

The University Concept in the Geo-cultural Context: A Historical Perspective

Jacek Lorkowski¹, Mieczyslaw Pokorski^{2*}

¹ Department of Management and Accounting, SGH Warsaw School of Economics; Warsaw, Poland; email: jacek.lorkowski@gmail.com; ORCID 0000-0001-5985-9790.

² Institute of Health Sciences, Opole University, Opole, Poland; email: m_pokorski@hotmail.com; ORCID 0000-0002-8710-9775.

*Corresponding Author: m_pokorski@hotmail.com

Citation: Lorkowski, J. and Pokorski, M. (2026). The University Concept in the Geo-cultural Context: A Historical Perspective, *Journal of Cultural Analysis and Social Change*, 11(2), 398-402. <https://doi.org/10.64753/jcasc.v11i2.4926>

Published: July 03, 2026

ABSTRACT

Sources of Western civilization often promote the concept that the University of Bologna, founded in 1088 and considered the world's oldest, is a kernel of the global university tradition. Here, we challenge this egocentric concept by reviewing the educational and research achievements of often-forgotten ancient civilizations, other than those with a Western orientation. Here, we investigated issues dealing with the foundation of the medieval "university" concept. The method was based on the digital humanities analysis of internet websites relating to the entry term "university". The search concerned nine geo-cultural civilization circles, each represented by the most relevant language. We defined the origin of the term "university," and the names of renowned higher education institutions considered the oldest. The term "university" has Latin roots and thus relates to the Medieval European Christendom. However, the tradition of higher education originated in institutions established in Chinese, Arabic, Hindu, and Byzantine civilizations, dating back to around 2000 BC, which long preceded medieval European universities. In conclusion, we challenge the widespread narrative that Western civilization and its medieval European universities are the sole founders of the global university tradition and historical educational advancements.

Keywords: Historiography; Digital humanities analysis; Education; University; Academic tradition.

INTRODUCTION

The internet functions as the primary contemporary repository for civilization's intellectual and cultural heritage. Online multilingual websites are, unquestionably, the most-read sources of information, containing encyclopedic knowledge [1-3]. Analysis of the same axiomatic entry in different languages enables comparison of how cultural circles perceive the same problem in a language-dependent context. This applies equally to the history, traditions, and core values we pass on through time. The university tradition symbolizes higher education, understood as the process by which a person, community, or society shares knowledge, skills, and virtues. Currently, there are no objective comparisons of the origin of university tradition among different civilizations and cultural circles dating back to ancient times. The digital humanities methodology seems to optimize this type of analysis.

Sources of Western civilization often promote the concept that this civilization is a kernel of the global university tradition, with the archetype being the University of Bologna, founded in 1088, and considered the oldest in the world. Here, we challenge this narrative by reviewing the educational and research achievements of often-forgotten ancient civilizations, other than those with a Western orientation. We aim to define the origin and starting time of the university concept and the genesis of higher education based on the continuity of university tradition

throughout centuries in the geo-civilization context. We show that the historiographical narrative of global Western educational superiority lacks robust empirical validation.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The material for analysis consisted of websites referring to the entry word "university". The method was based on digital tools of the internet websites. The aim was to define the origin of the term "university," and the names of renowned higher education institutions considered the oldest according to the tradition of a given cultural and civilization circle. Google algorithms optimize the findings, indicating the frequency of occurrence of a given search entry, and the higher hierarchical position, the higher relevance and meaningfulness from a holistic perspective [4, 5]. The tool allows discerning different languages, geographical locations, and the type of website visited.

Here, we considered nine cultural and civilization circles based on Huntington's division, each represented in the original language versions [6]. The culture underlying a civilization is a composite of ancestry, traditions, customs, art, and technical achievements at a given time, all shaping people's perception of the surrounding world, with the language providing the means to describe it. The study concerned the following geo-cultural circles, with corresponding representative languages in parentheses:

- Western civilization, including Europe and North America (German, English, and Spanish)
- Orthodox civilization (Russian)
- Latin American civilization (Spanish)
- African civilization (Swahili)
- Islamic civilization (Arabic)
- Hindu-Indian civilization (Hindi)
- Buddhist civilization (Malay)
- Chinese civilization (Chinese)
- Japanese civilization (Japanese)

The concept of "university"

The semantics of the term "University" are similar but not analogous in the nine languages analyzed. According to the English website, the original Latin word "universitas" refers to "quote-unquote" "many people united in one structure, society, community, company, guild, or corporation." They were self-regulating communities that determined the qualifications of their members. Such organizations specialized in „quote-unquote" "associations of students and teachers with collective rights usually guaranteed by privileges issued by princes, prelates, or the localities in which they were located." We can therefore speak of a self-regulating, independent corporation of scholars. The original Latin word for university referred to scientific institutions that confer academic degrees in Western and Central Europe, where this form of legal organization was widespread and from where these institutions spread throughout the world [7, 8].

