

ISLAMIC UNIVERSITY OF ROTTERDAM: REALIZING THE FOUNDING VISION OF WESTERN EUROPE'S FIRST INDEPENDENT ISLAMIC UNIVERSITY

¹Cemal YILMAZ

¹Independent Academic Researcher, and Author

*Corresponding Author: Dr. Cemal YILMAZ (jurhistory@gmail.com)

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Abstract

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founding vision;
Muslim citizenship;
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This article examines the historical development of the Islamic University of Rotterdam (IUR), today known as the Islamic University of Applied Sciences Rotterdam (IUASR), between 1997 and 2026, with particular attention to the relationship between its founding vision and subsequent institutional evolution. Using a qualitative historical case study and process-tracing approach, the analysis draws on founding statutes, conference discourse, curriculum documents, vision and mission statements, accreditation records, policy materials, and institutional archives. The findings show that the university was conceived as a broad educational project integrating religious scholarship, scientific inquiry, citizenship formation, cultural engagement, professional education, and societal contribution. Its development followed differentiated institutional trajectories rather than a single linear path. Theology and chaplaincy became consolidated fields; several cultural and academic initiatives were interrupted; broader societal and professional ambitions remained at the level of projection; and the educational and professional formation strand of the founding vision acquired renewed institutional expression through the accreditation of teacher education in 2026. The article conceptualizes this orientation as a comprehensive Islamic university and develops the Multiple Pathways of Vision Realization Model, which distinguishes realized, interrupted, re-activated, and projected pathways. The model provides a temporal and process-oriented framework for analysing how founding aspirations may persist, lose organizational expression, re-emerge, or remain aspirational under changing leadership, organizational, regulatory, and societal conditions.



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Introduction

The institutionalization of Islamic higher education in Europe has become an increasingly important field of scholarly inquiry over the past three decades. Existing research has examined imam training, Islamic theology programmes, state–religion relations, accreditation, Muslim religious leadership, and the position of Islamic educational institutions within European regulatory and social environments (Abou El Fadl 2004; Abū-Zaid, Amirpur, and Setiawan 2006; Boender 2006; Karahan 2019; Rath 1996; Sunier 2012; Yılmaz 2026c). This scholarship has considerably advanced understanding of the emergence and institutional development of Islamic higher education in Europe. Less attention, however, has been devoted to the founding visions of such institutions and to the ways in which these visions may continue to shape institutional development across successive periods of leadership and organizational change.

This question is particularly relevant because higher education institutions rarely develop along a single or uninterrupted trajectory. Founding aspirations may become firmly institutionalized in some areas, remain unrealized in others, disappear from organizational structures, or re-emerge in new forms under different historical conditions. Institutional development is consequently shaped by the interaction between initial educational purposes and changing leadership priorities, regulatory frameworks, societal expectations, organizational capacities, and opportunities for academic recognition.

The Islamic University of Rotterdam (IUR), today known as the Islamic University of Applied Sciences Rotterdam (IUASR), provides a particularly instructive case for examining these processes. Founded in 1997 by Turkish-Dutch scholar Dr. S.T.K. Damra, who served as its founder and first rector, the institution was established as an independent Islamic higher education institution and has subsequently been identified in institutional and scholarly accounts as the first independent Islamic university founded in Western Europe (Boender 2006; IUR 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000; Yılmaz 2026b). Its establishment occurred during a period in which questions concerning imam training, Muslim citizenship, religious leadership, social integration, and the institutional position of Islam were becoming increasingly prominent in the Netherlands and elsewhere in Europe. From its inception, however, the university was conceived as an institution whose educational and societal responsibilities extended beyond religious leadership formation alone. The subsequent institutional development of IUR/IUASR unfolded across three broad generations of leadership, summarized in Table 1. These phases provide a chronological framework for examining how different dimensions of the founding vision were initiated, consolidated, interrupted, and later re-activated under changing institutional circumstances.

Table 1. Three Generations of Leadership at IUR/IUASR

Period	Rector	Chair of the Board
First Generation (1997–2001)	Dr. S.T.K. Damra (founder and first rector)	Hamdi Mert / Mohammed Z. Bhoelan
Second Generation (2001–2024)	Prof. Dr. Ahmet Akgündüz	Prof. Dr. Nevzat Yalçıntaş / Selahaddin Çelebi
Third Generation (2024–Present)	Drs. Emrullah Akgündüz	Prof. Dr. Ahmet Akgündüz

This study examines the relationship between the founding vision of IUR and its institutional development between 1997 and 2026. It asks:

How has the founding vision of the Islamic University of Rotterdam/IUASR acquired different forms of institutional expression through processes of realization, interruption, re-activation, and projection between 1997 and 2026?

To answer this question, the study reconstructs the principal dimensions of the university's founding vision and traces their institutional trajectories across successive phases of development. Particular attention is given to theology and spiritual care, Islamic languages and civilizations, Islamic arts and media, teacher education, and initiatives related to wider societal and professional development.

