

Towards a Typology of Islamic Higher Education in Europe: A Comparative Analysis of Institutional Models

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Abstract

This article examines the emergence and institutional diversity of Islamic higher education through a comparative analysis of eight European cases: the Netherlands, Germany, Belgium, Austria, England, France, Spain, and Italy. While existing scholarship has focused primarily on individual countries, institutions, or debates concerning imam training, a systematic comparative framework for explaining institutional variation remains underdeveloped. The study employs a qualitative comparative institutional analysis based on six dimensions: institutional governance, legal recognition, degree-awarding status, funding arrangements, religious authority, and state involvement. The findings identify five ideal-type institutional configurations: the Independent Islamic University Model, the State-Integrated Islamic Theology Model, the Seminary-Based and Community-Led Model, the Hybrid Partnership Model, and the Emerging and Transitional Model. The analysis shows that broadly similar needs for Islamic education and religious leadership have generated different institutional pathways according to national state-religion arrangements and higher-education governance. The study provides a comparative framework for analysing institutional diversity without assuming a single European model of Islamic higher education.

Keywords

Islamic Higher Education, Islamic University of Rotterdam, Islamic University of Applied Sciences Rotterdam, IUASR, Islam in Europe, Imam Training, Islamic Theology

1. Introduction

Over the past several decades, Islam has become an increasingly visible compo-

ment of Europe's religious, social, and educational landscape. The growth of Muslim populations through migration, family reunification, refugee movements, and demographic change has generated new questions concerning religious representation, institutional development, leadership formation, and the transmission of Islamic knowledge within European societies. While early discussions often focused on mosques, religious associations, and integration policies, increasing attention has gradually shifted towards the role of educational institutions in shaping the future of Muslim communities in Europe (Sunier, 2006b; Yilmaz, 2026e).

One of the most significant developments within this broader process has been the emergence of Islamic higher education. Since the late twentieth century, a diverse range of institutions has appeared across Europe, including Islamic universities, Islamic theology departments, imam-training programs, seminaries, and hybrid educational initiatives. These institutions seek to address a variety of educational, religious, and societal needs, ranging from the training of imams and religious leaders to the production of Islamic scholarship and the development of academic programs capable of engaging with contemporary European realities (Bano & Kalmbach, 2011; Taha, 2013).

The expansion of Islamic higher education has occurred within a broader context of debates concerning imam training, integration, citizenship, religious authority, and state-religion relations. Across Europe, policymakers, academics, and Muslim communities have increasingly emphasized the need for religious leaders who possess linguistic, cultural, and institutional familiarity with the societies in which they operate (Yilmaz, 2026c, 2026b). In many countries, reliance on foreign-trained imams has stimulated discussions about the desirability of developing educational programs capable of preparing religious leadership within European contexts (Hashas, de Ruiter, & Vinding, 2018; Tosun, 2020).

Despite the growing importance of these developments, Islamic higher education in Europe remains characterized by considerable institutional diversity. Educational initiatives have emerged within different political, legal, demographic, and educational environments, resulting in a wide variety of organizational forms. Some institutions operate within public university systems, while others have been established by Muslim organizations, religious seminaries, or collaborative partnerships involving multiple actors. Consequently, Islamic higher education has developed through multiple institutional pathways rather than through a single European model (Yilmaz, 2026e).

Existing scholarship has generated valuable insights into individual countries, specific institutions, and particular policy debates. Studies have examined Islamic theology programs, imam-training initiatives, processes of Muslim institutionalization, and the relationship between higher education and Muslim minority communities (Abu Dardaa et al., 2008; Boender, 2006; Ghaly, 2008; Musharraf, 2015). Nevertheless, the literature remains fragmented. Most studies focus on national experiences, individual institutions, or specific educational programs. Comparatively little attention has been devoted to developing a systematic framework ca-

pable of explaining the broader diversity of institutional forms identified across the eight European cases examined.

This gap is significant because Islamic higher education has become an important site where questions of religious authority, knowledge production, leadership formation, and institutional development converge.

Against this background, this article argues that there is no single European model of Islamic higher education. Rather, multiple institutional pathways have emerged in response to different configurations of state-religion relations, Muslim demographics, historical trajectories, and educational governance structures. Consequently, Islamic higher education is best understood as a diverse field of institutional arrangements rather than as a unified educational system.

The central research question guiding this study is therefore:

What institutional models of Islamic higher education can be identified across the eight European cases examined, and how can their diversity be systematically explained and classified?

Addressing this question requires moving beyond individual national cases towards a comparative framework capable of identifying broader patterns of institutional development. Drawing on evidence from the Netherlands, Germany, Belgium, Austria, England, France, Spain, and Italy, the article develops a typology of the principal institutional forms of Islamic higher education identified across the eight cases examined.

1.1. Methodology and Comparative Evidence Protocol

This study employs a qualitative comparative institutional analysis to examine the development of Islamic higher education across eight European country cases: the Netherlands, Germany, Belgium, Austria, England, France, Spain, and Italy. The cases were selected purposively rather than as a statistically representative sample of Europe. Purposive case selection is particularly appropriate where the objective is to capture theoretically relevant variation and compare contrasting institutional configurations rather than to produce statistical generalization (George & Bennett, 2005; Gerring, 2006). The selected countries exhibit substantial variation in state-religion relations, higher-education governance, modes of Muslim institutionalization, legal recognition, and the organization of Islamic theological and leadership education. The analysis therefore seeks to identify recurring institutional patterns across a diverse set of European cases rather than to claim that the selected countries exhaust the full range of Islamic higher-education arrangements in Europe. The empirical analysis draws on a combination of academic literature and institutional sources. Academic sources include scholarly books, journal articles, comparative studies, and country-specific research on Islamic theology, imam education, Muslim institutionalization, religious governance, and higher education. Institutional sources include official university and institutional webpages, programme descriptions, accreditation and quality-assurance information, governmental and regulatory documents, and publicly available materials

