

# WHAT IS A UNIVERSITY?

Prof. Dr. Recep Şentürk









Dr. Recep Şentürk is the President of Ibn Khaldun University (IHU) in Istanbul, Turkey. Professor Şentürk holds a Ph.D. from Columbia University, Department of Sociology, and specializes in civilization studies, sociology and Islamic studies with a focus on social networks, human rights, and modernization in the Muslim world. Among his books are in English, *Narrative Social Structure: Hadith Transmission Network 610-1505* , and in Turkish; *Open Civilization: Towards a Multi-Civilizational Society and World: Ibn Khaldun: Contemporary Readings; Malcolm X: Struggle for Human Rights, Social Memory: Hadith Transmission Network 610-1505*. Dr. Şentürk's work has been translated to Arabic and Spanish.

For full list of his works visit: [www.recepsenturk.com](http://www.recepsenturk.com)  
Email: [president@ihu.edu.tr](mailto:president@ihu.edu.tr)

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Our great question is: “What is a university?”

Whenever my colleagues ask me to address this question, I become worried, even fearful of tackling it. On the other hand, it is very exciting to talk about an issue about which I have been thinking my whole life. This is a big question, and adequate answer is a major challenge. I do not claim to give the final, ultimate answer to this question; rather, we will be thinking together about what a university is. I will first share with you my ideas and experiences and also my future vision of what a university is and should be.

### **A GLOBAL RESEARCH UNIVERSITY**

It gives me great pleasure to address you, dear Ibn Khaldun University (IHU) students – students from all over the world pursuing Masters and Doctorate degrees, studying very exciting topics – and my respected colleagues, Ibn Khaldun University professors from all over the world, offering their valuable knowledge and experience that they have gained over many years. We have brought together bright minds from around the world to produce new ideas to address the



*Alliance of Civilizations Institute (ACI)*

challenges humanity faces. Here, we have created a small habitat for these minds to be nourished and continue to grow. I am sure that the Alliance of Civilizations Institute (ACI) will also grow and prosper as an institution by becoming part of Ibn Khaldun University, Turkey's very first research university

specializing in law, humanities, social sciences and Islamic studies.

The purpose of our university is to not only focus on formal education but also produce research. For this reason, only 25 percent of our student body will consist of undergraduate students, while 75 percent will be graduate students working towards their Masters and PhDs. At least 35 percent of our students will be non-Turkish, international students hailing from different parts of the world.

Sometimes colleagues ask me: "How can you be so sure about such a thing? Are you crazy? How can you do it? How can you bring 35 percent of your students from around the world?" I tell them that what happened at the Alliance of Civilizations Institute is the evidence that we can do it. I fully trust my colleagues who have been helping me in this project with such a universal vision from the very beginning. I also have young colleagues who are very energetic, very enthusiastic about the work they are doing.

People ask me also: "What kind of PR are you doing to bring students from different parts of the world?" I respond:



*The School of Athens by Raphael (1483-1520)*

“Nothing.” I tell them that our job advertises itself. Our students at the Alliance of Civilizations Institute are happy with the education they are receiving, so they are our ambassadors to the world. You cannot pay money to random people to better advertise your effort globally, but at the Alliance of Civilizations (ACI) – and now at IHU – we have American, Russian, French, Arab, Dutch and Japanese ambassadors, ambassadors from over 40 countries that promote our institute. It is a powerful way of advertising. Ibn Khaldun University will be the expanded version of what we are doing here at the Alliance of Civilizations Institute, so it is a great opportunity for us to expand on what was a small experiment at the ACI.



*University of Timbuktu / Mali (12th century)*

## **A UNIVERSITY OF THOUGHT & IDEAS**

The research university is the real form of a university, because there is a difference between a college and a university: a college educates undergraduate students, but universities commit themselves to research and the production of novel ideas. This is what a university is: a place where people learn, through experience, how to think, what thinking is, and how to produce new, universal ideas.

Thinking distinguishes humans from other creatures, and we all have the potential for systematic thinking – indeed, it is our greatest asset – but we must learn how use it property.

