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Decolonising the Origins of the University: Fatima al-Fihri and the Islamic Foundations of Higher Education

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Abstrak

Objective: This research aims to examine the legacy of Fatima al Fihri and the establishment of the University of al Qarawiyyin as the historical foundation of higher education through a decolonial perspective and challenge the dominant narrative that attributes the origins of modern universities only to medieval European institutions. **Theoretical framework:** The research uses decolonial theory in the historiography of education to examine the contribution of Islamic civilization and women to the development of higher education. **Literature review:** The literature review covers university historiography, Islamic higher education, the role of Fatima al-Fihri, and the institutional system of Al Qarawiyyin, which includes curriculum, diplomas, teaching methods, and waqf financing. **Methods:** The literature review discusses the historiography of the origin of the modern university, the development of higher education in Islamic civilization, the role of Fatima al-Fihri as the founder of the University of al Qarawiyyin, as well as the institutional characteristics of Al Qarawiyyin, which include the curriculum, teaching methods, diploma system, and waqf-based financing in relation to the modern university model. **Results:** The results of the study show that Al Qarawiyyin has had the main characteristics of modern higher education institutions since the ninth century, including a curriculum system, teaching, diploma certification, and waqf-based financing. This research also confirms that Fatima al-Fihri played the role of an institutional architect of higher education, which showed the fundamental contribution of Islamic civilization in the formation of universities.

Implications: This research strengthens efforts to decolonize the historiography of education by encouraging a more inclusive recognition of the contributions of Islamic civilization and women. **Novelty:** The novelty of the research lies in the reinterpretation of the history of the University of al-Qarawiyyin through a decolonial perspective that places Fatima al-Fihri as the founder of the university and the pioneer of higher education.

Keywords: fatima al-fihri, university of al-qarawiyyin, decolonization of education, educational history, higher education foundations.

INTRODUCTION

With universities like Oxford, Paris, and Bologna usually cited as the first models of higher education, the history of the modern university is generally told through a primarily Eurocentric lens. Even though these establishments undoubtedly influenced the intellectual history of Europe, these accounts frequently downplay or ignore prior advancements in education in other cultures [1]. Specifically, Islamic civilization's institutional and intellectual achievements are still neglected in popular historiography. This imbalance calls for a critical reassessment of the origins of higher education through a decolonial framework that reexamines neglected historical evidence and expands the global understanding of university formation [2].

Fatima al-Fihri, who founded the University of al-Qarawiyyin in Fez, Morocco, in 859 CE, is one of the most fascinating but little-known individuals in this setting. Al-Qarawiyyin, which was founded centuries before the medieval colleges of Europe, became a famous hub of higher education that drew academics and students from all across North Africa, Andalusia, and beyond. Its institutional structure contradicts preconceived notions about the origins of the university model and makes it the oldest continually operating university in the world [3].

Beyond its historical forerunner, Al-Qarawiyyin possessed the fundamental traits of universities: a disciplined curriculum that included both religious and secular sciences, codified teaching methods, academic accreditation via the ijazah system, and a long-term financial model based on waqf (endowment). These characteristics show that long before comparable models emerged in Europe, Islamic civilization had already established sophisticated mechanisms of information transmission. Therefore, Al-Qarawiyyin's marginalization in international educational discourse is a reflection of the continuance of colonial frameworks in the telling of intellectual history rather than a lack of historical reality [4].

The gender aspect of this story is equally important. Fatima al-Fihri's founding role directly challenges long-held beliefs about women's marginalization in early societies' institutional and intellectual leadership. Her founding of Al-Qarawiyyin serves as evidence that women in early Islamic civilization were not only involved in academic pursuits but also created long-lasting educational establishments. Thus, putting her contribution front and center has both historiographical and epistemic benefits: it challenges gender-exclusionary views of educational growth while giving agency to underappreciated players [5].

Therefore, by reevaluating the university's beginnings through the case of Fatima al-Fihri and Al-Qarawiyyin, this work aims to decolonize the historiography of higher education. Using a historical-analytical methodology based on qualitative library research, the study assesses the institutional features of Al-Qarawiyyin in light of modern definitions of the university and investigates the socio-religious, intellectual, and economic circumstances that contributed to its formation. By doing this, it hopes to provide a more comprehensive and historically informed view of higher education around the world, one that recognizes the fundamental influence of Islamic civilization in forming the frameworks of higher education [6].