concerning institutional status, governance, educational provision, and degree recognition. Sources were included where they provided verifiable information on institutions offering advanced Islamic education at the post-secondary level or on the regulatory and institutional environments within which such provision developed. The study focuses primarily on developments from the late twentieth century to the present period, corresponding to the emergence and institutional consolidation of Islamic higher education in the selected countries. Earlier developments are considered where necessary to explain the historical formation of national arrangements. Institutions and programmes were included when they provided advanced Islamic education beyond basic religious instruction and contributed to one or more of the following functions: academic Islamic theology, professional religious leadership formation, Islamic scholarship, imam or chaplaincy education, or advanced seminary-based training. However, formal higher-education provision and community-based or seminary-based advanced religious education are treated as analytically distinct categories. Where institutions do not possess recognized degree-awarding status, this is explicitly distinguished from accredited or formally recognized higher-education provision. To ensure comparability across the eight cases, the study follows a structured and focused comparative logic in which each case is examined through the same set of analytically relevant questions and dimensions (George & Bennett, 2005). Each country is assessed according to six principal dimensions: institutional governance, legal recognition, degree-awarding status, funding arrangements, the location of religious authority, and the degree and form of state involvement. Particular attention is also given to accreditation structures, relationships with public universities, the role of Muslim organizations, and the professional objectives of educational programmes. The use of common dimensions enables systematic comparison while preserving the historically and institutionally specific character of individual cases (Gerring, 2006; Ragin, 2014). The classification process proceeded in two stages. First, the selected national cases and institutions were analyzed according to the common dimensions described above. Second, recurring configurations across these dimensions were compared and grouped into broader institutional patterns. Following Weber's concept of ideal types, the resulting models are analytical constructions that emphasize recurrent institutional characteristics rather than exact descriptions of individual institutions or national systems (Ok, 2017). Institutions may therefore display features of more than one model, while the typology identifies the dominant institutional logic shaping their organization and operation. The evidence-to-model mapping was based on the institutional configuration observed across the six comparative dimensions. Models were distinguished according to who governs the institution or programme, the legal and academic status it holds, whether it possesses or operates within recognized degree-awarding structures, how it is financed, where religious authority is located, and how directly the state participates in its establishment, regulation, or operation. The typology thus emerged from a structured comparison of institutional characteristics rather than

from national labels or institutional self-descriptions. This approach is consistent with comparative research that uses cases to identify recurring configurations and develop analytically meaningful typologies (George & Bennett, 2005; Ragin, 2014). This methodology makes it possible to compare institutional arrangements that have developed under different national conditions while preserving important distinctions between accredited higher education, professional religious training, and advanced community-based education. The resulting typology should therefore be understood as a comparative framework derived from these eight European cases rather than as an exhaustive classification of all Islamic higher education in Europe.

1.2. Contribution of the Study

The article makes two principal contributions to the existing literature. First, it develops a comparative analytical framework for examining Islamic higher education across different European institutional contexts. Second, it proposes a comparative typology derived from eight European cases, distinguishing institutional models according to their configurations of governance, legal recognition, degree-awarding status, funding arrangements, religious authority, and state involvement. In doing so, the study seeks to explain how different national institutional environments have generated distinct pathways for the development of Islamic higher education.

1.3. Structure of the Article

The article proceeds as follows. The next section develops the conceptual and theoretical framework by examining the definition of Islamic higher education, processes of institutionalization, state-religion relations, educational governance, and the minority context of Muslim communities in Europe. The subsequent section traces the historical emergence of Islamic higher education in the selected European contexts. This is followed by a structured comparative examination of the eight country cases using common analytical dimensions, including governance, legal recognition, degree-awarding status, funding arrangements, religious authority, and state involvement. The later sections synthesize these findings into a comparative typology and examine how differences in state-religion relations and higher-education governance have contributed to the emergence of distinct institutional models. The conclusion discusses the implications of these findings for understanding the diversity of Islamic higher education across the cases examined.

2. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

Understanding the diversity of Islamic higher education in Europe requires a framework that moves beyond individual institutions and national case studies. Existing research has generated important insights into imam training, Islamic theology, Muslim institutionalization, and state-religion relations across Europe

(Altinyelken, 2021; Azra, 2013; NorAzali & Nor, 2021; Sejdini, 2022; Yilmaz, 2026b). However, much of this literature remains focused on specific countries or institutions, making it difficult to explain broader patterns of institutional variation.

This study approaches Islamic higher education as a field situated at the intersection of religion, higher education, governance, and minority integration. It assumes that educational institutions are shaped by historical trajectories, legal frameworks, demographic developments, and organizational dynamics rather than by theological considerations alone. To analyze this diversity, the article draws on four complementary perspectives: the concept of Islamic higher education, theories of institutionalization, state-religion relations and educational governance, and the minority context of Muslim communities in Europe. Together, these perspectives provide the theoretical foundation for the comparative dimensions used to analyze the eight country cases and for the institutional typology developed in the subsequent sections.

2.1. Defining Islamic Higher Education

Defining Islamic higher education is not a straightforward task. Across Europe, institutions associated with Islamic education differ considerably in their organizational structures, educational objectives, curricular content, and sources of legitimacy. The term may refer to Islamic universities, faculties of Islamic theology, institutes of Islamic studies, imam-training programs, seminaries, or hybrid institutions that combine religious and academic forms of education. Consequently, Islamic higher education should be understood as a broad and heterogeneous field rather than as a single institutional category.