The article makes two related conceptual contributions. First, it introduces the concept of the **comprehensive Islamic university** to describe an institutional vision that situates religious scholarship within a broader framework of scientific inquiry, professional education, citizenship formation, cultural engagement, and societal contribution. Second, it develops the **Multiple Pathways of Vision Realization Model**, which distinguishes four forms through which components of a founding vision may develop over time: realized, interrupted, re-activated, and projected pathways. The model contributes to the literature by shifting analytical attention from formally established programmes and recognized institutional outcomes to the differentiated temporal trajectories of founding aspirations themselves. While existing scholarship has largely examined Islamic higher education through themes such as imam training, theology, accreditation, religious leadership, and state–religion relations, the present framework focuses on how different components of a single founding vision may follow distinct institutional trajectories over time. It therefore provides a process-oriented framework for examining how founding aspirations may achieve sustained institutionalization, lose organizational expression, re-emerge under later conditions, or remain principally aspirational under changing leadership, organizational, regulatory, and societal conditions.

Literature Review

Scholarship on Islamic higher education in Europe has largely developed around questions of religious leadership, imam training, Islamic theology, state–religion relations, citizenship, and the institutional accommodation of Islam within European societies (Boender 2006; Essabane, Sterkens, and Vermeer 2023; Rath 1996; Shatanawi 2012; Sunier 2012, 2014). In the Dutch context, particular attention has been given to the need for religious professionals capable of operating within public institutions and multicultural social environments, as well as to the broader institutionalization of Islam within a secular regulatory framework (Arab 2017; Kaya 2019; Shadid and Van Koningsveld 1996).

Within this literature, Islamic higher education institutions are frequently examined through their most visible organizational outcomes: accredited theology programmes, imam-training initiatives, chaplaincy programmes, relations with government authorities, and processes of academic recognition. These perspectives are essential for understanding the institutional position of Islamic education in Europe, but they provide only a partial account of how institutions develop over extended periods. They tend to foreground programmes and structures that achieved formal recognition, while giving less analytical attention to aspirations that were interrupted, remained dormant, or re-emerged in altered institutional forms. The institutional history of IUR/IUASR illustrates the importance of this distinction. The Master programme in Islamic Spiritual Care received accreditation from the Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO) in 2010, followed by the Bachelor programme in Islamic Theology in 2013. In 2026, the institution obtained accreditation for a primary teacher education programme (PABO) (NVAO 2010, 2013, 2026b, 2026a). Considered only through these accredited outcomes, the university's development might appear to represent a gradual progression from specialized religious education towards broader professional formation.

Its founding documents, however, indicate a more extensive institutional conception. The statutes adopted on 21 November 1997, the founding conference held at Erasmus University Rotterdam on 8 December 1997, and the university's early study guides articulated ambitions encompassing religious scholarship, scientific research, education, professional formation, citizenship, cultural engagement, and contribution to a multicultural society (Damra 1998; IUR 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000). Early institutional initiatives likewise included fields extending beyond theology and spiritual care, including Islamic

languages and civilizations and Islamic arts and media, alongside plans relating to broader educational, social, and professional development.

These sources suggest that the university was originally conceived through a multidimensional educational vision rather than as a single-purpose institution devoted exclusively to imam training or theological formation. This broader orientation provides the basis for the concept of the **comprehensive Islamic university** developed in this article. The term does not imply that all academic fields must be established simultaneously or that an institution must reproduce the organizational structure of a conventional comprehensive research university. Rather, it refers to an educational conception in which religious scholarship forms part of a wider intellectual, professional, cultural, and societal mission. This understanding also resonates with interpretations of Islamic educational and intellectual traditions that emphasize connections between religious knowledge, scientific inquiry, education, and engagement with wider society (Al-Attas 1980; Bilgrami and Ashraf 1985; Hamidullah 1995; Macit 2019).

A second analytical issue concerns the temporal relationship between founding aspirations and later institutional outcomes. Founding visions need not operate as fixed organizational blueprints that are either fully implemented or abandoned. Particular components may acquire sustained institutional form, disappear after an initial period of development, remain unrealized for extended periods, or regain organizational expression under different leadership and regulatory conditions. Scholarship on organizational vision and institutional development has similarly emphasized that institutional purposes may be interpreted and reformulated as organizations encounter changing internal and external circumstances (Kakabadse, Kakabadse, and Lee-Davies 2005). Building on this perspective and on the historical evidence examined in this study, the article distinguishes four pathways of vision realization: realized, interrupted, re-activated, and projected. The framework directs attention to the different ways in which founding purposes may acquire sustained institutional form, lose organizational expression, re-emerge under later conditions, or remain aspirational across successive phases of institutional development.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative historical case study design to examine the development of the Islamic University of Rotterdam (IUR), today known as the Islamic University of Applied Sciences Rotterdam (IUASR), between 1997 and 2026. The research combines historical reconstruction with process tracing and conceptual analysis in order to examine how the university's founding vision was articulated and how its principal components subsequently acquired different forms of institutional expression across successive phases of development.