Unfortunately we often think that thinking is easy, but coherence in systematic thinking requires education – thinking about thinking – and the university is an institution for this crucial process.

Sometimes I ask my students, “What is an idea?” They think that the answer is simple, and that everyone knows what



*Istanbul University, the oldest continuously functioning university in Turkey, established by Mehmed II the Conqueror in 1453.*

an idea is, but when they try to answer, they often have great difficulty formulating a response. I give them an assignment: “Please bring me an idea, a new idea that you produce, as homework for next week,” and most of them cannot bring forth a new, well-developed idea. Then they realize that this is not a joke, but a serious job. If you want to produce a good, coherent idea, then you need to know what an idea is and how it is developed.

These foundations make the university a place of not only study but also the perfecting the human being.

### **A METHOD TO PRODUCE THE IDEAL HUMAN BEING**

Every civilization has its own concept for the ideal person, different from that of other civilizations: the Islamic Civilization has the notion of *al-insān al-kāmil*, the Chinese

civilization has another notion, the Hindu civilization has another, etc. Accordingly, civilizations build specific institutions of education, including universities, in order to produce their ideal human beings. In tackling the question of our ideal university, an investigation into the nature of our ideal human being is required, and indeed each civilization, religion or community may produce a different answer.

It is important to note that the conceived ideal person might change over time, as well. The history of Western civilization reflects this: the ideal human being in the ancient Greek civilization was not the same as that in the Medieval



*The Qarawiyyin University in Fez, Morocco. Established by Fātimah al-Fihriyyah in 859, it is the oldest existing, continually operating and the first degree awarding educational institution in the world. The great father of sociology and the inspiration behind our university, Ibn Khaldun studied with scholars at the Qarawiyyin as well.*

Western Christian period, and it changed again in the period of modernization and secularization, and again as the West entered what it considers the post-modern era. The Islamic concept of the ideal human being – *al-insān al-kāmil* – remained essentially the same until the period of Western colonization, which took us into a period of confusion that continues until today: this understanding is also important for our investigation.

In my opinion, what makes a university “Islamic” is exactly tied to this point. If a university aims to produce the human being idealized by Islamic civilization – *al-insān al-*



*Al-Azhar University in Cairo, Egypt. Established in 970 it is one of the most prestigious institutions of traditional Islamic learning.*

kâmil – then it is an Islamic university. If a university teaches how to think as a Muslim and how to produce ideas which are compatible with the Islamic knowledge tradition, then it is an Islamic university.

Similarly, if the university aims to produce the Chinese civilization's ideal human being, it is a Chinese university. The same is true for a Russian university, or an American university. The vision of the end product of education has become very clear in America and France and Germany, but unfortunately it is still not clear in Turkey in the Muslim world. Who is the ideal person our education system should produce? The ideal person for Boğaziçi University is different than that for Galatasaray University or Istanbul University, and so on. Some Turkish universities adopt the French ideal for a human being, while others adopt the American ideal, while some universities do not even have a clear idea about the ideal human and how to educate one. They just want to graduate students, giving them a diploma and sending them off into the world.

## **THE MUSLIM WORLD'S INTELLECTUAL DEPENDENCY ON THE WEST**

I was always concerned with the state of educational institutions in Turkey during my high school and university years and tried to understand why our educational institutions do not

educate us well. A book by Tom Bottomore, *Sociology: A Guide to Problems & Literature*, on the sociology of education, was eye-opening. He wrote that educational institutions in the non-Western world lack academic purpose: their purpose is only to modernize and Westernize the populations of their countries. I realized that our educational institutions were guilty of this, and were indeed created to modernize and Westernize young people rather than academically educate them. And they had achieved their purpose: even though they failed academically,



*The Registan Square in Samarkand, Uzbekistan with its three famous madrasas from left to right: The Ulugh Beg Madrasah (1417–1420), the Tilla-Kari Madrasah (1646–1660) and the Sher-Dar Madrasa (1619–1636).*

they succeeded in changing the students' concepts about themselves, their societies and their norms. For instance, a girl travels from Anatolia to study in Istanbul for four years and returns a modern, Westernized lady.