The German-speaking civilization circle defines the concept of university primarily as derived from the Latin "*universitas*", meaning the community of teachers and scholars [9]. Likewise, Spanish-speaking civilization describes the university as a research institution of higher education that awards degrees in various disciplines, located in one or more places called campuses. This underscores that the medieval university was a product of Europe's social, religious, and political conditions at the time [10]. The Russian-speaking civilization refers to the Latin-originated "universitas," emphasizing the very concept of university rather than the word's origin. It is the university that educates specialists in basic and applied sciences and conducts research work [11]. The Arabic-speaking civilization describes "university" as an original Arabic term, considering it a place for conducting scientific research and granting academic certificates or licenses to its graduates. It also offers the third and fourth-cycle studies as a supplement to education after primary and secondary school. The word "university" relates here to "meeting", "gathering", "collective", or "community", where people gather to gain knowledge and education [12].

The Swahili and Hindi-speaking civilization circles do not dwell on the origin of the term "university". Instead, they emphasize that the university is a higher education institution in which experts in various fields tutor students and conduct scientific research. Students obtain education, graduating with diploma examinations, and then pursue Bachelor's, Master's, and doctoral degrees [13]. The Hindi civilization notes that the use of this word began in Europe in 1250. It was a decision by the rulers of the time, guided by the need to meet the political and social needs of individual countries, not students [14]. The Malay civilization indicates that the university is an institution of higher education that awards degrees at various levels and in various fields. The provenance of the word „Universiti" is the Latin "*universitas magistrorum et scholarium*," interpreted as "people who are associated with an authority, society, company, group of employees, or corporation." This meaning evolved along with changes in

the people's lifestyle that became increasingly urban, to "an association of students and teachers with collective rights that are usually agreed in a contract issued by the king or leader of their city" [15].

According to the Chinese-speaking civilization, the university is one of the four classics of Confucianism, and the term refers to institutions that gather in specific places to organize, research, and disseminate knowledge in various fields. In ancient China, institutions of higher learning functioned as prototypes for modern universities. Allegedly, the educational system originated in China in the 21st century BC. The Chinese Shang Xiang, a high school rather than a university, is the source of the concept of university education [16]. The Japanese-speaking civilization notes that if one thinks of "university" as a concept found in Western languages (Latin: *universitas*, English: university, French: *université*, German: *Universität*), its history originated between the 12th and 13th centuries [17]. Originally, the word originated from the Latin "universitas", having its source in the student guilds. Such guilds established the world's first school rules. Subsequently, teacher guilds—and later unions—emerged. Originally, universities, guilds, and unions operated without hierarchical student structures; these terms designated voluntary, associative bodies [18].

In English, the word university comes from the word "universe", which refers to the Latin "*universus*" consisting of "*unus*" meaning "one" and "*versus*" meaning "in a certain direction" referring to a group of individuals or a society". During the Middle Ages, Latin was the language of the Church and education, and the word "*universitas*" referred to new unions of teachers and students appearing in Bologna, Salerno, and Oxford, the predecessors of today's universities. Medieval European universities evolved from Church-run guild schools that included both teachers and students. During the 11th century, the terms "university" and "guild" were used interchangeably to describe trade organizations. By the 13th century, "university" became specifically associated with the students' union [18].

University education – a cultural experience and awareness of the civilization circles

The foundations of formal schooling were first established in ancient civilizations, such as Egypt, Persia, India, Greece, and Rome. Those institutions, although not referred to as universities, had a strong intellectual influence on the development of civilizations in the Middle Ages. The Academy, founded by the Greek philosopher Plato near Athens in 387 BC, was a prototype of modern universities whose features resonated throughout later centuries. It is unclear which medieval university can be considered the best prototype of a modern university. The University of Bologna, founded in 1088, is the first university in Europe and is therefore referred to as the "Mother of Universities" (*Alma Mater Studiorum*). It was shortly followed by the universities in Oxford (1096), Paris (1150), and Modena (1175) [19]. Before the establishment of the famous medieval European universities, several earlier institutions laid the groundwork for higher learning. These included the Schola Palatina in Aachen and the Academy of Brexgata near Noyon, both founded in 798 AD under the Carolingian monarchy, as well as the Medical School of Salerno, which emerged in the 9th century. The rise of medieval European universities was fundamentally linked to the transfer of knowledge from the Islamic world, often catalyzed by the Spanish Reconquista and the Norman conquest of Arab Sicily—a crucial, yet frequently overlooked, historical connection. As a result of these events, Arab universities found themselves in territories of Christian rulers. A mingling of Christian, Arabic, and Byzantine cultures also took place after the medical crusades in the Middle East.

