

**EDUCATIONAL IDEAS BY THOMAS JEFFERSON
AND SYED MUHAMMAD NAQUIB AL-ATTAS: A
COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS**

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Abstract

Education has been a subject of global discourse, both in the East and the West. These discussions often focus on the educational ideologies proposed by intellectuals and administrative elites. In the United States, for example, Thomas Jefferson, who served as President from 1801 to 1808, was an ardent advocate of education for national development. In Malaysia, Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas is renowned as a scholar for his concept of the Islamisation of knowledge, which has resulted in numerous scholarly works. This study provides a comparative analysis of the educational ideas of Jefferson and Al-Attas, particularly in relation to the development of educational worldviews, the knowledgeable individuals, and the establishment of higher education institutions. These three components demonstrate how the educational philosophies of both

figures can be applied to the advancement of their respective nations. The research employs qualitative methods, relying on an analysis of primary writings by Jefferson and Al-Attas. Jefferson's personal correspondence, digitized and accessible through the Founders Online platform at the National Archives of the United States, was examined alongside Al-Attas's magnum opus works. Comparative analyses were conducted to highlight the educational philosophies of these two figures within a historical framework. Authoritative secondary sources, including books and journal articles, were also utilised to support the discussion. This effort highlights the significance of Jefferson's ideas in advancing education in the United States and the intellectual contributions of Al-Attas to Malaysia's academic landscape during their respective eras. Although Jefferson was a statesman with intellectual inclinations, Al-Attas was an intellectual with a vision akin to that of a statesman. The study concludes that the educational philosophies of Jefferson and Al-Attas are instrumental in shaping worldviews, knowledgeable individuals, and contributing to the establishment of higher education institutions.

Keywords: *Thomas Jefferson, Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, Educational Worldviews, Knowledgeable Individuals, Education Institutions.*

Introduction

In addition to catalyzing intellectual revolutions, education serves as a potent instrument for societal transformation. The pivotal role of education in shaping societal paradigms is exemplified through the visionary endeavours of influential figures across different epochs. This discourse focuses on Thomas Jefferson, the third President of the United States (1801-1808), and Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, a contemporary scholar, as exemplars in the realm of education. Their profound insights into knowledge acquisition, individual self-development, and institutional enhancement underscore their enduring legacies. Jefferson's presidential tenure coincided with a transformative phase in American history, marked by the consolidation of democratic ideals and territorial expansion. Conversely, Al-Attas, a prominent academic, championed the Islamization of knowledge, navigating the intricate realms of philosophy and Sufi literature. Despite their divergent spheres of influence, both figures wielded considerable impact on education within their respective nations.

In terms of the roles of the two figures studied in this study, there is a significant difference between them because Jefferson is a

president and Al-Attas is a scholar. In the political world, Jefferson was responsible for writing the United States Declaration of Independence in 1776 and submitting ideas for the drafting of the United States Constitution in 1789. During his presidency, the United States entered a new era of revolution in terms of democracy, the implementation of agrarianism (agricultural economics), and the expansion of U.S. territory through the purchase of the New Orleans and Louisiana areas from Napoleon Bonaparte.¹ Al-Attas, on the other hand, has travelled as an intellectual in the world of thought through the concept of Islamization that he has introduced. Al-Attas held the Ibn Khaldun Chair in Islamic Studies at American University in Washington, as well as being an International Member of the American Philosophical Association, and has contributed to the creation of magnum opus works that address various questions and confusions in the Islamic world. On October 23 2024, he was conferred the title Royal Professor by His Majesty the King, Sultan Ibrahim.² The positions of Jefferson and Al-Attas had a significant impact on both countries.

Rooted in diverse intellectual traditions, Jefferson and Al-Attas cultivated distinct perspectives on science and knowledge dissemination. Jefferson, for his part, has been exposed to a variety of ideas, including those from continental Europe, particularly enlightenment ideas from individuals such as Montesquieu, Adam Smith, John Locke, Lord Kame, Renaissance era thought and Islamic influences, epitomized by his possession of the Holy Qur'ān.³ Jefferson's contribution was later described as a "masterpiece" in the world of education by scholar such as Richard Guy Wilson.⁴ Al-Attas has written extensively about the Malay world, particularly in terms of philosophy and Sufi literature based on classical Malay manuscripts. This has exposed him to ideas from Al-Ghazali, Mulla Sadra, and Hamzah Fansuri, and intellectuals such as Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud have described Al-Attas as "A real reformer and thinker."⁵ Their scholarly contributions, lauded as masterpieces, resonate profoundly in educational realms.