I had a chance to confirm Bottomore's ideas during a visit to Ghana with a group of professors. We visited the best university in Ghana, where a top official made a presentation to us, telling us about how the Ghanaians took over the university from the British when they left. I asked: "Sir, did you make any changes in the philosophy of education, the method of education, or the curriculum of the university after you took over it?" "No, no, no!" he said proudly. "We did not change anything. We just maintained the system the way it was." Basically, they tried to continue the work of the British, but for free! The British government did not need to send professors anymore, nor did they need to pay any salaries, since those

Ghanaians volunteered to culturally colonize and modernize and Westernize themselves.

When I go to universities in Turkey and other parts of the non-Western world, I ask students (in a political science department, for example): “Is there any theory produced by a Turkish person, by an Arab or any Muslim person in these books you are studying?” They say “no.” Psychology is taught the same way, as is sociology, law and economics. The universities market specific Western ideas and theories to the young people of non-Western countries. To this day, I have yet to come across a psychology department where a Muslim’s psychological theory is taught.

A few days ago, I met a young student doing her PhD in education. I asked her: “Do you know any Muslim scholar of education?” She said “no.” She is doing a PhD in Istanbul! A religious girl, hair covered, but no idea about theories on education by Muslim, let alone Turkish scholars. I asked her: “Do you know al-Zarnūjī?” She responded: “What is he?” I asked: “Do you know al-Ghazālī?” She said: “Yes, yes, he is a very famous



*Example of an ijazah, or diploma of competency in Arabic calligraphy, issued by Ottoman master calligrapher ‘Ali Ra’if Efendi in 1791.*

scholar, everyone knows him,” but she had not read anything by al-Ghazālī. Instead, she studied and learned all the theories imported from the West. She is a Turkish Muslim, yet she was not taught any Muslim or Turkish scholar of education, as if there is no Islamic or Turkish scholarship on education.

The outcome of this process is what I call “sustainable intellectual dependency,” and this truly is the purpose of universities in the non-Western world: not to raise great scientists, but to make those countries intellectually and academically dependent on the West. Just as we are technologically dependent, importing technological products from the West – airplanes, telephones, weapons, cosmetics, etc. – rather than producing them ourselves, we are intellectually dependent, taught that we cannot produce new ideas: the best we can strive for is to become a good student of Western academics and market Western ideas in our countries. As long as this continues,



*Rüstem Paşa Madrasa in Istanbul, Turkey built by the Grand Vizier of Süleyman the Magnificent, Rüstem Pasha between 1550-1551.*

our universities are not functioning as real universities.

The university as an institution first emerged in the Muslim world. The first university in the world was established by Fâtimah al-Fihriyyah, a Moroccan woman, in 859: the University of Qarawiyyîn. The second established university was Al-Azhar University in 975, followed by Nizâmiyyah during the 11th century A.D. in Baghdad. Only after universities had emerged

across the Muslim world from east to west did some European countries begin to adopt the university as an institution – as a result, these educational traditions evolved somewhat differently.

## **PERSONALIZED ISLAMIC EDUCATION & THE ISNAD NETWORK**

Let us talk about our first universities. How were they structured? How did they function? Universities like the Qarawiyyīn, the Nizāmiyyah and Al-Azhar were very different from universities of today.

One important difference is the personal student-teacher relationship: each student was treated individually, and the curriculum was customized for each student. There was no mass production of education, and at the end of the student's educational program, a diploma, called *al-ijāzah*, was issued by the educator – the mentor, the teacher, or the professor to the student – rather than by the institution. If you studied in the Süleymaniye Madrasa, for example, your teacher would issue your diploma to certify your completion of your studies rather than the dean of the madrasa.