The Orthodox cultural and civilization sphere has a different perspective, pointing to the University of Constantinople (College of the Magnaur Palace), which operated in Byzantium from 425 to 1453 AD, as the first corporate-originating educational institution. Then comes the writing School in Veliko Preslav and Ohrid in Bulgaria, established at the turn of the 9th and 10th centuries. Latin America considers a modern university a successor to universities created by Christian monks in the 12th and 13th centuries, which were an extension of cathedral and monastery schools [10]. Moving away from Eurocentrism, one notes the presence of the Hanlin Academy of the Forest of Paintbrushes in China, established in 738 AD and operating from the Tang to Qing dynasties. Established in 9th-century Baghdad, the House of Wisdom acted as an early influential precursor to modern academic institutions in the Islamic world. Particular attention is drawn to two Arabic universities. They are the Al-Qarawiyyin University in Fez, Morocco, and the Al-Azhar University in Cairo, Egypt, dating back to 859 and 970 AD, respectively. The former is the first scientific institution that created specialized departments and degrees. Despite the mix of historical, cultural, and regional differences, a consensus prevails that the modern university as an institution of higher education is a successor to medieval universities and thus has Christian roots [16].

A perspective on the university tradition in Hindi is different. Here, university tradition has European roots dating back to the universities in Bologna and Paris, but they are considered neither the oldest nor the most important. Emphasis focuses on a university or a consortium of previously existing universities in Taxila, an ancient city 30 km northwest of Islamabad in today's Pakistan, in India, as early as the 7th century BC, where over 10500 people, from various corners of the world, could gather at a time to study [14]. Equivalents of today's academic

degrees were bestowed on the monastery's graduates. Other scientific and educational centers mentioned in ancient India were Nalanda, Vikramshila, and Kanchipuram. The Nalanda monastery had about ten thousand students and one thousand teachers in the 5th century. The monastery's book collection, encompassing five million copies, underscores its vital role in culture and education [20]. Likewise, the Buddhist cultural and civilizational circle represented by the Malay language civilization finds that precursors of higher educational institutions had existed long before in the Old World, especially in Asia. This cultural realm emphasizes the importance of ancient Chinese civilization, dating to the 21st century BC, which preceded the first European universities by three thousand years. The Shang Xiang is the oldest scientific and educational institution, funded by the statesperson named Shun and operating from 2255 to 2205 BC during the Youyu period. It is probably the ancestor of the royal central school called Dongxu during the Xia dynasty (2205-1760 BC), Youxue during the Shang dynasty (1766-1046 BC), Dongjiao and later Piyong during the Zhou dynasty (1046-249 BC), and Taixue during the Han dynasty (202-220 AD) renamed to Guozijian or the Imperial Academy in 1306 AD and remaining the central institute of learning in ancient China [16]. Renowned today, the University of Nanjing traces its history to the Royal Central School, founded in Nanjing in 258 AD. The Imperial University of Nanjing became the first institution in China to combine education and scientific research. It consisted of five departments in the year 470 AD. The development of higher education in China precedes that in Japan, where, according to the available records, it dates to the University Dormitory established by Emperor Tenji in the 7th century AD.

