and innovative planning, *waqf* institutions may not be successful in delivering their intended services and benefits to the public. To a great extent, sustainability of *waqf* institutions relies on continuous public confidence and financial support. As *waqf* activities expand and demand for financial resources also rise, *waqf* institutions ought to look for business ventures to generate continuous income for growth and sustainability. Ukhwah Samara has initiated and is currently promoting mosque tourism as a professionally certified and internationally recognised *waqf*-related activity. This is motivated by the global growth in religious tourism and the large number of land donations as *waqf* for the building of mosques in Sabah.

As a place of worship, the mosque provides a unique opportunity for non-Muslims to observe directly how Muslims perform their daily prayers. In addition, they would also be able to understand the history, culture and civilisation of Islam. Tourists normally expect unique and different experiences as part of their travelling. Travelling can be very pricy but

people are willing to pay in return for a rewarding journey. Most important of all, specific criteria must be developed before a mosque is authorised to conduct mosque tourism. This is necessary in order to ensure that basic facilities such as cleanliness and washroom standards meet tourist expectations and at the same time protect the image of the mosque. In addition, the local community must be aware of and actively participate in the mosque tourism programme to avoid unnecessary conflict due to lack of understanding.

Mosque tourists are not expected to have prior knowledge of Islamic values or religious requirements including the sensitive issue of attire. The local community, on the other hand, may get upset with what is considered improper dressing of tourists. Thus, mosques that are certified for religious tourism should provide proper information on attire as well as the necessary attire for those wishing to visit them. Furthermore, in promoting mosque tourism it is proposed that the state regulatory body adopt a model of tour certification for guides and the participating mosque. The certification process would provide training for both Muslim and non-Muslim tour guides and certify them as specialists in mosque tourism. The local experience of raising public donations and activities for the building of a specific mosque being toured on *waqf* property can be documented and presented to tourists. This documentary can help the tourists to further understand

the concept of *waqf* as a unique economic system in Islamic communities and as an Islamic practice.

The proposed model is still at its early stage and may not be immediately implemented. Designing training and certification is time consuming, while getting international recognition may take years of hard work and sacrifice. However, its long-term benefits make it a worthwhile effort for all stakeholders to ensure its success. As with any business venture, there are risks and returns involved in mosque tourism. In order to be successful and sustainable, mosque tourism also requires a proper plan and strategy, promotion and operational competencies. Through mosque tourism the local community can be motivated to learn other languages and cultures. They can directly benefit by participating in small-scale businesses including souvenir shops, handicraft outlets and cafeterias offering items of local pride to Muslims and Malaysians. The economic effects of this could be the subject of future empirical studies.

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