The case was selected because IUASR represents a distinctive example of independently established Islamic higher education in Europe and because its institutional history can be reconstructed through a substantial body of founding documents, curriculum materials, accreditation records, policy documents, and archival sources. The study does not seek statistical generalization. Its purpose is analytical generalization: the IUASR case is used to examine broader questions concerning the relationship between founding visions, institutional continuity, leadership succession, academic diversification, and long-term organizational development.

The unit of analysis is the institutional development of IUR/IUASR over the period 1997–2026. Within this longitudinal case, the analysis focuses on identifiable components of the founding vision and traces their subsequent institutional trajectories. Particular attention is given to whether these components acquired sustained organizational expression, were discontinued after initial implementation, re-emerged after a period of limited or absent institutional expression, or remained

primarily at the level of articulated aspiration or institutional planning.

Source Materials

The analysis is based primarily on documentary sources produced during the establishment and subsequent development of IUR/IUASR. The core primary-source corpus consists of the founding statutes adopted on 21 November 1997 (IUR 1997), materials related to the founding conference held at Erasmus University Rotterdam on 8 December 1997, including the founding discourse of Dr. S.T.K. Damra (Damra 1998), the university's early vision and mission statements, and the study guides issued for the academic years 1998–1999, 1999–2000, and 2000–2001 (IUR 1998, 1999, 2000). These sources were used to reconstruct the principal intellectual, educational, religious, professional, cultural, and societal dimensions of the founding vision.

The primary corpus was supplemented by later documentary evidence used to trace the subsequent development of these dimensions. This material included accreditation decisions issued by the Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO) concerning Islamic Spiritual Care, Islamic Theology, and Primary Teacher Education (NVAO 2010, 2013, 2026b, 2026a), together with parliamentary documents, policy records, institutional reports, public statements, media interviews, newspaper publications, and relevant scholarly literature. These sources were used to establish programme continuity or discontinuation, leadership and organizational transitions, regulatory recognition, and the later re-emergence or transformation of earlier institutional aspirations.

Documents were selected purposively according to their relevance to the central research question. A document was included when it provided evidence concerning at least one of five analytical dimensions: (1) the articulation of the founding vision; (2) the establishment, development or discontinuation of academic or institutional initiatives; (3) leadership and organizational transitions; (4) accreditation or other forms of academic recognition; or (5) the subsequent re-emergence, transformation, or continued projection of an earlier institutional aspiration. Documents that provided only general contextual information without bearing directly on one of these dimensions were used for contextualization rather than for pathway classification.

Where possible, major institutional developments were examined across more than one type of source. Founding and institutional documents were compared with accreditation decisions, policy materials, parliamentary records, public sources, and scholarly literature in order to distinguish documented institutional developments from later interpretation. This triangulation was particularly important where the classification of a pathway depended on establishing both the presence of an aspiration in the founding period and its subsequent institutional trajectory.

Analytical Procedure

The study employs a process-tracing approach to reconstruct the institutional development of principal components of the founding vision from 1997 to 2026. Process tracing is used here to identify the sequence through which particular aspirations were articulated, translated into organizational initiatives, sustained, interrupted, reintroduced, or left at the level of institutional projection. The approach is therefore concerned with temporal development and institutional sequence rather than with the identification of isolated outcomes (Arab 2017; Kaya 2019; Wadeson, Monzani, and Aston 2020).

The analysis proceeded in three stages. First, the founding statutes, founding conference materials, early vision and mission statements, and study guides were examined in order to identify the principal dimensions of the original institutional vision. These included religious scholarship and leadership formation, scientific and intellectual development, citizenship and social responsibility, cultural engagement, education, and broader societal and professional development.

Second, each identified dimension was traced chronologically through subsequent institutional records, accreditation decisions, policy documents, public materials, and relevant scholarly sources. Particular attention was paid to evidence of formal establishment, organizational continuity, discontinuation, later re-emergence, accreditation, and changes in institutional priority. This stage made it possible to distinguish between aspirations that acquired sustained institutional form and those that followed more discontinuous or incomplete trajectories.

Third, the identified trajectories were compared in order to identify recurring patterns in the relationship between founding aspirations and later institutional outcomes. On the basis of this comparison, four analytical categories were developed: realized, interrupted, re-activated, and projected pathways. These categories were applied according to explicit classification rules.