According to the prevalent historiography of higher education, medieval European universities, especially those established in Bologna, Paris, and Oxford in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, are largely responsible for the development of the contemporary university. Even if there is no denying that these establishments influenced Western academic traditions, these accounts frequently downplay earlier advancements in non-European civilizations, especially in the Islamic world. An inadequate and occasionally exclusive grasp of global intellectual history has resulted from this Eurocentric framing. Institutions like the University of al-Qarawiyyin were founded centuries ago, according to historical evidence, but their influence on the systems of higher education is still not fully acknowledged in the mainstream of academia [7].

Additionally, Fatima al-Fihri's pivotal involvement adds a new perspective that questions prevalent female stereotypes in educational history. Oftentimes, women's contributions to institutional growth are disregarded or undervalued, which supports stereotypes that early academic leadership was solely occupied by men. Thus, the marginalization of Fatima al-Fihri's legacy reflects both gender-exclusionary historiographical tendencies and civilizational bias. As a result, it is imperative to reevaluate the university's beginnings using a decolonial framework that acknowledges the contributions of Islamic civilization as well as women's leadership in the establishment of higher education institutions [8].

By critically analyzing Al-Qarawiyyin's founding within its socio-religious, intellectual, and economic background and assessing its institutional features in light of generally recognized conceptions of the university, this work fills this historiographical void. By doing this, it hopes to add to a more comprehensive and impartial narrative of the history of higher education worldwide [9].

In order to reevaluate the beginnings of higher education from a decolonial standpoint, this study is guided by a number of interconnected concerns. First, how much of the institutional development of the university model can be attributed to the founding of the University of al-Qarawiyyin in 859 CE? Second, what intellectual, economic, and socioreligious elements made it possible for it to emerge and persist in early Islamic civilization? Third, how do the structural elements of Al-Qarawiyyin, including its curriculum, teaching methods, ijazah certification system, and waqf-based finance model, align with the traits that make up a contemporary university? [10].



Figure 1. Image of Fatima al-Fihri

Furthermore, how does emphasising Fatima al-Fihri's position in the historiography of education contradict prevailing Eurocentric and gender-exclusionary narratives? Lastly, how might acknowledging Islamic contributions to university establishment support larger initiatives to decolonise intellectual history worldwide and reframe the history of higher education in a way that is more inclusive? [11].

LITERATURE REVIEW

Eurocentric interpretations that place the university's beginnings in medieval Europe have long dominated its historiography. Early examples of the university model include the

University of Bologna (1088), the University of Paris (c. 1150), and Oxford University (c. 1096), according to foundational texts in the history of higher education. According to these narratives, a university is usually defined as a corporate entity of masters and students (*universitas*), with independent governance, regulated curricula, and the power to award degrees. Critics contend that these studies frequently overlook earlier educational forms outside of the European context, thereby establishing a civilizational hierarchy in intellectual history, even though they have offered insightful information on the institutionalisation of higher learning in Europe [12].

By emphasising the advanced educational institutions of the Islamic world, recent scholarship has called into question these Eurocentric paradigms more and more. The growth of mosques, madrasas, and academic networks that served as hubs of higher education starting in the seventh century has been chronicled by Islamic culture historians. The founding of the University of al-Qarawiyyin in 859 CE has received fresh attention in this literature as a key college formation. Al-Qarawiyyin, according to scholars, demonstrated a number of characteristics common to later European universities, such as institutionalized teaching circles, specialized fields of study, academic accreditation via the *ijazah* system, and institutional continuity maintained by charitable endowments (*waqf*) [13].

The designation of early Islamic institutions as "universities" in the contemporary sense is still up for debate, though. According to some historians, medieval European colleges had a different corporate and legal framework than previous madrasas. Some argue that this divergence is frequently exaggerated and stems from definitional frameworks influenced by Western institutional paradigms. Comparative research has shown that Islamic educational establishments have upheld strict policies regarding transregional academic mobility, multidisciplinary work, and intellectual authorization. These traits make it more difficult to draw clear lines between "madrasa" and "university," pointing to a more flexible and interwoven development of higher education throughout history [14].