A useful distinction must be made between three related but analytically different forms of education. The first is traditional religious education, typically provided through seminaries, mosque-based institutions, or advanced programs focused on the transmission of classical Islamic scholarship. The second is professional religious training, which concentrates on the preparation of imams, chaplains, religious teachers, and community leaders. The third is academic higher education, in which Islam is studied within formal higher education institutions through teaching, research, and degree programs. While these categories frequently overlap in practice, they represent different educational orientations and institutional objectives (Yilmaz, 2026a).

The diversity of Islamic higher education also reflects an important conceptual distinction between Islamic theology and Islamic studies. Islamic theology generally approaches Islam from within the religious tradition and is concerned with the interpretation, development, and teaching of Islamic doctrines and norms. Islamic studies, by contrast, typically examines Islam as an academic subject through historical, sociological, anthropological, linguistic, or political perspectives (Damra, 1998; Ilaina, Ahid, & Presetiyo, 2022; Muqowim & Lessy, 2021; Shatanawi, 2012; Suleiman & Shihadeh, 2007). In many European institutions,

these two approaches coexist, although the balance between them varies considerably.

For the purposes of this study, Islamic higher education is defined broadly as the provision of advanced Islamic education at the post-secondary level within institutional settings that seek to produce religious knowledge, scholarly expertise, professional leadership, or a combination thereof. This definition encompasses university-based Islamic theology programmes, independent Islamic higher-education institutions, professional imam and chaplaincy training, and advanced seminaries operating beyond the level of basic religious instruction. These forms of provision are not, however, treated as institutionally equivalent. A distinction is maintained throughout the analysis between formally recognized or accredited higher education leading to recognized academic degrees and advanced religious or professional education provided by seminaries, community institutions, or other non-degree-awarding bodies.

This broader conceptualization is necessary because the European landscape includes both formally recognized higher-education institutions and influential forms of advanced Islamic education located outside conventional university structures. Restricting the analysis exclusively to university-based theology programmes would obscure an important part of this institutional landscape, while treating all forms of advanced Islamic education as equivalent would conceal substantial differences in legal recognition, academic status, governance, and degree-awarding authority. The study therefore includes these different forms for comparative purposes while explicitly distinguishing their institutional and academic status.

2.2. Religion, Higher Education, and Institutionalization

The development of Islamic higher education in European contexts can be understood as part of a broader process of religious institutionalization. As religious communities become more established within society, they typically develop organizations, educational structures, leadership systems, and mechanisms for the production and transmission of knowledge. Educational institutions play a particularly important role within this process because they contribute to the formation of religious authority, the training of future leaders, and the reproduction of religious knowledge across generations (Boender, 2006; Damra, 1998; Maghfuri, 2019).

Institutionalization refers to the process through which social practices become organized, stabilized, and embedded within formal structures and organizations. In the context of religion, institutionalization involves the creation of enduring arrangements through which religious beliefs, practices, leadership, and educational activities are maintained and transmitted. Higher education institutions represent one important mechanism through which this process may occur, as they provide organizational continuity, professional training, and intellectual development (Kaya, 2019; Tolbert & Zucker, 1999; Vosooqirad, Rezaeian, &

Naghipoorfar, 2022).

From this perspective, the emergence of Islamic higher education in Europe can be understood as part of the broader institutionalization of Islam. As Muslim communities became increasingly permanent, demands emerged for institutions capable of producing religious scholars, imams, chaplains, teachers, and other forms of leadership adapted to European contexts (Nisbo, 2001; Yılmaz, 2026b). Educational institutions therefore became important mechanisms for organizational continuity, leadership formation, and knowledge production. The institutional forms through which these functions developed, however, varied according to national historical, political, legal, and educational environments. In some contexts, Islamic theological education became incorporated into public university structures, whereas in others Muslim communities developed independent institutions or forms of advanced religious education outside public higher education. Variations in Islamic higher education can therefore be interpreted as different institutional responses to broadly comparable needs for religious continuity, knowledge production, and leadership formation.

Institutional theory further suggests that organizations develop within social and regulatory environments that create both opportunities and constraints (Lammers, Garcia, Putnam, & Mumby, 2014; Tolbert & Zucker, 1999). Educational institutions do not emerge in isolation; they are influenced by state policies, legal frameworks, funding structures, accreditation systems, higher-education governance, and community expectations. These institutional environments affect not only whether Islamic educational initiatives can emerge, but also the organizational forms through which they obtain academic, legal, religious, and societal legitimacy.

This perspective is particularly relevant for the present study. Rather than treating Islamic higher education as a homogeneous phenomenon, the article approaches it as a field of institutional diversity shaped by different processes of religious institutionalization. It helps explain why broadly similar needs for religious leadership, advanced Islamic education, and knowledge production have generated markedly different organizational arrangements across the eight cases examined. Institutionalization thus provides a theoretical bridge between the common challenges faced by Muslim communities and the different institutional models identified through the comparative analysis.

2.3. State-Religion Relations and Educational Governance

One of the most important factors shaping the development of Islamic higher education is the relationship between religious communities, the state, and higher education systems. European countries have adopted different approaches to regulating religion, organizing higher education, and engaging with faith-based institutions. These differences create distinct institutional environments within which Islamic educational initiatives can emerge, obtain recognition, and develop.

Research on state-religion relations has long emphasized that European coun-

tries do not follow a single model of religious governance. Some countries maintain cooperative arrangements in which religious communities participate in publicly recognized institutional frameworks. Others emphasize stronger forms of separation between religion and state. Between these poles exists a wide range of intermediate arrangements characterized by varying degrees of recognition, regulation, and cooperation (Bader, 2007; Dikici, 2021; Kymlicka, 2009).

