



Universities and the Muslim World

“The number of students in higher education worldwide has increased by 161% since 2000, a far greater rate of increase than the 30% rise seen in primary and secondary school, according to UNESCO’s 2026 Global Education Monitoring (GEM) report released on 25 March.” (Universitynews).

Today, more people than ever before are applying for a university education. This quest for knowledge has always been close to the hearts of Muslims, as they are urged throughout the Quran and Hadith to seek knowledge, observe, and reflect. This meant that throughout history, all over the Muslim world, advanced subjects were taught in masajid, schools, hospitals, observatories, and the homes of scholars, developing knowledge and learning that eventually spread to Europe.

In Islam, the place of religion and the place of learning are combined. There is no equivalent to this reality in other cultures. Some of the oldest universities are masajid. Famous masjid universities include Al-Azhar, which still exists today, 1,030 years later. As the focal point of higher learning in Egypt, it attracted the cream of intellects and it is known for its age and also for its illustrious alumni: Ibn al-Haytham, father of experimental optics, lived in Egypt for a long time and was attached to the university, and Ibn Khaldun, a leading 14th-century scholar who developed a new science that he called Ilm ul ‘Umran (knowledge of civilization), taught there.

The first-ever grand college masjid complex was Al-Qarawiyyin in Fez, Morocco. This university was originally built as a masjid in 859 during the Idrisids’ rule by Fatima al-Fihiri, a devout and practising young woman. She was well educated, and after inheriting a large amount of money from her father, a successful businessman, she vowed to spend her entire inheritance on building a masjid-university suitable for her community in Fez.

Like some of the masajid, Al-Qarawiyyin soon developed into a centre for religious instruction and political discussion, gradually extending its education to all subjects, particularly the natural sciences, and so it earned its name as one of the first universities in history. The university was well equipped, especially with astronomy instruments, and the “timer room” had astrolabes, sand clocks, and other instruments to calculate times. As well as astronomy, studies were in the Quran and theology, law, rhetoric, prose and verse writing, logic, arithmetic, geography, and medicine. There were also courses on grammar, Muslim history, and elements of chemistry and mathematics. This variety of topics and the high quality of its teaching drew scholars and students from a wide area.

These masjid-universities not only took local students but also those from other countries. So, in the famous Abbasid universities of Baghdad, Iraq, medicine, pharmacology, engineering, astronomy, and other subjects were taught to students from Syria, Persia, and India. Students at Al-Azhar University in Cairo included large numbers of foreigners, alongside Egyptians from areas outside Cairo.

At the Zaytuna Masjid in Tunisia, there were manuscripts on grammar, logic, documentation, the etiquette of research, cosmology, arithmetic, geometry, minerals,

and vocational training. Courses were difficult, and medicine was particularly grueling, with a strenuous examination. Anything less than a pass meant that the person could not practice medicine. The students of law went through undergraduate training and, if they were successful, were chosen by their master as a fellow. Only then could they go on to graduate studies, which lasted an indefinite period of time. It could be up to 20 years before they acquire their own professorial chair. The law student had to get a certificate of authorisation known as ijazas, and a license before practising. The license literally meant he now had “the right to teach.”

Muslims institutionalised higher-level education. There were entrance exams, challenging finals, degree certificates, study circles, international students, and grants. In fact, there is a remarkable similarity between the teaching procedures in these ‘medieval universities’ and the methods of the present day. They even had collegiate courses and prizes for proficiency in scholarship.

Muslim learning reached medieval Europe in the 12th century. A massive translation exercise began of Arabic works from the previous 500 years into medieval Latin, making available the rational ideas from experiments to a new audience. The availability of well-referenced material kick-started European tertiary education and questioned the idea that there had to be conflict between religion and science. At Chartres Cathedral School in the 1140s, Thierry of Chartres taught that the scientific approach was compatible with the story of creation in the Bible, paving the way for the Renaissance.

We see all of these examples of how Muslims during much of our history were the most advanced in education in the whole world, but now there is not even a single university from a Muslim country in the top 150 universities of 2026 according to the Times Higher Education rankings, and you can’t help but wonder why.

The Muslim scholars were ideological people who were studying creation in response to Allah’s command, and for the advancement of humans for the sake of Allah. They rooted all their studies within Islam and rather than keeping them ‘backward’, it ensured they excelled. Today, Muslims study in institutions that separate their studies from their religion, copying western civilizations secular Capitalist approach. We study failing societies where governments are unable to solve our problems and allocate very few resources to our educational institutions.

Individually, we may be able to accumulate qualifications, but as a society we need much more to ensure progress.

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