A pathway was classified as **realized** when a component of the founding vision acquired concrete institutional form and subsequently demonstrated sustained organizational continuity together with academic, professional, or regulatory recognition. A pathway was classified as **interrupted** when an initiative moved beyond the level of aspiration and acquired identifiable organizational or programme-level form but later ceased to operate as an independent field of institutional activity. A pathway was classified as **re-activated** when a dimension identifiable in the founding vision lacked sustained programme-level expression for an extended period but later acquired renewed institutional form under changed organizational, leadership, or regulatory conditions. A pathway was classified as **projected** when an aspiration was explicitly articulated, institutionally planned, or preliminarily developed but did not progress to sustained implementation.

The classification procedure was based on the distinction between three types of evidence: evidence of founding intent, evidence of institutional implementation, and evidence of subsequent trajectory. A pathway classification therefore required documentary support for both the original aspiration and its later institutional development. Where evidence supported only the articulation of an aspiration but not sustained implementation, the pathway was classified as projected rather than realized or interrupted. Where an initiative had once acquired concrete organizational form but was subsequently discontinued, it was classified as interrupted. Re-activation was applied only where continuity could be demonstrated at the level of the broader educational or institutional purpose, even if the later programme did not reproduce the exact organizational form originally envisaged. The purpose of these categories is analytical rather than evaluative. They do not rank programmes or institutional initiatives according to success or failure. Instead, they describe different temporal patterns through which components of a founding vision may acquire, lose, regain, or fail to attain sustained institutional expression.

Reliability, Scope, and Limitations

To strengthen the reliability of the historical reconstruction, major institutional developments were cross-checked, where possible, across different types of documentary evidence. Founding documents and early institutional records were compared with later institutional materials, accreditation decisions, parliamentary and policy documents, public statements, and relevant scholarly sources. This triangulation was used to distinguish between documented institutional developments, projected initiatives, later interpretations, and changes in organizational form.

Particular attention was given to the evidentiary basis of pathway classification. Classification depended on the relationship between evidence of founding intent, evidence of institutional implementation, and evidence of subsequent trajectory. Where the documentary record did not support sustained implementation, an aspiration was not classified as realized or interrupted. Similarly, re-activation was identified only where a broader educational or institutional purpose could be traced from the founding period to a later form of renewed organizational expression.

The study has several limitations. First, it is based on a single institutional case and is therefore intended to support analytical rather than statistical generalization. The pathway model developed from the IUR/IUASR case should accordingly be understood as a framework for further comparative examination rather than as a definitive typology applicable to all Islamic higher education institutions.

Second, the availability of documentary evidence varies across different phases of the university's history. The formative period is particularly well documented through statutes, study guides, conference materials, and archival records, whereas some later internal organizational developments are less extensively represented in publicly accessible sources.

Third, part of the historical evidence derives from institutional archival collections that are not fully available through public repositories.

These limitations require careful distinction between contemporaneously documented developments and broader interpretive conclusions. For this reason, the analysis gives priority to primary and contemporaneous sources where available and uses later secondary sources primarily for contextualization, corroboration, and comparison.

Discussion

Reconstructing the Founding Vision of a Comprehensive Islamic University: The Founding Statutes and Institutional Mission

The Islamic University of Rotterdam was formally established on 21 November 1997 through the adoption of its founding statutes (IUR 1997). These statutes indicate that the institution was conceived as more than a centre for imam training or religious instruction. While Islamic scholarship and the education of religious professionals constituted important elements of its mission, the founding document articulated a broader academic and societal agenda encompassing higher education, scientific research, professional development, and contribution to a multicultural society. Academic programmes were expected to be grounded in an Islamic worldview while also contributing to knowledge production, professional expertise, and social well-being (IUR 1998, 1999, 2000).

The statutes also linked education to wider social objectives. Higher education was presented as a means of preparing individuals for constructive participation in society while fostering intellectual, cultural, and professional development. Education, research, professional formation, and societal contribution were therefore treated as interconnected dimensions of the institutional mission. The documentary evidence indicates that the founding vision extended beyond religious leadership formation and envisaged a university serving both Muslim communities and wider European society through education, research, and public engagement.

Founding Discourse: Muslim Citizenship and Social Responsibility

The broader intellectual orientation of the university was articulated during its founding conference, held at Erasmus University Rotterdam on 8 December 1997. The conference was organized under the title *Islam in the Netherlands, Islam in Europe: Islamic Scholarship and Potentials for Social Development*, while the keynote address delivered by founder and first rector Dr. S.T.K. Damra focused on Muslims as citizens of European societies (Damra 1998). These themes positioned the university's mission within questions of citizenship, scholarship, and social development rather than religious instruction alone.

A central element of Damra's founding discourse was Muslim citizenship. Responsible citizenship was presented as an integral component of Islamic identity and as an important objective of

higher education. Graduates were expected to participate constructively in European societies while remaining grounded in Islamic ethical principles (Damra 1997, 1998, 2001). This responsibility was not confined to Muslim communities. Themes such as social justice, care for vulnerable groups, mutual respect, and solidarity were presented as values with relevance to society as a whole. The scope of the founding discourse further illustrates the breadth of the university's intended social engagement. Issues including education, ageing, healthcare, labour market participation, poverty, social exclusion, and community development were addressed as legitimate areas of academic inquiry and public concern. These subjects were treated as part of the university's broader educational and societal responsibilities rather than as peripheral themes.