These differences are particularly relevant for Islamic higher education because educational institutions operate simultaneously within religious and regulatory environments. Questions concerning accreditation, degree recognition, curriculum development, faculty appointments, public funding, professional training, and the representation of religious authority are shaped not only by educational policies but also by broader frameworks governing relations between religious communities and public authorities.

As a result, similar needs for Islamic theological education and religious leadership may generate different institutional outcomes in different national contexts. In Germany and Austria, established frameworks of cooperation between the state, recognized religious communities, and public universities created institutional pathways through which Islamic theology could be incorporated into publicly funded university structures. Institutions such as the Centre for Islamic Theology at the University of Münster, the Centre for Islamic Theology at the University of Tübingen, and Islamic-theological programmes at Austrian universities illustrate this trajectory. In the Netherlands, by contrast, Islamic higher education also developed through independent Muslim initiative, most notably through the Islamic University of Rotterdam, currently operating as the Islamic University of Applied Sciences Rotterdam (IUASR). In Belgium and other contexts, more hybrid or partnership-based arrangements emerged through cooperation among universities, public authorities, and Muslim organizations. These differences illustrate how comparable demands for leadership formation and Islamic scholarship can be channelled through different institutional pathways according to the structure of state-religion relations and higher-education governance (Yilmaz, 2026d).

Educational governance constitutes a second, closely related dimension. Higher education systems differ with regard to accreditation procedures, institutional autonomy, quality-assurance mechanisms, degree-awarding authority, public funding, and the recognition of religious educational providers. These differences influence the opportunities available to Islamic institutions and programmes seeking formal academic recognition. They also help determine whether Islamic higher education develops primarily within public universities, through independent institutions, through partnerships, or outside formally recognized higher-education structures.

For the purposes of this study, state-religion relations and educational governance are therefore treated as key explanatory variables rather than as outcomes. They do not determine institutional development mechanically, since organiza-

tional agency, Muslim community structures, historical trajectories, and religious authority also matter. They nevertheless shape the opportunity structures within which Islamic higher education develops. Their interaction helps explain why the same broad needs for religious leadership and advanced Islamic education have produced state-integrated arrangements in some cases, independent or community-led institutions in others, and hybrid forms elsewhere.

2.4. Islamic Higher Education in Minority Contexts

Islamic higher education in Europe operates within a distinctive minority context. Unlike many Muslim-majority societies, Muslim communities in the European cases examined developed as religious minorities within predominantly non-Muslim social and institutional environments. This context shapes both the objectives and institutional forms of Islamic higher education. Educational institutions contribute not only to the transmission of religious knowledge but also to leadership formation, community development, civic participation, and identity construction (Akram, 2019; Ramadan, 2003; Taştan, 2021).

The minority context also encourages adaptation and institutional innovation. Educational institutions are increasingly expected to prepare graduates for roles extending beyond traditional religious functions, including chaplaincy, teaching, counselling, intercultural communication, and civic engagement. At the same time, they must navigate relationships with state authorities, accreditation bodies, universities, religious organizations, and Muslim communities. These multiple institutional relationships contribute to the emergence of diverse educational arrangements and help explain why Islamic higher education in European minority settings may develop differently from comparable institutions in Muslim-majority societies (Yilmaz, 2026d).

For the purposes of this study, the minority context is treated not simply as a demographic condition but as an explanatory dimension of institutional evolution. Together with processes of institutionalization, state-religion relations, and educational governance, it helps explain the conditions under which different forms of Islamic higher education emerge. These theoretical perspectives provide the basis for interpreting the six comparative dimensions used in the empirical analysis—governance, legal recognition, degree-awarding status, funding arrangements, religious authority, and state involvement—and for understanding the institutional models derived from the eight cases examined.

3. Historical Emergence of Islamic Higher Education in Europe

3.1. Post-War Muslim Migration and Religious Needs

The historical emergence of Islamic higher education in European contexts is closely linked to the development of Muslim communities following the large-scale migration movements of the post-war period. Beginning in the 1950s and 1960s, several European countries recruited labour migrants from predominantly

Muslim regions, while subsequent decades witnessed family reunification, refugee migration, and continued demographic growth. As a result, Muslim populations became increasingly established within European societies and gradually developed from predominantly temporary migrant communities into more permanent social and religious constituencies (Hoyer, 2016; Nisbo, 2001).

During the initial phases of settlement, religious needs were largely addressed through informal and community-based arrangements. Mosques, prayer spaces, cultural associations, and local religious organizations served as the primary institutions through which religious life was maintained. Religious education was typically provided through mosque-based instruction, visiting scholars, and transnational networks connecting Muslim communities in Europe with institutions and scholars in countries of origin. Consequently, advanced religious learning and the training of religious personnel remained to a considerable extent dependent on educational structures located outside Europe.

As Muslim communities became more firmly rooted within European societies, these arrangements increasingly proved insufficient for emerging institutional and professional needs. The growth of second- and third-generation Muslim populations raised new questions concerning language, citizenship, representation, religious authority, and leadership. In countries such as Germany, the Netherlands, and England, policymakers, academics, and Muslim organizations increasingly emphasized the need for religious leaders capable of engaging with local educational systems, public institutions, and younger generations raised within European societies (Sunier & Van Kuijeren, 2002; Yilmaz, 2026c, 2026d).

These developments generated demand for more advanced and sustainable forms of Islamic education. The need was no longer limited to the provision of basic religious instruction but increasingly extended to the preparation of imams, teachers, chaplains, scholars, and community leaders capable of operating within European institutional environments. Educational initiatives therefore acquired greater significance as mechanisms for leadership formation, knowledge production, and institutional continuity.