For Al-Attas' educational idea, the primary foundation revolves around the Islamization of knowledge. This is a result of the difficulties in today's educational system, which is under siege from waves of secularization from the West, whether in higher education or in intellectual discourse. Al-Attas has put forth efforts to revolutionise the interpretation of knowledge related to sciences, applications, and moral conduct in education, along with the analysis of Islamic civilization in the Malay world. Al-Attas has echoed the idea of

Islamization of knowledge in works like *Islam dalam Sejarah dan Kebudayaan Melayu* (Islam in the History and Culture of the Malay People), *Islam and Secularism*, and *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islām*. Ultimately, Al-Attas' discourse aims to nurture refined individuals.

While Jefferson's post-presidential years crystallized his educational vision, Al-Attas continues to inspire through his enduring legacy. Their divergent paths converge in their unwavering commitment to knowledge dissemination and societal upliftment. Jefferson's vision of educational revolution mirrors Al-Attas' endeavour to Islamize knowledge, each contributing to their nation's educational ethos.

In terms of space to implement educational ideas, Jefferson and Al-Attas have a good chance of making their plans a reality. Since the country's early independence on July 4, 1776, the land of the United States, according to Jefferson, had been in the spirit of a revolution emphasising the question of human democracy and freedom. Jefferson created such circumstances and opportunities as a continuation of a human freedom revolution to an educational revolution that would play an important role in making the human being fulfil his social functioning. Al-Attas' educational ideas were established and expanded through writings channelled through organisations such as the Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia (ABIM) in its early stages. Al-Attas' idea of education later found a place and was accepted by the Malaysian government, particularly when his student at the time was the Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia, Dato' Sri Anwar Ibrahim (now 10th Prime Minister of Malaysia from 2022 to present). The space and opportunities made available as Jefferson and Al-Attas expanded their educational ideas contributed to their educational ideas becoming fairly practical. Thus, Al-Attas and Jefferson's vision of education in terms of enlightenment of the world's view of knowledge, the formation of knowledgeable individuals, and the establishment of an educational institution was realised, as will be explained in the following section.

The purpose of this study's thesis statement is to demonstrate that Jefferson and Al-Attas both contributed significantly to the advancement of knowledge through their writing and the educational institutions that they established. This was done to demonstrate that they both made significant contributions to the country's and race's education during their time. After becoming President of the United

States from 1808 until his death in 1826, Jefferson's role in the world of American education became clearer to him. Al-Attas, on the other hand, is still active in the intellectual world, and he has left a legacy of thought that is carried on by his students in Malaysia, as well as other countries in the Islamic world. Despite their differing positions and capacities, these two individuals appear to play distinct roles in the development of knowledge. If Jefferson is significant in the development of knowledge culture in the United States, Al-Attas is equally significant in the development of knowledge in Malaysia. Through meticulous comparative analysis, this study elucidates the complementary roles of Jefferson and Al-Attas in shaping educational landscapes. By juxtaposing their ideologies and institutional contributions, this research endeavours to fill a critical void in scholarly discourse.

Previous studies on the education of Jefferson and Al-Attas have been conducted by researchers from the United States, Malaysia, and other countries. Richard Guy Wilson⁶, Francesca Miller⁷, and Andrew Holowchak⁸ have studied the evolution of Jefferson's educational ideas, from personal statements to the establishment of educational institutions. Holowchak has already described Jefferson's idea of education as a utopia that can be translated into reality, whereas Miller and Wilson have compiled Jefferson's idea of education's contribution not only in terms of knowledge development but also in terms of educational institution architecture development. Researchers such as Sharifah Shifa Al-Attas⁹, Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud¹⁰, H. Komaruddin Sassi¹¹, and Muhammad Ardiansyah¹² have presented their studies on the idea of Al-Attas education through analysis that is not only subject to the philosophy of education but also includes Al-Attas' idea for a university. Wan Mohd Nor's research has traced Al-Attas' contribution to the concept of education in the context of the Islamization of knowledge, whereas Shifa has detailed the chronology of the construction of ISTAC as a higher learning institution across civilizations. Ardiansyah, on the other hand, has examined Al-Attas's concept of manners as a component that determines success in filling an educational institution. Komaruddin, for his part, has detailed Al-Attas' idea of education in the framework of tawhid (theology) through a critical evaluation in each chapter in which he discusses whether the idea is relevant or not.

However, none of the researchers have addressed the comparative analysis of the two figures mentioned earlier. Thus, through this study, the gap is attempted to be filled, particularly through comparative analysis in terms of the world view of

knowledge, the ultimate goal of individual formation, and the construction of educational institutions. This comparison is important because it details the efforts of two individuals, Jefferson for the United States and Al-Attas for Malaysia, to develop knowledge for their respective races. This comparison is based on the three previously mentioned aspects, as well as chronology, for a more focused arrangement of the scope of the discussion. As a result, the void left by previous researchers is filled with an objective and authoritative argument.