African civilization also has its say in laying the foundation of modern education. The Library of Alexandria, likely the first higher-education center ever, existed in ancient times in Africa. Another is the Sankore Islamic University, founded in 989 AD in Timbuktu, Mali, in West Africa. The university had no central administration, encompassing upwards of 25,000 students at its peak in the 15th century AD.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Here, we described the origin of the university concept and the genesis of university-like higher education dating back millennia. We used the digital humanities analysis of internet websites across nine world civilizations. This narrative aimed to define the origin and onset of the university concept based on the academic tradition throughout centuries in the geo-cultural context. The term "university" is of Latin origin and traces back to the turn of the 10th century, the time when the world's oldest university in continuous operation, Bologna University, began functioning in 1088. Those were the times of thriving Christendom in Western European civilization that took the lead in intellectual, cultural, and educational developments. The academic tradition established then has endured and evolved into its present form. There is no wonder that Western civilization takes credit for the endurance and expansion of the global academic tradition. However, there are significant differences in the rating of the oldest universities' role in these developments. One should also make no mistake that higher education and research systems, equal or superior to the medieval Western universities, were non-existent in the ancient Hellenic world, Roman empires, or African and Asian civilizations so early as two thousand years BC, operating within the possibilities of those times. The fact is that medieval universities drew their foundational traditions and organizational principles from their ancient predecessors. Thus, those often neglected and bygone educational entities challenge Western dominance and promote opposition to the supposedly "universal" Western role in the development of education and research. Science appears like an eternally rising wall of bricks constructed by all civilizations of humanity, and no brick should be taken out for continuing advancements to stay.

Acknowledgments: This research received no external funding.

Ethical considerations: This review article does not involve any direct contact with individuals or institutions; therefore, ethical and consent-seeking procedures were not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Author Contributions: Both authors contributed equally to the study conception, design, analysis, and interpretation of results, and drafting the manuscript's body text. Both authors have approved the submitted version.

Data Availability Statement: The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors upon request.

REFERENCES

- Giles, J. (2005). Internet encyclopedias go head-to-head. *Nature*, 438(7070), 900-1. <https://doi.org/10.1038/438900a>.
- Fallis, D. (2008). Toward Epistemology of Wikipedia. *American Society for Information Science and Technology*, 59(10), 1662-74. <https://doi.org/10.1002/asi.20870>.

- Mesgari, M., Okoli, C., Mehdi, M., Nielsen, F. A., Lanamäki, A. (2015). The sum of all human knowledge: A systematic review of scholarly research on the content of Wikipedia. *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology*, 66(2), 219-45. <https://doi.org/10.1002/asi.23172>.
- LaFleur, G. Search engine optimization (SEO). <https://www.techtarget.com/whatis/definition/search-engine-optimization-SEO> (accessed on 22 June 2024).
- Understanding bounce rate in Google Analytics. <https://yoast.com/understanding-bounce-rate-google-analytics> (accessed on 22 June 2024).
- Huntington, S. P. (1996). *The clash of civilizations and the remaking of world order*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Lamport, M. A. (2015). *Encyclopedia of Christian Education*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers; ISBN 9780810884939.
- Gavroglu, K. (2015). *Sciences in the universities of Europe, nineteenth and twentieth centuries: Academic landscapes*. Springer; ISBN 9789401796361.
- Weijers, O. (1987). *Terminologie des universités au xiiiè siècle. series: lessico intellettuale europeo*, 39, XXXIX, 437 pages. Roma: Dell'Ateneo; ISBN 10: 8822235150.
- Aullon of Haro, P. (2018). *The university question, "Humanistic Methodologies."* Madrid: Juan Andrés Institute.
- Wikipedia. Retrieved from <http://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%A3%D0%BD%D0%B8%D0%B2%D0%B5%D1%80%D1%81%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B5%D1%82> (in Russian).
- Wikipedia. Retrieved from <http://ar.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D8%AC%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%B9%D8%A9> (in Arabic).
- Chuo K. In Wikipedia. Retrieved from http://sw.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chuo_Kikuu (in Swahili).
- Wikipedia. Retrieved from <http://hi.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E0%A4%B5%E0%A4%BF%E0%A4%B6%E0%A5%8D%E0%A4%B5%E0%A4%B5%E0%A4%BF%E0%A4%A6%E0%A5%8D%E0%A4%AF%E0%A4%BE%E0%A4%B2%E0%A4%AF> (in Hindi).
- Universiti. In Wikipedia. Retrieved from <http://ms.wikipedia.org/wiki/Universiti>.
- Wikipedia. Retrieved from <http://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E5%A4%A7%E5%AD%B8> (in Chinese).
- University. In Wikipedia. Retrieved from <http://ja.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E5%A4%A7%E5%AD%A6> (in Japanese).
- University. In Wikipedia. Retrieved from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/University>.
- Verger, J. (2003). *Patterns*. In: H. de Ridder-Symoens (Ed.), *A History of the University in Europe. Vol. I: Universities in the Middle Ages*; Cambridge University Press; ISBN 978-0-521-54113-8.
- Nalanda University. Retrieved from <http://www.cwrl.utexas.edu/~bump/OriginUniversities.html>.