The *ijāzah*, invented by the Muslims, especially scholars of Hadith, to conserve authentic Islamic knowledge, had a very interesting structure: it listed the entire chain of teachers until it reached the Prophet Muhammad, the Arch-angel Gabriel, and then Allah. This chain is called an isnād, and Islamic Civilization is truly an "*isnād* civilization." Such a system does not exist in any other civilization; in other civilizations, there were no diplomas at all, let alone a chain of transmission for the knowledge taught. My Ph.D. thesis (later published by Stanford University Press), *Narrative Social Structure: Anatomy of the Hadith Transmission Network 610-1505*, was about one thousand years of the teacher-student network created by this system, the longest recorded network in the world. I only studied half of it, and the isnād network continues until today: last year I was invited to Oxford and gave a presentation titled: "Unbroken Chain of Social Memory: Hadith Transmission Network 610-2016."

## **THE SUBJUGATION OF SCHOLARSHIP**

What happened when this system was transferred to Europe? In the medieval period, the Church monopolized the transmission of education, subjugating individual scholars by, among other methods, stripping them of the authority to

issue diplomas and ordain students. In the modern period, the secular state became the power subjugating scholars, taking the authority to grant diplomas and licenses.

In the Islamic civilization, however, the individual scholar resisted being subjugated into the state power, instead remaining autonomous and powerful: a diploma issued by a scholar entitled the recipient to become a judge, a professor, a mufti, or a *mudarris* (teacher). That individual *'ālim* (scholar) embodied and gathered in himself the powers of the Council of Higher Education, the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Religious Affairs, and still should be understood in the same way. Islam has no centralized religious



authority like the Church, and so every scholar functions as an independent institution. The university, therefore, is represented by its scholars throughout Islamic history, who have the power to accept or reject students and grant diplomas. Some scholars stay in institutional settings, but they are free to leave and carry on their work independently, if they wish.

The Muslim world did see some standardization of the curricula of colleges and universities during the eleventh century C.E., curricula that are largely the same today. The auxiliary disciplines – *ulūm al-ālah* – of Arabic language, logic and rhetoric are still taught similarly across the Muslim world, from India to the Balkans. Students in Turkey study books of *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) like *al-Ikhtiyar*, *al-Qudūrī*, and *al-Hidāyah* that students in India, Pakistan and Afghanistan study, as well. As Europe attempts to standardize their curriculum through the Bologna Process, we might remember that what the Muslim world achieved almost one thousand years ago survives to this day.

## **ANALYZING THE EFFECTS OF WESTERN EDUCATION IN THE NON-WESTERN WORLD**

The rise of modern universities, though, disrupted this standardized curriculum. The consequences of the shift in the Muslim world from the traditional madrasa system to the modern university system have yet to be analyzed very well. What happened? What kind of damage was done? Were there any advantages to abandoning our traditional education system for this new system?



*Main Campus of Ibn Khaldun University*

Ironically, this university institution that we imported from the West is the corrupted, destroyed version of the beautiful system the West originally borrowed from the Muslims. In the new system, diplomas are issued by the institution rather than the professors and do not include an isnād. Education is no longer individualized, but based on mass production.

At the ontological level, however, the worldview that characterizes modern universities is fundamentally different from the Islamic worldview. The Islamic worldview is multiplex, accepting a multiplex existence (*Marātib al-Wujūd*) as well as multiple levels of epistemology (*Marātib al-'Ulūm*), multiple

levels of methodology (*Marātib al-Usūl*), and multiple levels of meaning (*Marātib al-Ma'āni*) and truth (*Marātib al-Haqāiq*). What I call an “open civilization” is characterized by this multiplex worldview. Modern universities, on the other hand, are characterized by positivism’s uni-layered ontology, uni-layered epistemology and uni-layered methodology.

The greatest victim of this shift is the study of Islamic knowledge. That today we have relegated the study of religion to separate schools of theology is a result of secular thinking, which aims at separating religion from science in order to protect the latter from “contamination” by the former. In the madrasa, there is no separate school of *shari’ah*. Why? Because everyone is taught religion and other sciences in an integrated way. The traditional Islamic madrasa system, then, does not correspond with today’s schools of theology but with the ideal



*Albukhary International University, Malaysia*

university in general, where jurists, engineers and medical doctors can be educated together in the same institution.

