

***Tawhīdic* Epistemology, Integration of Knowledge and Thought Leadership in the International Islamic University Malaysia**

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Abstract

This essay examines the evolution of the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) as a transformative project rooted in the integration of *Tawhīdic* Epistemology (TE) and contemporary scientific inquiry and elaborates on what the TE means for research and thought leadership. It re-looks – albeit briefly – at the establishment of the IIUM. Initially conceived as a response to the "crisis of knowledge" within the Muslim *ummah*, IIUM has matured into a sophisticated institution that seeks to bridge the dichotomy between secular and revealed knowledge. Central to this analysis is the argument that Research Excellence at IIUM is intrinsically tied to the revitalization of *‘ilm al-usūl* (the science of principles and foundations). Furthermore, this study posits that institutional reputation is a by-product of high-impact, ethically anchored research. By aligning its research agenda with the *maqāṣid al-sharī‘ah* and engaging in rigorous, trans-disciplinary dialogue, IIUM positions itself as a global leader in civilizational renewal. The paper concludes by affirming that the IIUM 2025/2026 strategic mandate to embed *tawhīdic* principles into applied research represents a necessary evolution toward achieving both intellectual sovereignty and global academic prestige.

The Historical Evolution of IIUM: A Project of Intellectual and Civilizational Renewal

The International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) is not merely an educational institution; it is the physical and intellectual manifestation of a modern movement to address the crisis of knowledge in the Muslim world. Its historical evolution is intrinsically linked to the global Islamic discourse on reform (*islāh*) and renewal (*tajdid*). In the intellectual dimension, the idea of reform called for a critical evaluation of the backward condition of the Muslims at the turn of the 20th century, suffering from decades, if not centuries, of colonial domination. What the IIUM represents manifests one approach to reform, i.e., calls for the need to benefit from both sources of knowledge – revelation and the universe – with the aid of reason. In 1983, when the IIUM was established, this ‘integration of Islamic heritage and modern sciences based on the philosophy of tawhid’ was put forward as the foundation of curriculum design. Later in the late 1990s, the Islamisation of Knowledge (IOK) became the central guiding agenda. By the early 2010s, this was repackaged as Integration of Knowledge, while in the early 2020s, under the current leadership, TE has been reasserted. In many ways, this takes us back to the original idea whereby *tawhīd* becomes the explicit reference framework for all intellectual development in IIUM.

The Global Intellectual Context: The Crisis of Knowledge (1970s)

The impetus for IIUM's creation originated from a deep-seated intellectual crisis experienced across the Muslim *ummah* following centuries of intellectual stagnation and colonialism. This crisis was characterized by the bifurcation of knowledge into segregated “religious” and “secular” streams, leaving Muslim societies intellectually ill-equipped to engage with modernity. However, after gaining political independence after WWII, the Muslim *ummah* gradually started demanding indigenous solutions to their numerous development challenges. While some called for a “return to the glory of the past” – as all solutions were found in the *Qurān* and *Hadith*- others wished Muslim countries to embrace modernity and follow the path of the West in line with the modernization thesis that dominated the global intellectual and political economy of the 1950s and 1960s.

The mid-1970s witnessed a resurgence of religion, i.e., Islam, in many parts of the Muslim world. With the oil resources in many parts of the Middle East, funds were channelled to promote Islamic activities and organizations as part of overall da’wah efforts to spread Islam. Among others, Islamic economics and Islamic education were given attention.

- In 1975, the Islamic Development Bank was established in Jeddah with a focus on the overall economic development of the economies of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC), now known as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation.
- In 1976, the first International Conference of Islamic Economics was held in Makkah *al-Mukarramah* under the patronage of the late King Faisal. This Conference heralded the birth of contemporary Islamic economics and finance.
- The Makkah Conference (1977): The First World Conference on Muslim Education in Makkah was a pivotal moment. It officially recognized the intellectual malaise of the *ummah* and brought together leading Muslim scholars, notably Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas and Isma'il Raji al-Faruqi, who formalized the concept of IOK. Both scholars viewed the secularization of knowledge as the primary sickness afflicting the *ummah*.