Scholars have looked at the early Islamic civilization's larger intellectual milieu in addition to institutional research. Scholarship in the fields of jurisprudence, theology, grammar, philosophy, astronomy, and medicine flourished during the ninth century. Centers like Fez, Cairo, and Baghdad played important roles in the integrated intellectual culture that was produced by the dissemination of knowledge throughout North Africa, Al-Andalus, and the larger Islamic world. Therefore, rather than being seen as a singular phenomenon, the rise of Al-Qarawiyyin needs to be placed within this dynamic intellectual ecology. A comprehensive epistemological framework that combined faith and reason was reflected in its curriculum, which included both religious sciences (*'ulum al-din*) and rational sciences (*'ulum al-'aql*) [15].

Fatima al-Fihri is still relatively understudied in the general academic discourse, despite these advances in research. Her contribution has frequently been overlooked by contemporary educational historiography, even though Islamic historical texts recognize her as the originator. Scholars of gender studies and feminist history have started to reevaluate how women participated in early Islamic cultures' institutional and intellectual life. Their study disproves previous theories that women were not allowed to pursue public academia by showing that they served as hadith transmitters, educational institution patrons, and benefactors of scholarly endowments. Fatima al-Fihri is a noteworthy but little-studied example of female institutional leadership in this new body of research [16].

However, there are still gaps in the literature. Fewer studies combine these aspects into a cohesive examination of university origins, even while separate studies have focused on decolonial theory, women's intellectual engagement, and Islamic educational institutions. Research that concurrently looks at the *ijazah* certification system, the socioeconomic mechanics of *waqf* finance, the institutional characteristics of Al-Qarawiyyin, and the gendered implications of its establishment is limited. Furthermore, rather than being

analytically fair, comparisons between Islamic and European models frequently stay fractured or contentious [17].

By combining gender analysis, decolonial theory, and institutional history into a coherent framework, this study aims to close these gaps. The study adds to existing scholarly discussions on the worldwide roots of higher education by placing the establishment of Al-Qarawiyyin within its larger civilizational context and assessing its structural features alongside modern definitions of the university. By doing this, it promotes a change in historiography that aims to give an account of intellectual history that is more inclusive and critically analytical [18].

Table 1. Summary of Literature Review on the Origins of the University and Al-Qarawiyyin

Theme	Main Argument in Literature	Key Issues / Debates	Relevance to This Study
Eurocentric Historiography	Universities originated in medieval Europe (Bologna, Paris, Oxford) with corporate identity, governance, and degree systems.	Tendency to privilege Western institutional models and create a civilizational hierarchy.	Establishes the dominant narrative this study critiques.
Islamic Educational Institutions	Mosques and madrasas functioned as centers of higher learning from the 7th century onward.	Debate over whether these institutions qualify as “universities” in the modern sense.	Positions Al-Qarawiyyin as an early model of structured higher education.
Al-Qarawiyyin (859 CE)	Demonstrated institutional continuity, teaching circles, ijazah certification, and waqf-based sustainability.	Question of legal-corporate differences compared to European universities.	Central case study showing structural parallels with later universities.
Ijazah Certification System	Formalized scholarly authorization and academic transmission.	Whether ijazah equates to degree-granting authority.	Supports the argument of academic institutionalization in Islamic tradition.
Waqf Financial Model	Provided sustainable, independent funding for education.	Comparison with later European endowment systems.	Demonstrates economic sophistication and institutional autonomy.
Comparative Institutional Debate	Some historians stress structural differences; others argue that differences are exaggerated.	Definitional bias shaped by Western paradigms.	Encourages a more flexible, global understanding of university evolution.
Intellectual Ecology of Early Islam	The 9th-century Islamic world fostered scholarship in theology, law, philosophy, medicine, astronomy, and grammar.	Risk of isolating Al-Qarawiyyin from its broader intellectual network.	Places Al-Qarawiyyin within a dynamic transregional knowledge system.
Gender and	Women participated as	Fatima al-Fihri is	Introduces gender

Institutional Leadership	scholars, hadith transmitters, patrons, and founders.	underrepresented in mainstream historiography.	analysis into university origin debates.
Research Gaps	Studies often separate decolonial theory, gender, and institutional analysis.	Lack of integrated, multidisciplinary examination.	Justifies this study's integrated theoretical framework.
Contribution of This Study	Combines institutional history, gender analysis, decolonial theory, ijazah system, and waqf finance.	Moves beyond fragmented or contentious comparisons.	Promotes a more inclusive and critically analytical historiography of higher education.

