

## Leverhulme Lecture

### The Rise and Fall of Islamic Learning Cities

**Presenter:** Nematollah Azizi, Professor of Educational Planning University of Kurdistan, Iran and  
Leverhulme Visiting Professor, University of Glasgow

**Date:** Wednesday, 13th December 2023, 7:00 pm

**Location:** Lanyon Building OG.074, Queen's University Belfast, Belfast, BT7 1NN

#### Abstract

Throughout Islamic history, various cities have served as flourishing centres of learning, contributing significantly to intellectual, scientific, and cultural advancements. While the historical periods of peak intellectual activity may have passed and traditional centres of Islamic learning faced challenges and declines, efforts are ongoing to revitalize and preserve the rich intellectual heritage of these cities. Contemporary initiatives seek to combine traditional Islamic education with modern approaches, fostering a renewed appreciation for knowledge and scholarship. Therefore, via UNESCO's recognition and support, some cities continue to be recognized for their educational institutions, cultural heritage, and contributions to knowledge.

However, the rise and fall of Islamic learning cities is a historical narrative that spans several centuries, reflecting the dynamic intellectual and cultural achievements of the Islamic world. Islamic learning cities such as Baghdad, Damascus, Aleppo Cordova, Fez, Timbuktu, Istanbul and Isfahan, often characterized by vibrant centres of knowledge, scholarship, and cultural exchange, experienced periods of flourishing followed by decline. Indeed, the decline of learning cities in the Islamic world has been influenced by various historical, political, economic, and social factors which needs to be readdressed inclusively.

In this lecture, I will explain the nature of learning culture and culturally empowered environment of learning cities in the Islamic world. I will also highlight their contribution in advancing knowledge and scholarship, how they have influenced Western cities and civilization, and analyse why they have declined.

#### Biography

Nematollah Azizi is Professor of Educational Planning at the University of Kurdistan, Vice-President of the Iranian Association for Higher Education and President of the Kurdistan Association of Educational Management. He has been the UoK's Vice-Chancellor for Research, the Dean of Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, the Director

of Students Affairs, and the Director of Research Students in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences. He was founding convenor of the Department of Education and of the Research and Teaching group on Higher Education, Curriculum Studies within the department.

As a senior academic, having had opportunities to teach in multiple higher education systems including at the University of Kurdistan, the University of Jyväskylä in Finland and ICD Paris Business School, he has gained extensive experience in working with highly culturally diversified student groups at undergraduate and postgraduate level. He has been responsible for redeveloping the PhD programme in Higher Education and Educational Management at the University of Kurdistan, as well as many relevant Masters degrees.

In recent years, his research focus has been on internationalization of higher education and universities' roles in community engagement. He has been a principal investigator as well as collaborator in numerous internationally and nationally funded projects, including, recently, the British Academy Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF)-funded project, *Strengthening Urban Engagement of Universities in Asia and Africa*. During his period in senior administrative positions, he has demonstrated successful collaborative leadership and supervision skills, working with colleagues from diverse sociocultural backgrounds. In addition to his senior roles in the University of Kurdistan his international connectivity, rare amongst Iranian academics, has offered him some remarkable opportunities to enrich and deepen his professional proficiencies effectively, and to offer his expertise in higher education management and in strategies that enhance community engagement for diverse academic and student groups. He has been a visiting professor at University of Bath, University of Jyväskylä, University of Gothenburg and University of Glasgow.

He has carried out a number of consultancies for regional, national and international agencies including the Ministry of Sciences, Research and Technology, National Organization for Technical and Vocational Education and Training, and Kurdistan Council of Education. He has been an adviser and evaluator of programmes at ministerial level as well as within a number of universities. He has been a keynote speaker and chairperson at many international events.

Finally, regarding the importance of serving local communities in order to help them to flourish and to be empowered, he has been engaged proactively in founding and directing a number of NGOs and charities in Kurdistan, including the Institute of Darolehshan, and the Students Fund. He also has offered numerous workshops and courses for disadvantaged groups and individuals particularly in informal settlement areas.