The relationship between religion and scientific inquiry constituted another important component of the founding discourse. Dr. Damra argued that the pursuit of knowledge, research, and intellectual development was compatible with Islamic intellectual traditions and that Islamic and Western scholarly traditions could be approached as complementary rather than mutually exclusive. Religious leadership formation was thus situated within a wider framework incorporating citizenship, social responsibility, scientific inquiry, education, and public service (Damra 1997, 1998, 2001).

Educational Philosophy and the Comprehensive University Vision

The available institutional documents reveal an educational philosophy connecting Islam, knowledge, education, citizenship, and societal development. Across these sources, knowledge was presented as having both intellectual and social purposes. Religious formation, academic development, professional preparation, and public engagement were understood as interconnected dimensions of the university's educational mission (Damra 1997, 1998, 2001; IUR 1998, 1999, 2000). The founding and early institutional documents also situated religious knowledge within a broader intellectual framework in which scientific inquiry, reason, and engagement with contemporary social realities were regarded as legitimate components of higher education. The university's educational orientation therefore sought to connect Islamic intellectual traditions with the historical, political, and social context of Europe. Graduates were expected to combine religious and ethical formation with the intellectual and professional competencies required for participation in multicultural and multi-religious societies.

This orientation supports the identification of what this study terms a comprehensive Islamic university vision. Within this conception, theology and chaplaincy formed important components of the institution but did not exhaust its intended academic purpose. The founding materials also articulated ambitions concerning scientific research, education, culture, citizenship, professional development, social responsibility, and public service. Subsequent initiatives in theology and chaplaincy, Islamic Languages and Civilizations, Islamic Arts and Media, and later teacher education can therefore be understood as different institutional expressions of this broader orientation (Yılmaz 2026c, 2026a). The concept also resonates with interpretations of Islamic intellectual and educational traditions that emphasize the relationship between religious and other forms of knowledge and engagement across multiple scholarly domains (Al-Attas 1980; Bilgrami and Ashraf 1985; Hamidullah 1995; Macit 2019).

Multiple Pathways of Institutional Development, 1997–2026

During the university's formative years, the founding vision began to acquire institutional form through multiple academic initiatives and organizational structures. Early documents indicate that the founders did not envisage a single-purpose institution devoted exclusively to imam training. Instead, several academic and societal domains were developed or planned simultaneously (IUR 1998, 1999, 2000). Three principal academic pathways became visible between 1997 and 2001. The first centred on religious leadership formation through Islamic theology and spiritual care within the Faculty of Islamic Theology. The second involved cultural and intellectual development through the Faculty of Islamic Languages and Civilizations. The third extended the university's academic profile into culture,

communication, and public discourse through the Faculty of Islamic Arts and Media. Plans were also developed for an Islamic Social Gerontology Institute (ISGEN), reflecting ambitions in ageing, health, and wider societal development. This initiative was planned in collaboration with the Turkish gerontologist Dr. Kemal Aydın, whose work focused on ageing, elderly care, and the needs of Turkish communities in Europe (Yılmaz 2026a). These initiatives developed unevenly. Some achieved long-term continuity and academic recognition, while others were discontinued or remained incomplete. The historical evidence therefore reveals different trajectories of institutional realization within the same founding project.

Realized Pathway: Theology and Chaplaincy

Among the initiatives developed during the formative period, theology and chaplaincy became the most enduring areas of institutional activity. Both fields responded to identifiable needs within the Dutch context, including demand for religious professionals capable of working in mosques, educational settings, healthcare institutions, prisons, and other public organizations. Contemporary debates concerning the institutionalization of Islam in the Netherlands similarly highlighted the need for religious professionals able to operate within European social and institutional settings (Ahajjaj 2026; Arab 2017; Kaya 2019; Shadid and Van Koningsveld 1996; Sunier 2014; Yılmaz 2026d).

The programmes sought to combine Islamic scholarship with knowledge of contemporary Dutch and European society. Their educational orientation therefore extended beyond classical religious learning to include engagement with multicultural environments, public institutions, and the evolving needs of Muslim communities. Over time, theology and chaplaincy acquired a stable institutional position. They achieved continuity, organizational consolidation, academic recognition, and subsequent accreditation. Within the pathway framework developed in this study, they therefore constitute the clearest example of a realized pathway. Their consolidation also provided an institutional basis for later programme diversification and academic expansion.