METHODOLOGY

In order to investigate the beginnings of higher education, this study uses a qualitative historical-analytical research design, focusing on the University of al-Qarawiyyin and its founder, Fatima al-Fihri. The study mostly uses qualitative library-based research, utilizing both primary and secondary historical sources, due to the historical nature of the research subject. In addition to reconstructing historical changes, the interpretive and critical methodological approach examines how those developments have been framed within the prevailing body of educational historiography [19].

A historical-analytical framework is used in the study. In terms of history, it explores the economic, intellectual, and socioreligious circumstances of Islamic civilisation in the ninth century, which made it possible for Al-Qarawiyyin to be founded in 859 CE. Analytically, it compares the curriculum, teaching strategies, certification system (ijazah), and waqf-based funding structure of Al-Qarawiyyin to well-recognised elements of the contemporary university paradigm. Both contextual reconstruction and comparative institutional evaluation are made possible by this dual strategy [20].

A decolonial analytical perspective is also incorporated into the study. The study critically analyses how Eurocentric notions of the university were historically developed and how they might exclude non-European institutional forms, as opposed to accepting them as neutral or universal. The study aims to reevaluate the epistemic presuppositions that underlie prevailing narratives of higher education history by utilising decolonial theory. The research is based on qualitative library research utilising:

1. Primary historical sources, including classical Islamic historical writings, biographical dictionaries (tabaqāt literature), and documented records related to the foundation of Al-Qarawiyyin and waqf endowments.
2. Secondary scholarly works, including academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and contemporary historiographical analyses on Islamic education, medieval universities, gender in Islamic history, and decolonial theory.
3. Comparative educational studies, particularly those examining structural similarities and differences between Islamic madrasas and European medieval universities.

The selection of sources was guided by relevance, academic credibility, and contribution to the thematic areas of institutional structure, gender analysis, and decolonial historiography.

Data analysis was conducted through thematic and comparative analysis. First, historical data about the establishment and growth of Al-Qarawiyyin were divided into the following subject categories: financial organisation, certification, curriculum, pedagogy, institutional structure, and gender dimension. Second, these elements were contrasted with the common definitions and traits that higher education literature attributes to universities in medieval Europe. Critical discourse analysis was also used to investigate how the university's

beginnings are framed by prevailing historiographical narratives. This required looking for definitional bias, selective focus, and exclusionary patterns in popular academic literature. The study assesses the degree to which Eurocentric frameworks have influenced conceptions of educational development around the world through this approach [21].

The study is grounded in decolonial theory, which critiques the persistence of colonial epistemologies in global knowledge production. Decolonial scholarship argues that historical narratives often privilege European experiences as universal standards while marginalising alternative intellectual traditions. By applying this framework, the research reassesses the classification of Al-Qarawiyyin and re-centres Islamic civilisation within the genealogy of higher education. Simultaneously, gender analysis informs the methodological approach. By foregrounding the role of Fatima al-Fihri, the study challenges androcentric interpretations of educational history and highlights women’s institutional agency in early Islamic society. This intersection of decolonial and gender perspectives enables a multidimensional reassessment of university origins [22].

As a qualitative historical study, this research relies on available documentary and scholarly sources, which may themselves reflect interpretive biases or gaps in archival preservation. Furthermore, the classification of early institutions as “universities” involves definitional debates that remain contested within academic discourse. The study does not claim to provide a definitive resolution to these debates but rather contributes to ongoing scholarly discussion by presenting a critical and comparative analysis [23].