Among the outcomes of this historic Conference was a call to develop an alternative knowledge paradigm rooted in the *tawhīdic* worldview. This project aimed to critically examine, re-evaluate, and ultimately integrate contemporary human sciences, arts, and technology with the eternal, normative guidance of the Islamic Revealed Knowledge. To materialise this vision, there was a need to have an Islamic University that was the champion of the IOK agenda.

The Founding Vision and Establishment of the IIUM (1982–1983)

The vision for IIUM was conceived within this global intellectual ferment but was realized through the political will of the government of Malaysia (two other Islamic Universities were established, the first was the International Islamic University Islamabad, and the Islamic University of Niger).

- The Idea of IIUM in Malaysia (1983): The idea was formally mooted on January 12, 1982, by the then-Prime Minister of Malaysia, Mahathir Mohamad, during discussions about the future direction of Islamic education. This political endorsement gave the IOK project a crucial institutional laboratory for its implementation.
- The Working Paper: Various concepts of Islamic education and the Islamic University were proposed by numerous scholars over the previous decades, including during the 1977 Conference in Makkah. However, as far as the IIUM was concerned, an initial working paper was prepared by academics, including Mohd Kamal Hassan (who later served as its 3rd Rector), outlining a comprehensive institution that would integrate

Islamic values into all academic disciplines i.e. sciences, engineering, social sciences, law, etc. (it is important to note that an earlier paper modelled after the Al-Azhar University and other similar Islamic studies universities was not accepted).

- **International Co-Sponsorship:** Recognizing the university's global Islamic mission, the establishment of IIUM was deliberately made an international project. On May 20, 1983, IIUM received its “Establishment Order” from the King of Malaysia after an exchange of Diplomatic Notes of co-sponsorship with several Muslim governments and the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC). The initial co-sponsors included Malaysia, Bangladesh, Egypt, Libya, the Maldives, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey, who, until today, are represented on the Board of Governors of the IIUM.
- **Legal Innovation:** Due to its mandate to use English and Arabic as media of instruction and its commitment to attracting international students, which was initially restricted by Malaysian law, IIUM was initially incorporated under the Companies Act 1965. This facilitated its international character and its non-adherence to the National Language Act at the time, underscoring the founders' commitment to its global mission (Hassan, 2011).

The Formative Years and Conceptual Structuring (1983–1990s)

The initial phase was marked by the practical implementation of the TE/IOK philosophy through academic structuring.

- **The First Intake (1983):** The first academic session started on July 16, 1983, with a modest batch of 153 students. Initial faculties included the Faculty of Economics and the Faculty of Laws, areas of study where the secular-Islamic conflict was most pronounced and where the need for integrated frameworks was urgent. The Rectorship of the late Muhammad Abdul Rauf (1983-1987) provided a stable guiding hand to allow the IIUM to establish itself on firm, albeit cautious ground. The idea of an “IIUM” was new and quite different from other Islamic universities, including those of al-Azhar and Makkah and Madinah.
- **The Centre for Fundamental Knowledge (CFK):** What made the IIUM unique was the establishment of the CFK as the structural mechanism for integration. Its core function was to instil the foundational principles of *tawhīdic* and Islamic ethics (*adab*) into every student, regardless of their specialization (e.g., Law, Engineering, Medicine), ensuring

all graduates embodied the qualities of *iman* (faith), *‘ilm* (knowledge), and *akhlaq* (ethics).

- **The Leadership of IOK Proponents:** During the leadership of AbdulHamid A. Sulayman, the second Rector of IIUM (1988-1998), IIUM's vision and mission were made clearer. It was in this period that the IIUM led in its crucial role in disseminating the IOK concept, making it a criterion for academic life and focusing initial efforts on the humanities and social sciences. This period was characterized by “streamlining” the IOK vision, making the philosophy explicit and establishing its infrastructure.