The growing demand for locally educated religious personnel represented an important turning point. Concerns emerged in several of the countries examined regarding long-term reliance on religious leaders trained abroad and the limited availability of institutions capable of providing advanced Islamic education within European societies. In Germany and Austria, these concerns increasingly contributed to the development of Islamic theology within public university structures. In the Netherlands, they also stimulated independent Muslim initiatives in higher education. In England and France, advanced Islamic education developed through different combinations of community-based institutions, seminaries, partnerships, and academic programmes. These divergent responses reflected differences in state-religion arrangements, higher-education governance, and the institutional organization of Muslim communities (Sezgin, 2019; Suleiman & Shihadeh, 2007; Tosun, 2020).

The emergence of Islamic higher education should therefore be understood as part of a broader process of Muslim settlement and institutionalization. As Muslim communities became permanent social actors, demands for educational infrastructure expanded accordingly. The historical roots of Islamic higher education lie not only in religious concerns but also in wider processes of demographic change, community development, leadership formation, and institutional consolidation. These developments created the conditions under which more formal forms of advanced Islamic education began to emerge in different European contexts during the closing decades of the twentieth century.

3.2. From Mosque-Based Education to Higher Education

The development of Islamic higher education in Europe did not occur suddenly. Rather, it emerged gradually alongside earlier forms of religious education that had developed within Muslim communities during the initial decades of settlement. Mosques, cultural associations, and community organizations served as the primary centres of religious learning, providing instruction in Qur'anic recitation, basic religious knowledge, Arabic language, and Islamic ethics. These institutions played a crucial role in preserving religious identity and transmitting religious traditions to younger generations (Sunier, 2006a).

Although these educational activities fulfilled important community needs, they were generally designed to provide basic or intermediate religious instruction rather than formally recognized higher education. Most were not structured as degree-awarding institutions, nor were they designed to provide academic or professional qualifications equivalent to those offered within recognized higher-education systems. Muslim communities therefore continued to depend substantially on religious personnel educated abroad and on transnational networks of Islamic learning.

As Muslim populations became more established and organizationally complex, new educational demands emerged. Communities increasingly required individuals capable of serving as religious leaders, educators, counsellors, chaplains, and representatives within European societies. These roles required competencies extending beyond traditional religious knowledge, including familiarity with local languages, legal systems, educational institutions, professional environments, and wider social contexts. Existing mosque-based educational structures often lacked the capacity to provide such training on a systematic basis (Essabane, Sterkens, & Vermeer, 2023; Sunier, 2006b).

This transition was also influenced by changing expectations concerning religious authority and professional recognition. As Muslim communities became increasingly rooted within Europe, questions emerged regarding the relationship between inherited forms of religious learning and the requirements of contemporary European societies. Educational institutions were increasingly expected to prepare graduates capable of operating within both religious and public spheres.

The transition from mosque-based education to more advanced forms of Is-

lamic education did not, however, produce a single institutional pathway. In some contexts, Islamic theology and religious leadership training became integrated into recognized university systems. In others, Muslim communities established independent higher-education institutions or advanced seminaries outside public universities. Elsewhere, hybrid and partnership-based arrangements emerged. The historical shift was therefore not simply a movement from informal religious education to university education, but a diversification of institutional forms responding to similar educational and leadership needs under different national conditions (Tosun, 2020; Yilmaz, 2026a).

3.3. European Policy Responses Since the 1980s

The growing visibility and institutional consolidation of Muslim communities across Europe prompted increasing policy attention to questions of religious leadership, representation, and education. From the 1980s onwards, governments, advisory bodies, researchers, and Muslim organizations in several European countries began to explore how Islamic institutions could relate to existing legal, educational, and social frameworks. Although policy approaches varied considerably, questions concerning imam education, Islamic theology, and religious leadership gradually became recurring themes within broader debates on the institutionalization of Islam (Yilmaz, 2026c).

One important development was the emergence of academic and policy discussions concerning the preparation of religious leaders within European contexts. Researchers increasingly questioned whether long-term reliance on foreign-trained imams was sustainable in societies characterized by growing Muslim populations and increasingly complex relationships between religion, citizenship, education, and public life. These debates were particularly visible in countries such as the Netherlands, Germany, Austria, and France, although the institutional solutions proposed differed substantially.

During the 1980s and 1990s, studies and advisory reports in several national contexts drew attention to the need for educational programmes capable of preparing religious leaders familiar with European languages, institutions, and legal systems. In the Dutch context, the work of scholars such as Waardenburg and later Landman contributed to discussions concerning imam education and the institutional development of Islam (Landman, 1992; Waardenburg, 1983; Yilmaz, 2026d).

Not all actors, however, supported greater governmental or public-institutional involvement in the organization of imam education and Islamic higher education. Some Muslim scholars and community leaders argued that religious leadership and advanced Islamic education should primarily develop through autonomous Muslim institutions rather than through state-directed frameworks. In the Netherlands, Dr. S.T.K. Damra and his colleagues became prominent advocates of this position, emphasizing the importance of independent Islamic higher education for the training of imams, chaplains, and religious scholars. This vision contrib-

uted to the establishment of the Islamic University of Rotterdam in 1997, which sought to combine Islamic scholarship with higher education within an independent Muslim institutional framework. Operating today as the Islamic University of Applied Sciences Rotterdam (IUASR), the institution illustrates an alternative trajectory to the state-integrated models that developed in countries such as Germany and Austria (Yilmaz, 2026e).

These contrasting developments demonstrate that policy concern with similar issues did not produce uniform institutional outcomes. Where state-religion arrangements and higher-education systems allowed or encouraged the incorporation of confessional theology into public universities, Islamic theology could develop within state-supported academic structures. Where such pathways were less available, less attractive, or contested by Muslim actors, independent, community-led, seminary-based, or partnership arrangements became more significant.