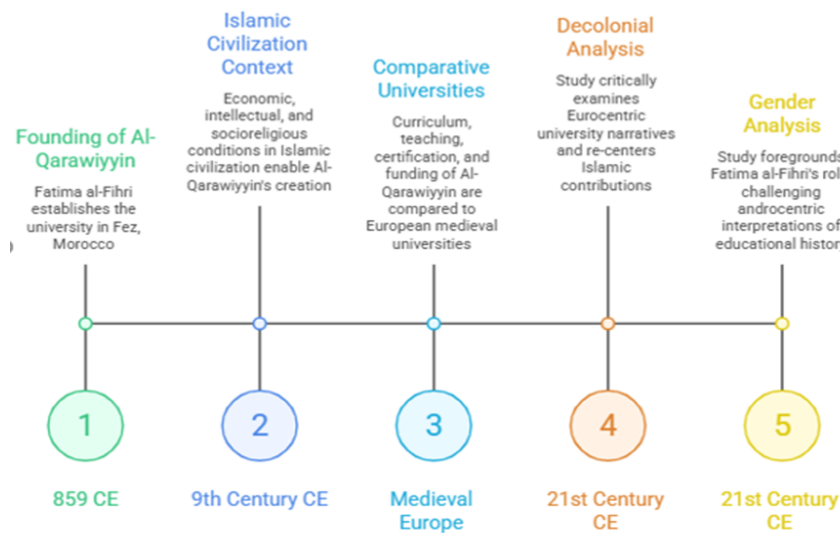


Figure 2. Key Milestones in the founding of Qarawiyyin

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Institutional Foundations of Al-Qarawiyyin

According to the study's findings, centuries before European medieval universities came into being, the University of al-Qarawiyyin displayed a number of institutional traits that are typically linked to the modern university model. Al-Qarawiyyin, which was founded in Fez, Morocco, in 859 CE, evolved gradually from a congregational mosque into a permanent and organised centre of higher education. Its functional development shows a purposeful institutionalisation of study that went beyond devotional practice into systematic intellectual formation, notwithstanding its religious architectural roots [24].



Figure 3. University of al-Qarawiyyin

According to historical records, Al-Qarawiyyin had formal teaching circles (halaqat) that were supervised by renowned academics with well-established reputations in their fields. These academics formed a recognisable intellectual authority structure within the university rather than serving as casual lecturers. Pupils studied under particular instructors, developing enduring academic bonds that can last for years. A discernible academic community with intellectual hierarchy, specialisation, and mentorship is reflected in this continuity of education. These characteristics fit nicely with fundamental institutional ideas that were eventually codified in European universities, such as organised faculty and systematic intellectual transfer [25].

A thorough intellectual framework that integrated theological and rational disciplines, including jurisprudence (fiqh), theology (kalam), language, logic, astronomy, and medicine, was reflected in the curriculum. The faculty-based systems of later institutions are similar to this kind of multidisciplinary. The university has shown its transregional academic importance by drawing students from all over Al-Andalus and North Africa [26].

The idea that structured higher education only developed in Europe is called into question by these institutional characteristics. The fundamental academic components of organized education, certification, interdisciplinary scholarship, and scholarly continuity were already well established at Al-Qarawiyyin centuries before, even while European institutions created unique corporate models [27].

Table 2. Summary of Literature Review on the Origins of the University and Al-Qarawiyyin

Theme	Main Argument in Literature	Key Issues / Debates	Relevance to This Study
Eurocentric Historiography	Universities originated in medieval Europe (Bologna, Paris, Oxford) with corporate identity, governance, and degree systems.	Tendency to privilege Western institutional models and create a civilizational hierarchy.	Establishes the dominant narrative this study critiques.
Islamic Educational Institutions	Mosques and madrasas functioned as centers of higher learning from the 7th century onward.	Debate over whether these institutions qualify as “universities” in the modern sense.	Positions Al-Qarawiyyin as an early model of structured higher education.
Al-Qarawiyyin (859 CE)	Demonstrated institutional continuity, teaching circles, ijazah certification, and waqf-based sustainability.	Question of legal-corporate differences compared to European universities.	Central case study showing structural parallels with later universities.