Interrupted Pathways: Languages and Cultures, and Arts and Media

Alongside theology and chaplaincy, the founders developed additional academic initiatives designed to broaden the university's profile. The Faculty of Islamic Languages and Civilizations represented an effort to incorporate language, history, culture, and civilizational studies into the academic structure. These fields were viewed as means of connecting Islamic intellectual traditions with contemporary European realities. The Faculty of Islamic Arts and Media, established in 2001, further extended this diversification into culture, communication, creativity, and public discourse. Its establishment reflected an understanding of Islamic higher education that included cultural production and communication alongside theology and religious education. The institutional importance attached to the initiative was reflected in the appointment of Dr. Osama Elkaffash as Dean and in the participation of Deputy Minister of Education Prof. Dr. Raja Sabbah from Kuwait as a keynote speaker at the faculty's inaugural meeting.

Neither faculty, however, achieved the level of long-term institutional consolidation attained by theology and chaplaincy. Following the departure of Damra in 2001 and the transition to a second generation of leadership, these initiatives gradually lost institutional priority and were ultimately discontinued (Yılmaz 2026c). They are therefore classified in this study as interrupted pathways: initiatives that reached a concrete level of institutional development but did not continue as sustained academic fields. Their interruption does not diminish their relevance for reconstructing the founding vision. Archival evidence indicates that they formed part of broader ambitions extending into educational sciences, social sciences, social services, economics, and health-related fields. Among these aspirations was the idea of establishing a medical faculty capable of bringing classical Islamic scientific traditions, including the legacy associated with Ibn Sina (Avicenna), into dialogue with contemporary medical

knowledge.

Leadership Transition and Changes in Pathway Prioritization

The departure of founder and first rector Dr. S.T.K. Damra in 2001 marked a significant transition in the institutional development of the university. Under the subsequent rectorship of Prof. Dr. Ahmet Akgündüz, the institution entered a second phase. During this period, the relative priority accorded to different components of the founding vision changed. Theology and chaplaincy became the dominant academic fields, supported by continuing societal demand and increasing opportunities for formal accreditation and recognition. By contrast, Islamic Languages and Civilizations and Islamic Arts and Media gradually ceased to develop as independent academic areas.

The interruption of these initiatives appears to have reflected changing institutional priorities and organizational circumstances rather than the formal abandonment of the broader founding vision. The leadership transition therefore altered the relative institutional expression of different dimensions of that vision. Subsequent developments also demonstrate that interruption or limited implementation did not necessarily imply the permanent disappearance of an underlying aspiration. Some dimensions of the university's broader educational orientation remained institutionally dormant and later acquired renewed expression during the third generation of leadership, most notably through the introduction and accreditation of primary teacher education.

Re-Activated Pathway: Teacher Education

The accreditation of the Primary Teacher Education programme (PABO) in 2026 marked the first formally accredited diversification of IUASR beyond its established fields of Islamic Theology and Islamic Spiritual Care (NVAO 2026b, 2026a). Its classification as a re-activated pathway requires a distinction between the later programme in its specific institutional form and the broader educational and professional orientation already present in the founding vision. The historical evidence does not indicate that a primary teacher education programme identical to the 2026 PABO had been fully designed during the founding period. The founding statutes, early study guides, and founding discourse nevertheless show that education, professional formation, citizenship, scientific inquiry, and contribution to a multicultural society formed part of the university's wider institutional conception from its earliest years (Damra 1998; IUR 1998, 1999, 2000). Teacher education is therefore situated here within this broader educational and professional formation strand rather than treated as the direct implementation of a pre-existing PABO blueprint.

For much of the university's subsequent development, this educational strand did not acquire an equivalent accredited programme-level expression alongside theology and spiritual care. Its institutional visibility remained limited while the university's academic profile became concentrated primarily in religious and chaplaincy education. The establishment and accreditation of PABO in 2026 consequently represent a renewed organizational expression of an earlier educational purpose under different historical, leadership, and regulatory conditions. Within the classification rules used in this study, this trajectory corresponds to a re-activated pathway because three forms of documentary evidence can be distinguished: first, evidence of an original educational and professional aspiration in the founding period; second, the absence of sustained programme-level realization of that aspiration for an extended period; and third, its later re-emergence in a formally accredited educational programme. The continuity identified here therefore lies at the level of institutional purpose rather than in the uninterrupted preservation of a specific programme or organizational structure.

Viewed in this way, the introduction of teacher education represents both diversification and continuity. It broadened IUASR's academic profile while giving new institutional expression to an educational orientation already embedded in the university's founding conception.

Projected Pathway: Societal, Health, and Professional Development

The founding vision also encompassed several ambitions that were articulated or institutionally planned but did not progress to sustained organizational implementation. These extended into social sciences, health-related studies, gerontology, economics, and broader forms of societal engagement. The planned Islamic Social Gerontology Institute (ISGEN) provides a particularly illustrative example, linking the university's educational mission to questions of ageing, elderly care, health, and social development. Within the analytical framework developed in this study, these initiatives are classified as projected pathways. Unlike interrupted pathways, which acquired a more concrete and sustained organizational form before later being discontinued, projected pathways remained primarily at the level of articulated ambition, institutional planning, or preliminary development. Their significance lies in demonstrating the breadth of the founding vision even where full institutional realization did not occur.