Physical Expansion: AbdulHamid A. Sulayman was the architect of the current Gombak Campus, being involved in the transition from the temporary campus in Petaling Jaya to the purpose-built Gombak Campus in the 1990s, symbolizing the growth and consolidation of its mission. The campus, themed as the "Garden of Knowledge and Virtue" (*Taman Ilmu dan Budi*) a phrase given by the third Rector, Mohd Kamal Hassan (1999-2006), reflects the aspiration to create a holistic learning environment where physical, intellectual, and spiritual growth were all given due attention.

Evolution and Mainstreaming the TE and IOK Agenda (2000s–Present)

As the university matured, the challenge shifted from establishing the concept to mainstreaming its practical application across all disciplines, including the applied sciences.

- **Holistic Integration:** The growth of Kulliyah's (Faculties) in fields like Engineering, Medicine, and Architecture solidified the commitment to applying TE beyond the social sciences, demanding innovative research and curricula in highly technical fields.
- **From Theory to Application:** Under later leadership, the focus evolved to practical implementation, using tools like *maqāsid al-shari'ah* to provide a clear, objective framework for developing integrated curricula and research agendas. This approach emphasizes the transformation of the *ummah* through tangible output.
- **Current Mandate (IIUM 2025/2026):** Today, IIUM's historical mission is codified in its strategic plans, which emphasize Integration, Islamisation, Internationalization, and Comprehensive Excellence (IIICE). In the last couple of years, the IIUM vision has been rebranded as the need to work within TE in all its teaching, research, and co-curricular activities. The focus on innovative research is the contemporary expression of the historical IOK project, recognizing that only *tawhīdic* guided innovation can

solve the complex, integrated crises of the modern Muslim world and to achieve its mission of *Ummatic* Excellence.

- The Role of Research in Institutional Identity and Reputation

The transition toward "Mainstreaming the TE/IOK Agenda" serves a dual purpose: fulfilling the university's foundational mandate and establishing its global academic reputation. In the 21st century, a university's prestige is no longer tied solely to its history or even to its teaching alone, but to its research impact in advancing knowledge as well as its social impact. For IIUM, producing high-quality, peer-reviewed research within a *tawhīdic* framework is the primary vehicle for proving that Islamic knowledge is not a relic of the past, but a competitive, sophisticated, and viable alternative to secular paradigms. By succeeding in rigorous research, IIUM secures its "brand" as the premier global hub for TE and the IOK attracting international funding, strategic partnerships, and elite scholars.

In summary, the history of IIUM is the history of a civilization project: a deliberate attempt to revive the classical Islamic intellectual tradition of knowledge unity and apply it to the complexities of the modern era, setting the stage for a transformative research agenda that is both ethically anchored and globally competitive.

Reputation as a Strategic Outcome of the IOK Agenda

Today, the institutional maturity of IIUM is defined by its strategic shift from conceptual establishment to mainstreaming the TE/IOK agenda. In the current academic climate, a university's reputation is derived from its capacity to produce original, high-impact research that commands global attention.

By codifying its mission through the IIICE (Integration, Islamisation, Internationalisation, and Comprehensive Excellence) framework— currently represented by the phrase *Ummatic* Excellence - IIUM is aiming to transition from an "educational project" into a global thought leader. The university's strategic research focus on innovative, *tawhīdic*-guided solutions—ranging from sustainable finance to climate ethics demonstrates that TE/IOK is not merely a philosophical framework but a sophisticated, research-ready paradigm that enhances the university's status on the world stage.

Conclusion: Research as the Gateway to Global Leadership

Ultimately, the pursuit of Research Excellence at IIUM is a quest for Intellectual Sovereignty. A university that does not produce original research is destined to be a consumer of others' ideas. For IIUM to fulfil its role as a "Garden of Knowledge and Virtue", it must be a producer of knowledge that commands respect in both the East and the West.

The strategic initiatives of IIUM 2025/2026 recognize that research is the ultimate engine of reputation. By rewarding TE-aligned research and building capacity in *tawhīdic* methodology, IIUM is not just educating students; it is broadcasting a powerful message to the world: that a God-centred epistemology is the most robust foundation for solving the complex crises of the modern era.

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