Ijazah Certification System	Formalized scholarly authorization and academic transmission.	Whether ijazah equates to degree-granting authority.	Supports the argument of academic institutionalization in Islamic tradition.
Waqf Financial Model	Provided sustainable, independent funding for education.	Comparison with later European endowment systems.	Demonstrates economic sophistication and institutional autonomy.
Comparative Institutional Debate	Some historians stress structural differences; others argue that differences are exaggerated.	Definitional bias shaped by Western paradigms.	Encourages a more flexible, global understanding of university evolution.
Intellectual Ecology of Early Islam	The 9th-century Islamic world fostered scholarship in theology, law, philosophy, medicine, astronomy, and grammar.	Risk of isolating Al-Qarawiyyin from its broader intellectual network.	Places Al-Qarawiyyin within a dynamic transregional knowledge system.
Gender and Institutional Leadership	Women participated as scholars, hadith transmitters, patrons, and founders.	Fatima al-Fihri is underrepresented in mainstream historiography.	Introduces gender analysis into university origin debates.
Research Gaps	Studies often separate decolonial theory, gender, and institutional analysis.	Lack of integrated, multidisciplinary examination.	Justifies this study's integrated theoretical framework.
Contribution of This Study	Combines institutional history, gender analysis, decolonial theory, ijazah system, and waqf finance.	Moves beyond fragmented or contentious comparisons.	Promotes a more inclusive and critically analytical historiography of higher education.

Curriculum and Pedagogical Structure

Al-Qarawiyyin exemplified a holistic epistemic approach that integrated both religious and rational sciences, according to an analysis of the curriculum. An educational philosophy that did not distinguish between faith and reason is indicated by the coexistence of rational sciences ('ulum al-'aql) and transmitted sciences ('ulum al-naql). This integration is in line with how universities' interdisciplinary academic frameworks are currently understood [28].

Direct academic mentoring, textual commentary, memorization, discussion, and critical thinking were the main pedagogical focuses of instruction. Students were given the authority to teach particular texts or subjects through the ijazah certification system, which served as an academic authorization mechanism. Although the ijazah was architecturally distinct from contemporary degree programs, it served the same purposes of certifying academic proficiency. Thus, the results imply that previous to European institutionalization, academic accreditation, intellectual hierarchy, and standards of scholarly authority were firmly established within Islamic educational institutions [29].

The primary pedagogical foci of instruction included direct academic mentoring, textual commentary, memorization, discussion, and critical thinking. Through the ijazah certification system, which functioned as an academic authorization process, students were granted permission to teach specific texts or courses. Despite having a different architectural design from modern degree programs, the ijazah fulfilled the same functions of attesting to academic competence. The findings, therefore, suggest that academic certification,

intellectual hierarchy, and criteria of scholarly authority were well-established in Islamic educational institutions before European institutionalization [30].

Additionally, rather than encouraging passive knowledge acquisition, the educational setting promoted active intellectual involvement. Under the guidance of their lecturers, students asked questions, took part in organized discussions (munazarat), and closely examined texts. Since information was tracked down through reputable academic authorities, the emphasis on isnad (chains of transmission) guaranteed both intellectual rigor and accountability. This methodological discipline established a structured hierarchy of learning that governed academic advancement and reinforced criteria of authenticity and scholarly honesty [31].

Al-Qarawiyyin operated as an advanced center of higher learning with established academic norms, not just a religious study circle, as evidenced by its multidisciplinary curriculum, structured mentorship, ijazah certification, and transregional scholarly mobility. The idea that formal instructional organisation and accreditation developed exclusively in medieval Europe is further called into question by these findings. Rather, they contend that early Islamic civilization already had highly developed, organized forms of higher education, which made a substantial contribution to the development of university institutions worldwide [32].