Another critical feature of Islamic education lost in the shift to the modern university was that of *tazkiyah* (purification), which, along with *ta’lim* (knowledge education), is a pillar of the Islamic method of education. It is mentioned in the Holy Qur’an that the Prophet Muhammad used both methods, *ta’lim* and *tazkiyah*: “...teach them the Book and wisdom and purify them...” (2:129). *Ta’lim* was for teaching the Holy Book and *hikmah* (wisdom) for teaching philosophy, the natural sciences, and anything other than the Qur’an, but *tazkiyah* is essentially moral and spiritual education. In the modern university, built to raise professionals for government or industry, there is no place for moral education. The traditional Islamic educational system, though, as it was developed to raise good human beings, was holistic. I believe humanity will suffer greatly if it continues to

separate academic education from morality.

## **A VISION FOR THE UNIVERSITY TODAY**

How do we envision education today?

We must move away from mass education and re-introduce individualized education. The university is not a factory, and human beings are unique, not simple objects or robots.

Our universities must not perpetuate the false dichotomies produced in the modern and postmodern intellectual eras, like the alleged dichotomies of religion vs. science, tradition vs. modernity, *wahy* (revelation) vs. reason, East vs. West, etc. These are false dichotomies that the Islamic tradition of knowledge overcame by integrating them without situating them as mutually exclusive opposites; we can be religious and good scientists, and draw from tradition and our contemporaries, and use both *wahy* and reason, all at the same time.

We must be holistic in our method, combining *ta'lim* and *tazkiyah*, academic education and ethical education, IQ education and EQ education. Emotional education combined with intellectual education produces healthy human beings. When you go to an interview for a job, they do not ask you a math question, but rather how you deal with other people, if you are kind, and how you handle stress. This is what is called *adāb* (manners, ethics, and morals) in our tradition. *Adāb* and *'ilm* (knowledge), morality and academic education must go together. Focusing on academic achievement at the expense of ethical education will produce people psychologically ill-prepared for the world.

We must teach how to think and produce ideas instead of simply transmitting and marketing Western ideas. Instead of serving as institutions of sustainable intellectual dependency, our universities must be institutions through which we gain *intellectual independence*. The Muslim world, during the process of modernization and adopting Western ideas, rejected our own heritage. We cannot think in a healthy way without memory, and indeed we are in many ways paralyzed. Isaac Newton once wrote: "If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders

of giants.” Today, non-Western students need to appreciate the legacy of previous generations and stand on their shoulders rather than reject them. In the Muslim world, both modernist and so-called Salafī currents tell us of dark ages lasting more than one thousand years between the golden age of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions and the period of *nahda* (revival). This approach is mistaken and baseless. Rather, we need to accept and appreciate the continuity of the intellectual production of Islamic civilization through the *isnād* system, a process that continues until today without break. Yes, there have been periods of crisis, but I believe in the continuity of Islamic civilization, knowledge, tradition, and heritage, and I see my purpose as building on this heritage: this is how originality is produced. Some young students and academics think they will produce an original idea by rejecting and cursing the past, but this is wrong: the right strategy is to place yourself before the flow of the people preceding you. They have been working on the same issues, so take their foundation and build upon it.

We are now, I argue, in an age of open civilization, in which cultures and people get intermixed in ever-increasing social diversity. This room is a good manifestation of an open civilization: such a group was unthinkable a century ago but is now more and more common, whether on the campus of Ibn Khaldun, Columbia or Georgetown. Students come from all over the world to study together, and we must redesign the Eurocentric monolithic education system to incorporate this diversity into the open civilization university’s pursuit of prosperity for all humanity. Trying to prevent or homogenize this diversity will continue to cause countless conflicts.

Just as the traditional Arabic and Turkish word for university – *kulliyah* – signifies its universal purpose, this new phase of human history must restore the university to its rightful place as an institution for the production of universal ideas.





*"The rank of knowledge is the highest of ranks."  
Calligraphy by Macid Ayrat*







*KNOWLEDGE IS PRIVILEGE*

[www.ibnkhaldun.edu.tr](http://www.ibnkhaldun.edu.tr)  
[info@ihu.edu.tr](mailto:info@ihu.edu.tr)