Summary of Pathways of Vision Realization

The different trajectories identified in the historical analysis are summarized in Table 2. The table distinguishes between realized, interrupted, re-activated, and projected pathways and identifies the principal institutional examples associated with each category.

Table 2. Multiple Pathways of Vision Realization in the Development of IUR/IUASR (1997–2026)

<i>Founding-vision dimension</i>	<i>Classification</i>	<i>Institutional expression</i>	<i>Documentary basis and trajectory</i>
Religious leadership formation	Realized	Islamic Theology and Islamic Spiritual Care	Identified in the founding vision and early institutional documents; subsequently consolidated as sustained academic fields and later achieved formal accreditation and academic recognition.
Cultural and civilizational development	Interrupted	Faculty of Islamic Languages and Civilizations	Established during the formative period as part of the university's broader academic profile, but later ceased to develop as an independent field of institutional activity.
Arts, media, and communication	Interrupted	Faculty of Islamic Arts and Media	Developed as a concrete academic initiative and formally established in the early institutional period, but later discontinued following changes in institutional priorities and leadership.
Educational and professional formation	Re-activated	Primary Teacher Education (PABO)	Education and professional formation formed part of the founding vision; this strand lacked sustained programme-level expression for an extended period and acquired renewed institutional form through the accredited PABO programme in 2026.
Societal, health, and professional development	Projected	ISGEN, NISBO partnership, social sciences, health studies, gerontology, and economics	Articulated or institutionally planned within the broader founding agenda but did not progress to sustained implementation as independent academic fields.

Note: The classifications distinguish between four temporal patterns of institutional development. *Realized* pathways achieved sustained organizational continuity and recognition; *interrupted* pathways acquired concrete institutional form but were later discontinued; *re-activated* pathways involved the later institutional re-emergence of a broader founding aspiration after a prolonged period of limited or absent programme-level expression; and *projected* pathways remained primarily at the level of articulated ambition, institutional planning, or preliminary development.

Institutional Continuity and the Analytical Significance of the Pathway Model

The historical development of IUR/IUASR between 1997 and 2026 suggests that institutional continuity cannot be adequately understood through a simple distinction between preservation and abandonment. The evidence instead points to a differentiated pattern in which components of a founding vision may acquire sustained institutional form, lose organizational expression, re-emerge under later conditions, or remain aspirational. The analytical significance of the Multiple Pathways of Vision Realization Model therefore lies in its capacity to distinguish between continuity of institutional purpose and continuity of organizational form. This distinction contributes to existing scholarship on Islamic higher education in Europe. Much of that literature has understandably concentrated on visible institutional outcomes, including imam training, Islamic theology, accreditation, religious leadership, state–religion relations, and the formal accommodation of Islam within European higher education systems (Boender 2006; Rath 1996; Sözeri, Altinyelken, and Volman 2021; Sunier 2012; Yılmaz 2026e). Such approaches are essential for understanding institutional recognition and public positioning, but they provide a more limited basis for explaining how unrealized, discontinued, or dormant aspirations may continue to shape institutional development over longer periods. The present model adds a temporal dimension by focusing on the changing trajectories of founding aspirations themselves.

This perspective also extends organizational approaches that emphasize the interpretive and adaptive character of institutional vision. Founding visions do not necessarily function as fixed organizational blueprints that are either implemented in full or abandoned. As organizations encounter leadership transitions, regulatory pressures, changing educational needs, and shifts in institutional capacity, components of an original vision may be reformulated or expressed through different organizational forms. In this respect, the IUR/IUASR case is consistent with broader arguments that organizational vision can retain directional significance while its practical realization changes over time (Kakabadse et al. 2005).

The concept of the comprehensive Islamic university further helps to situate the case within debates on Islamic higher education. The concept refers to an institutional orientation in which religious scholarship is embedded within a wider educational, intellectual, professional, cultural, and societal mission. The IUR/IUASR case demonstrates that such a vision may be expressed unevenly across time. Theology and spiritual care achieved sustained institutional consolidation, while cultural, civilizational, and media-related initiatives were interrupted. Teacher education later provided renewed institutional expression to a broader educational and professional orientation, while several social and health-related ambitions remained projected. The significance of these trajectories lies in the differentiated realization of a common founding framework rather than in the uniform development of all its components.

As the model is derived from a single longitudinal case, its broader analytical relevance remains open to further comparative examination. The four pathway categories identified in the development of IUR/IUASR provide a framework that can be tested, refined, or extended through studies of other Islamic and faith-based higher education institutions operating under different regulatory, organizational, and leadership conditions.