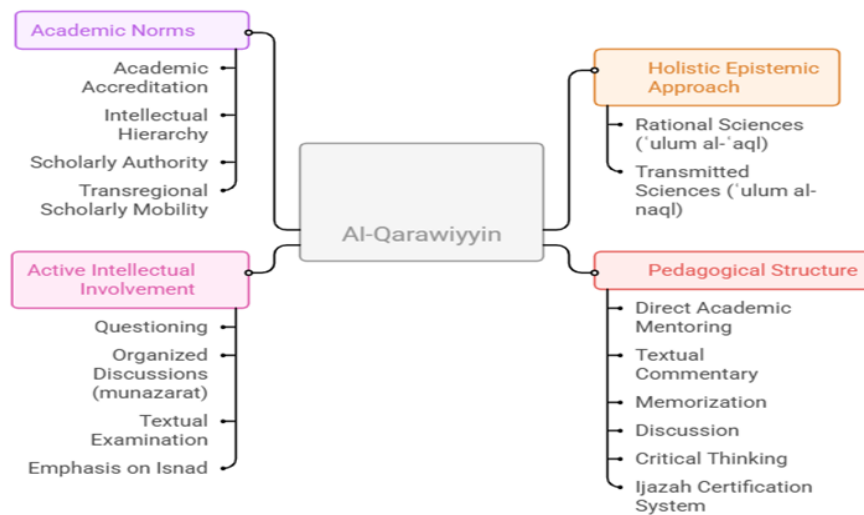


Figure 3. Al-Qarawiyyin: Holistic Epistemic Approach and Pedagogical Structure

Waqf-Based Financial Sustainability

The waqf (charitable endowment) system that provided funding for the University of al-Qarawiyyin is another important institutional characteristic that this study uncovered. By providing money for upkeep, salaries, scholarships, library materials, and infrastructure expansion, endowments guarantee long-term viability. The waqf concept created a permanent and legally binding financial vehicle to ensure educational continuity throughout generations, in contrast to transient patronage. Although it predates them in time, this independent funding mechanism is similar to later European benefaction and ecclesiastical endowment systems [33].

The waqf system exhibits institutional foresight and advanced economic planning. Al-Qarawiyyin established a solid and autonomous financial foundation by supporting the organisation with revenue-generating assets like real estate, marketplaces, or agricultural areas [34]. This arrangement lessened reliance on direct state authority and decreased susceptibility to unstable political environments. This strengthened the institution's intellectual life's resilience by allowing scholarly activity to persist in the face of dynastic or political power shifts.

Furthermore, the ethical underpinnings of waqf as a type of philanthropic investment demonstrate how Islamic civilisation integrates social responsibility with educational achievement. Education was seen as a social good that needed organised, long-term support rather than just being an individual endeavour. This collective engagement in the creation of knowledge is consistent with contemporary conceptions of universities as public service organisations dedicated to the long-term advancement of society [35].

Many people consider this kind of financial independence to be a hallmark of developed university systems. Therefore, the evidence supports the claim that, even before the European university endowment models were consolidated, Al-Qarawiyyin incorporated fundamental institutional features of higher education. The linear narratives that place the structural sophistication of universities only within the Western medieval tradition are further challenged by acknowledging this economic dimension [36].

Table 3. Institutional and Financial Structure of the Waqf System at al-Qarawiyyin

Aspect	Explanation	Institutional Impact	Comparative Insight
Definition of Waqf	A legally binding charitable endowment dedicated to public benefit, especially education.	Ensured permanent financial support across generations.	Predates European benefaction and ecclesiastical endowment systems.
Financial Coverage	Funded salaries, scholarships, maintenance, library materials, and infrastructure expansion.	Guaranteed operational continuity and institutional stability.	Comparable to later university endowment structures in Europe.
Revenue Sources	Income-generating assets such as real estate, marketplaces, and agricultural lands.	Created a self-sustaining and autonomous financial base.	Similar to modern university investment portfolios.
Independence from the State	Reduced reliance on direct political or dynastic authority.	Increased resilience during political transitions and power shifts.	Reflects modern principles of institutional autonomy.
Economic Foresight	Structured long-term financial planning embedded in religious-legal frameworks.	Demonstrates advanced economic planning in medieval Islamic civilization.	Challenges the narrative that institutional sophistication began in Western medieval universities.
Ethical Foundation	Based on philanthropy and social responsibility within Islamic civilization.	Education is treated as a collective social good rather than a private pursuit.	Aligns with contemporary understanding of universities as public service institutions.
Historical Significance	Demonstrates structural maturity of higher education institutions.	Positions Al-Qarawiyyin as institutionally advanced before European consolidation.	Challenges the linear Western-centric historiography of university development.

Gender and Institutional Leadership

Fatima al-Fihri's foundational importance is one of the study's main conclusions. According to historical records, she personally oversaw the building of the University of al-Qarawiyyin and dedicated it as a waqf for the public good using her inheritance. Her participation was institutionally and materially crucial rather than merely symbolic. She accepted a degree of civic and intellectual responsibility by founding and funding a permanent center of higher learning in 859 CE, challenging common beliefs about women's isolation from institutional leadership in early societies [37].