At the European level, broader discussions concerning religious diversity, social cohesion, and intercultural dialogue also created a more favourable environment for institutional engagement with Islam. European institutions did not, however, establish a uniform model of Islamic higher education. The development of Islamic higher education remained primarily shaped by national legal frameworks, higher-education systems, forms of religious governance, and the organizational capacities of Muslim communities.

4. Comparative Analysis and Typology of Islamic Higher Education in Europe

The preceding sections have shown that Islamic higher education in the eight European cases examined has developed through multiple institutional pathways rather than through a single, uniform model. Although Muslim communities have faced broadly comparable challenges relating to religious leadership, advanced educational provision, knowledge production, and institutional continuity, their responses have differed according to national legal frameworks, state-religion relations, higher-education governance, historical trajectories, and patterns of Muslim institutionalization.

A central finding of the comparative analysis is that similar educational and religious needs do not necessarily produce similar institutional outcomes. In Germany and Austria, Islamic theology became incorporated primarily into public university structures. In the Netherlands, an independent Muslim higher-education pathway developed alongside the national higher-education system. England and France demonstrate the continuing significance of community-based institutions, seminaries, and other forms of advanced religious education, although these institutions vary substantially in their formal academic and degree-awarding status. Belgium illustrates a more collaborative trajectory involving universities, Muslim representative bodies, and public authorities, while Spain and Italy display more fragmented and evolving institutional arrangements (Yilmaz, 2026e).

These differences indicate that the institutional development of Islamic higher

education cannot be explained by religious or educational objectives alone. The organizational form assumed by Islamic higher education is also shaped by the institutional environment within which Muslim communities, universities, public authorities, and religious actors interact.

4.1. Comparative Dimensions and Classification Criteria

To establish a transparent link between the empirical cases and the proposed typology, the eight country cases are compared across six common institutional dimensions: *institutional governance*, *legal recognition*, *degree-awarding status*, *funding arrangements*, *religious authority*, and *state involvement*.

Institutional governance refers to the principal actors responsible for establishing, directing, and administering an institution or programme. Governance may be located primarily within Muslim community organizations, public universities, independent educational institutions, or collaborative structures involving several actors.

Legal recognition concerns the formal status of the institution or programme within the national legal and higher-education framework. This includes whether it operates as a recognized higher-education provider, as part of a public university, as an independent religious institution, or outside the formally recognized higher-education system.

Degree-awarding status distinguishes institutions and programmes that award nationally recognized higher-education qualifications from those providing advanced religious or professional education without independent recognized degree-awarding authority. Partnerships through which qualifications are awarded by another recognized institution are treated separately from independent degree-awarding status.

Funding arrangements concern the principal financial basis of the institution or programme, including public funding, university funding, community financing, private sources, or combinations of these mechanisms.

Religious authority refers to the actors or institutional arrangements through which the religious content, theological orientation, and legitimacy of Islamic education are defined. Religious authority may rest primarily with Muslim organizations, Islamic scholars, advisory bodies, educational institutions, or negotiated structures involving both religious and academic actors.

State involvement refers to the extent and form of governmental participation in the establishment, regulation, funding, recognition, or operation of Islamic higher education. This ranges from direct integration into publicly governed university structures to indirect regulatory involvement or limited institutional participation.

These dimensions are analytically distinct but interact in practice. No single criterion determines the classification of an institution or country case. Rather, each model represents a recurring configuration across the six dimensions. The proposed categories should therefore be understood as ideal types: they identify

dominant institutional logics while allowing individual institutions to display characteristics associated with more than one model.

On this basis, five recurring institutional configurations can be distinguished across the cases examined: the *Independent Islamic University Model*, the *State-Integrated Islamic Theology Model*, the *Seminary-Based and Community-Led Model*, the *Hybrid Partnership Model*, and the *Emerging and Transitional Model*.

4.2. Independent Islamic University Model

The first model is the **Independent Islamic University Model**. It is characterized by institutions established and governed primarily through Muslim initiatives while remaining organizationally independent from public university theology structures. An early example was the Faculty of Islamic Sciences established in Córdoba under the leadership of Dr. Ali Kettani, which represented one of the earliest attempts to develop Muslim-led higher education within a contemporary European context (Kettani, 1999; Yilmaz, 2026d). The most prominent and enduring example, however, is the Islamic University of Rotterdam, currently operating as the Islamic University of Applied Sciences Rotterdam (IUASR). Established in 1997 under the leadership of Dr. S.T.K. Damra and his colleagues, the institution emerged from an independent Muslim initiative seeking to combine Islamic scholarship, religious leadership formation, and higher education within an autonomous organizational structure. Over time, it developed formally recognized and accredited higher-education programmes alongside its original religious and academic objectives (Yilmaz, 2026c).

Within the comparative framework, this model combines Muslim-led institutional governance and religious authority with organizational independence from public universities, while simultaneously seeking legal recognition, accreditation, and academic legitimacy within the national higher-education system. State involvement is therefore primarily regulatory and recognitional rather than constitutive of institutional governance. This distinguishes the model both from state-integrated Islamic theology and from community-based religious education operating outside recognized higher education.

4.3. State-Integrated Islamic Theology Model

The second model is the **State-Integrated Islamic Theology Model**. In this configuration, Islamic theology is incorporated into publicly recognized university systems and operates within established structures of higher-education governance. Germany and Austria provide the clearest examples. In Germany, institutions such as the Centres for Islamic Theology at the Universities of Münster and Tübingen, the Institute of Islamic Theology at Osnabrück, and programmes at other public universities illustrate the institutionalization of Islamic theology within the national university system. Austria has followed a related trajectory through Islamic-theological programmes within public universities. These arrangements combine theological education, teacher preparation, research, and forms of professional

leadership education within formally recognized academic structures (Hashas et al., 2018).