For this reason, the principal contribution of the model is heuristic and analytical. It offers a framework for examining how institutional purposes may persist despite discontinuity in specific programmes or organizational structures and how later developments may acquire meaning through their relationship to earlier aspirations. Applied comparatively, the framework may help distinguish between institutional change that represents a departure from an earlier mission and change that gives renewed form to a previously articulated educational purpose.

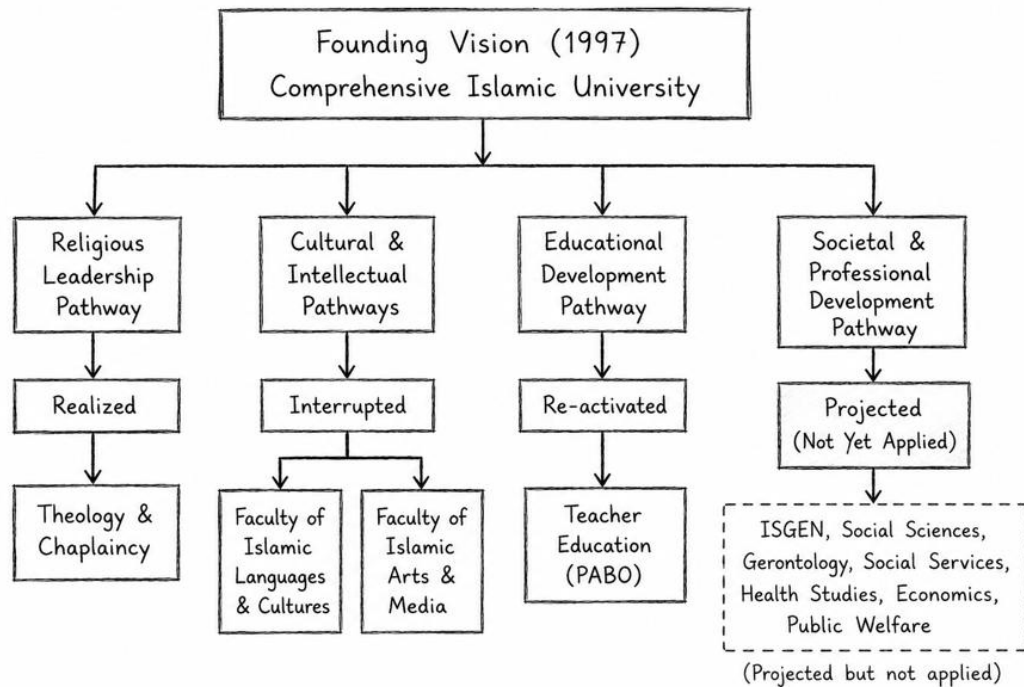


Figure 1. The Multiple Pathways of Vision Realization Model: IUR/IUASR (1997–2026)

Conclusion

This study examined the historical development of the Islamic University of Rotterdam/IUASR between 1997 and 2026 by analysing the relationship between its founding vision and subsequent institutional evolution. The evidence indicates that the university was conceived from its establishment as a broad educational project combining religious scholarship with scientific inquiry, professional formation, citizenship, cultural engagement, social responsibility, and societal contribution. This broader orientation has been conceptualized in this article as the comprehensive Islamic university.

The subsequent development demonstrates that the different components of this vision did not develop uniformly. To explain these divergent trajectories, the study proposed the Multiple Pathways of Vision Realization Model, distinguishing realized, interrupted, re-activated, and projected pathways. The model provides a temporal and process-oriented means of analysing how elements of a founding vision may achieve sustained institutionalization, lose organizational expression, re-emerge under later conditions, or remain principally at the level of institutional aspiration. Within this framework, the accreditation of Primary Teacher Education in 2026 is significant because it represents the renewed programme-level expression of a broader educational and professional formation orientation already present in the university's founding conception. Its significance therefore lies in the continuity of institutional purpose across changing organizational forms and historical conditions.

More broadly, the analysis suggests that the development of Islamic higher education institutions in Europe can be understood when attention is extended beyond accredited programmes, theology, imam training, and state–religion relations to include the longer-term trajectories of founding aspirations. The IUR/IUASR case shows how institutional continuity and change may coexist, and how diversification can emerge through the renewed expression of earlier educational purposes. Future comparative research across other Islamic and faith-based higher education institutions may further test, refine, or extend the four pathway categories under different regulatory, organizational, and leadership conditions. The study therefore highlights how institutional continuity may persist through the later re-expression of underlying educational purposes, even when programmes, organizational structures, and academic priorities change over time.

Author Contribution

Conceptualization, C.Y.; methodology, C.Y.; investigation, C.Y.; resources, C.Y.; formal analysis, C.Y.; data curation, C.Y.; writing-original draft preparation, C.Y.; writing-review and editing, C.Y. The author has read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

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

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