The founding of Al-Qarawiyyin challenges prevailing narratives in educational historiography that depict university construction as solely male-driven from a gender perspective. Women's structural contributions to the evolution of education are often overlooked in mainstream narratives of the origins of universities, which tend to emphasize male theologians, jurists, and scholars. Fatima al-Fihri's story shows that women in early Islamic society could play a variety of roles, including founding, supporting, and designing long-lasting educational institutions [38].

Furthermore, the larger framework of women's involvement in Islamic intellectual life must be taken into consideration when analyzing her leadership. In several parts of the Islamic world, women are described in historical records as intellectuals, instructors, benefactors, and hadith transmitters. Thus, the establishment of Al-Qarawiyyin represents a larger social structure in which women had the legal right to financial independence, property ownership, and charity endowment rather than a singular oddity. Women like Fatima al-Fihri were able to convert their personal fortune into an institutional legacy thanks to these structural rights [39].

Fatima al-Fihri's initiative also reflects a sophisticated understanding of institutional permanence. By designating the foundation as a waqf, she ensured that the institution would not remain dependent on fluctuating political patronage or temporary charity. Instead, it was embedded within a legally protected economic framework that guaranteed continuity across generations. This strategic foresight demonstrates that her contribution extended beyond philanthropy into the realm of long-term institutional design. The durability of Al-Qarawiyyin over more than a millennium stands as historical evidence of the structural strength of her founding vision [40].

Moreover, her legacy invites a broader reconsideration of how authority and knowledge production are conceptualized in intellectual history. Rather than viewing women solely as participants within educational systems, Fatima al-Fihri's example positions a woman as an architect of higher learning itself. This reframing has significant implications for both decolonial and gender-sensitive historiography, as it challenges inherited assumptions about who is recognized as a founder of institutions. Recognizing her foundational role not only restores historical balance but also expands contemporary understandings of leadership, agency, and the global origins of the university tradition [41].

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the University of al-Qarawiyyin represents one of the earliest and most enduring foundations of higher education, offering compelling evidence that challenges the dominant Eurocentric narrative attributing the origin of the university exclusively to medieval Europe. Through a historical and conceptual analysis, the findings reveal that al-Qarawiyyin possessed institutional characteristics comparable to those associated with the modern university, including organizational continuity, an ijazah-based certification system, waqf-supported financial sustainability, a multidisciplinary curriculum, and a vibrant scholarly community that promoted intellectual exchange across generations. These features indicate that the Islamic educational tradition established sophisticated models of higher learning long before the emergence of many European universities. The study also

highlights the pivotal contribution of Fatima al-Fihri as the founder of al-Qarawiyyin, emphasizing her remarkable role as a female educational pioneer whose vision significantly shaped the development of higher education. Her legacy demonstrates that women were active agents in the establishment and advancement of educational institutions within Islamic civilization, thereby challenging historical narratives that have frequently marginalized female contributions. Recognizing her role broadens the understanding of gender, leadership, and philanthropy in the history of education. Academically, this research contributes to the growing discourse on decolonising the history of higher education by proposing a more inclusive and balanced historiography that acknowledges the intellectual achievements of Islamic civilization alongside those of Europe. Practically, the findings encourage universities, historians, and policymakers to incorporate diverse historical perspectives into higher education curricula, promoting intercultural understanding and historical justice. Nevertheless, this study is limited by its reliance on historical documentary sources and conceptual analysis. Future research should employ comparative, archival, and interdisciplinary approaches to further examine institutional links between Islamic centers of learning and medieval European universities, thereby enriching global scholarship on the origins and evolution of higher education.

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Author Contribution

All authors contributed equally to this study. Their contributions included conceptualization, literature review, historical analysis, methodology, data interpretation, project coordination, institutional support, manuscript drafting, language editing, critical revision, and final approval. Each author reviewed the completed manuscript, approved its final version, and accepted full responsibility for the integrity and accuracy of the published work.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this article. No financial, institutional, professional, or personal relationships influenced the research process, data interpretation, manuscript preparation, or publication decision. All authors conducted the research independently and remain fully responsible for the content and conclusions presented in this study.

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