In terms of the six comparative dimensions, governance and degree-awarding authority are located primarily within public universities, legal recognition derives directly from the established higher-education system, and funding is predominantly public or university-based. Religious authority is more complex, since theological programmes operate at the intersection of academic autonomy and Muslim religious representation. This has generated continuing debate regarding the appropriate balance between public regulation, academic standards, theological autonomy, and religious self-determination (Yilmaz, 2026e).

The emergence of this model reflects not only demand for locally educated Muslim religious leadership but also national institutional frameworks in which confessional theology can be accommodated within publicly funded universities. This helps explain why broadly similar educational and leadership needs produced state-integrated arrangements in Germany and Austria while generating independent, community-led, or partnership-based structures elsewhere.

4.4. Seminary-Based and Community-Led Model

The third configuration may be described more precisely as the Seminary-Based and Community-Led Model. Its defining characteristic is the central role of Muslim-founded institutions in the transmission of Islamic scholarly traditions and the formation of religious leaders outside direct incorporation into public university theology structures. England provides the clearest example, but the institutions within this field differ substantially in their formal academic status.

Traditional institutions such as Darul Uloom Leicester primarily represent community-based Islamic scholarly formation rather than independent degree-awarding higher education. Other institutions occupy an intermediate position between seminary education and formally recognized higher education. Ebrahim College, for example, describes its Alimiyyah programme as undergraduate-level Islamic education, while its institutional trajectory illustrates continuing efforts to connect traditional Islamic learning with contemporary academic standards. These forms of education therefore need to be distinguished from nationally recognized higher-education degrees. At the same time, several Muslim-founded institutions in England have developed formal partnerships with recognized universities. Markfield Institute of Higher Education provides higher-education programmes through university validation arrangements, while Cambridge Muslim College offers programmes leading to Open University validated awards. Al-Mahdi Institute similarly combines seminary-based Islamic education with university partnership arrangements. These institutions demonstrate that community-led Islamic education and recognized higher education are not mutually exclusive categories; rather, partnerships can enable Muslim-founded institutions to retain distinctive educational and religious orientations while their academic awards are validated or conferred within recognized higher-education frame-

works (Ebbiary, 2025; Noh, Tamuri, Razak, & Suhid, 2014).

France represents a related but institutionally distinct variation. Institutions such as Institut Al-Ghazali and the Institut Européen des Sciences Humaines have contributed to advanced Islamic and imam education outside the core public university system. Their religious and professional training should, however, be analytically distinguished from nationally recognized university degrees unless formal degree-awarding or validation arrangements can be demonstrated. The French case therefore illustrates how advanced confessional Islamic education can remain primarily community-based while public universities concentrate more strongly on non-confessional academic approaches to Islam.

4.5. Hybrid Partnership Model

The fourth model is the Hybrid Partnership Model. In this configuration, Islamic higher education and leadership formation develop through cooperation among universities, public authorities, Muslim organizations, and other educational actors. Belgium provides the clearest illustration. Muslim representative organizations and universities, including KU Leuven and UCLouvain, have participated in educational initiatives, research activities, and discussions concerning Islamic education and religious leadership (Bekkaoui, 2024).

Rather than producing a single dominant institution comparable to the independent-university trajectory in the Netherlands or the state-integrated model in Germany and Austria, the Belgian experience reflects distributed institutional participation and collaborative development. Governance, funding, religious representation, and academic authority may therefore be located across several actors rather than concentrated within a single institution.

Within the comparative framework, the defining characteristic of this model is consequently not formal shared governance in every initiative, but the reliance on negotiated cooperation among actors possessing different forms of legitimacy and authority. Academic recognition may derive from universities, religious legitimacy from Muslim organizations, and institutional or financial support from public authorities. The model illustrates how Islamic higher education can develop through institutional partnership rather than through a single organizational centre.

4.6. Emerging and Transitional Model

The fifth model is the Emerging and Transitional Model, which characterizes cases in which Islamic higher education remains comparatively fragmented or institutionally unsettled. Spain and Italy provide the principal examples within the cases examined. In Italy, organizations such as CO.RE.IS. (Comunità Religiosa Islamica Italiana) have contributed to discussions concerning imam education, chaplaincy, religious leadership, and the institutional recognition of Islam, while other initiatives have emerged through Islamic associations, mosque networks, and community-based projects (Alicino, 2015).

Within the evidence examined in this study, Spain and Italy do not display a comparably consolidated national institutional framework corresponding to the state-integrated, independent-university, or partnership models identified elsewhere. Their institutional landscapes instead involve multiple initiatives whose legal recognition, academic status, governance arrangements, and relationship with public authorities remain diverse and evolving.

The term “transitional” does not imply that these cases are moving inevitably toward one of the other models. Rather, it indicates that institutional arrangements remain comparatively fluid and that future developments may produce new configurations or greater consolidation. The model therefore captures processes of institutional experimentation and formation rather than a predetermined developmental stage.

4.7. Comparative Synthesis

The five models should be understood as ideal types rather than rigid empirical categories. Individual institutions may combine characteristics associated with more than one model, and their position may change as accreditation, governance, funding, or partnership arrangements evolve. The English case in particular demonstrates that community-led institutions can simultaneously possess characteristics associated with seminary education, professional leadership formation, and formally validated higher education.

The typology therefore classifies dominant institutional logics rather than assigning immutable labels to individual institutions or entire national systems. Across the eight European cases examined, the principal differences can be traced to recurring configurations of institutional governance, legal recognition, degree-awarding status, funding arrangements, religious authority, and state involvement. These configurations, in turn, are shaped by differences in state-religion relations, higher-education governance, historical trajectories, and patterns of Muslim institutionalization.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that Islamic higher education is best understood as a field of institutional diversity rather than as a unified educational system. Across the eight European cases examined, broadly comparable needs relating to religious leadership, advanced Islamic education, knowledge production, and institutional continuity have generated markedly different organizational responses. These differences reflect variations in state-religion relations, higher-education governance, legal recognition, funding arrangements, religious authority, and the institutional histories of Muslim communities.

The proposed typology shows that the institutional form assumed by Islamic higher education is shaped by the wider environment within which educational and religious actors operate. Similar needs for locally educated imams, chaplains, teachers, scholars, and community leaders do not necessarily result in similar in-

stitutional arrangements. In Germany and Austria, established structures for publicly supported confessional theology created pathways for Islamic theology to become incorporated into university systems. In the Netherlands, independent Muslim initiative generated a different trajectory in which institutional autonomy was combined with efforts to obtain formal academic recognition. England and France demonstrate the continuing importance of community-led and seminary-based educational structures, although their degree-recognition status varies considerably. Belgium illustrates a more partnership-based pattern, while Spain and Italy remain characterized by comparatively fluid and evolving arrangements.

This comparison highlights the importance of distinguishing between religious and educational demand on the one hand and institutional opportunity structures on the other. The need for Islamic leadership formation may be broadly shared, but the legal and organizational pathways through which that need is addressed depend on national arrangements governing religion, higher education, accreditation, public funding, and institutional recognition. Islamic higher education therefore develops not simply in response to theological objectives but through interaction between Muslim organizational agency and the institutional environments in which it operates.

The findings also demonstrate that accreditation and degree recognition constitute particularly important dimensions of institutional differentiation. Formal higher-education providers, externally validated programmes, independent Muslim institutions, and advanced seminaries may all contribute to Islamic knowledge and leadership formation, but they do not occupy equivalent positions within national higher-education systems. Recognizing these distinctions helps avoid treating formally recognized academic education and advanced community-based religious education as interchangeable categories.

The comparative analysis further suggests that institutional diversity should not necessarily be interpreted as a temporary phase preceding convergence. Different national arrangements may continue to generate different institutional pathways, while individual institutions may move between or combine features associated with more than one ideal type. Partnerships, accreditation processes, changes in public policy, and evolving forms of Muslim representation may therefore alter institutional configurations over time without producing a single European model.

The typology developed here is consequently most useful as a comparative analytical tool rather than as a fixed classification of countries or institutions. Its value lies in identifying recurring configurations of governance, legal recognition, degree-awarding status, funding, religious authority, and state involvement, and in showing how these configurations help explain institutional variation across the cases examined.

6. Conclusion

This article set out to examine what institutional models of Islamic higher education have emerged across eight European cases and how their diversity can be

systematically explained and classified. Drawing on evidence from the Netherlands, Germany, Belgium, Austria, England, France, Spain, and Italy, the study has shown that Islamic higher education cannot be understood through a single institutional framework. Rather, different institutional pathways have developed in response to variations in state-religion relations, higher-education governance, historical trajectories, legal frameworks, Muslim institutionalization, and forms of religious authority.

Based on a structured comparison of institutional governance, legal recognition, degree-awarding status, funding arrangements, religious authority, and state involvement, the article identifies five ideal-type models: *the Independent Islamic University Model*, *the State-Integrated Islamic Theology Model*, *the Seminary-Based and Community-Led Model*, *the Hybrid Partnership Model*, and *the Emerging and Transitional Model*. These models represent recurring institutional configurations rather than rigid national categories. Individual institutions may display characteristics associated with more than one model, and their position may change as governance, accreditation, funding, or partnership arrangements evolve.

The study contributes to the literature in two principal ways. First, it provides a common comparative framework for examining Islamic higher education across institutionally diverse European contexts. Second, it develops an ideal-type typology that links empirical variation to identifiable institutional dimensions. In doing so, the article moves beyond descriptive country-by-country comparison and provides a framework for explaining why broadly similar needs for Islamic education and religious leadership can generate different organizational outcomes.

The analysis also underscores the importance of distinguishing between different forms of advanced Islamic education. Formally recognized higher education, externally validated programmes, independent religious institutions, and advanced seminaries may all contribute to scholarship and leadership formation, but they differ in legal status, degree-awarding authority, governance, and relationship with the state. These distinctions are particularly important when comparing community-led institutions in England and France with publicly integrated university programmes in Germany and Austria or independent recognized higher-education institutions in the Netherlands.

Several limitations should nevertheless be acknowledged. The typology is derived from eight purposively selected European cases and should not be treated as an exhaustive classification of Islamic higher education across Europe as a whole. The analysis is based primarily on institutional and publicly available documentary evidence and therefore cannot capture all dimensions of educational practice, theological orientation, internal governance, or institutional change. Moreover, several institutions and national arrangements continue to evolve, and hybrid characteristics may become more pronounced over time.

Future research may extend the framework to additional European countries, examine particular institutions in greater depth, or investigate how accreditation,

religious authority, funding, and state involvement change over time. Further comparative work could also explore the relationship between Islamic higher education, imam education, chaplaincy, teacher education, and broader forms of Muslim leadership formation.

The central conclusion of this study is therefore not that Europe possesses a single model of Islamic higher education, but that multiple institutional pathways have emerged within different national contexts. Understanding these pathways requires attention not only to religious and educational objectives but also to the institutional environments within which Islamic higher education develops.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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