Methodology

This study employs qualitative methods involving research into online archival documents and secondary materials housed in libraries. Analyses were conducted on Thomas Jefferson's digitised personal letters, available on Founders Online (<https://founders.archives.gov/>), which are accessible to researchers. These letters include Jefferson's educational ideas expressed in correspondence with individuals such as George Washington (1st President of the United States), James Madison (4th President of the United States), William Short (American Ambassador, 1794-1795), and his nephew, Peter Carr. For Al-Attas, key texts such as *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islām*, *The Mysticism of Hamzah Fansuri*, *Islam and Secularism*, *Islam in History and Culture*, and other monographs were analysed and compared with Jefferson's writings.

This study does not employ any specific theoretical framework as it is grounded in the discipline of history, which emphasises the analysis and interpretation of documents. This approach aligns with Leopold von Ranke's methodology that critical use of documents with narrative history.¹³ Nevertheless, this study seeks to introduce a more open and rational interpretation of education, one that is liberated from the constraints of myth, the grip of despotic politics, and the dominance of any intellectual hegemony. This initiative aligns with Paulo Freire's view that education should not serve as an instrument of oppression nor be reduced to mere memorization and examination practices.¹⁴ Furthermore, this approach aspires to embody the global educational objectives outlined by UNESCO in 1996, namely *learning to know, learning to do, learning to be, and learning to live together*.

To complement the discussion, authoritative secondary sources, including books and journal articles, were utilised to

strengthen the narrative. Intertextual engagement between primary and secondary sources is essential to ensure a balanced and objective discussion, while avoiding any claims that are speculative in nature. Through this qualitative approach, a comparative analysis of the educational ideas of Jefferson and Al-Attas was conducted, particularly in terms of shaping educational worldviews, fostering learnt individuals, and establishing higher education institutions. This approach underscores the significant contributions of both figures to the development of education in their respective nations.

Results and Discussion

Formation of a Knowledge World View

Jefferson and Al-Attas' conception of education is rooted in their respective worldviews of science. They share a common history in terms of the country they live in, as both are former British colonies, which are former 13 colonies for the United States, while Malaysia was formed by the merger of the Malay Peninsula, North Borneo (now Sabah) and Sarawak.¹⁵ Beginning with that, Jefferson and Al-Attas share a spirit of thinking in an effort to provide the idea of progress for society in their respective countries, with Jefferson using the political band and Al-Attas using the academic track. This is demonstrated by Jefferson's own admission that education reform is a political reform for the United States toward a strong nation state.¹⁶ For Al-Attas, education is an effort to form a civilised human being capable of acting with wisdom and justice in order to rid a country of the character of a false leader.

Regarding the formation of an educational worldview, Jefferson and Al-Attas had their own purposes and approaches for building this framework. Jefferson desired an education for the new United States aimed at progress, looking forward while discarding past backward thinking.¹⁷ He emphasized the idea of freedom in education, similar to the Renaissance era, and was influenced by Enlightenment ideas from Europe, notably from John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Voltaire, and Montesquieu.¹⁸ For Al-Attas, the worldview for the Muslim world must be based on Islam, discarding superstitions and myths, as he discussed in his works on the Malay world.¹⁹ Al-Attas emphasized the importance of the Islamization of knowledge as a counter to Western²⁰ educational ideas, which include elements of secularism.²¹ This aspect of the educational worldview is important for both so that the society of their times could obtain a clear and scientific framework of knowledge.

In this regard, Al-Attas sought to highlight the importance of the worldview closely related to education. He emphasized this in his general lecture in 1971 by detailing the significant differences between the pre-Islamic era and the era after the advent of Islam on Malay society's life, from aesthetic thinking to intellectual value-based thinking.²² Al-Attas did not speak of this without evidence when he uncovered the impact of the arrival of Islam on the production of literary works in the Malay world. He provided proof by analyzing the works of a poet in the Malay world, Hamzah Fansuri, through the poems and prose written by this figure. Al-Attas analyzed Fansuri's works like *Asrāru'l-Ārifīn* (Secrets of the Wise), *Sharābu'l-Āshiqīn* (Drink of the Lovers), and *Al-Muntahī*.²³ These works display an Islamic worldview encompassing issues of *tawhīd*, *sharī'ah*, and sufism, which should be emulated by Muslims in general.

The intellectual steadfastness and consistency of Al-Attas remain unwavering in the academic world even at the age of 94. In 2023, he once again demonstrated the sharpness of his intellect through his latest monumental work entitled *Islam: The Covenants Fulfilled*. In this book, he elaborates on the origin of human (*al-insān*) creation in great depth through an intellectual interpretation grounded in the divine revelation of Surah al-A'rāf (7:172). From this exposition, Al-Attas emphasizes that the reality of human existence cannot be separated from the metaphysical dimension inherent in the human being, which comprises the faculties of *al-rūh* (spirit), *al-nafs* (soul), *al-'aql* (intellect) and *al-qalb* (heart).²⁴ These elements form the foundation of understanding humanity as a being endowed with consciousness and moral intellect. Ultimately, according to him, the purpose of human life is centered upon the fulfillment of a divine trust, a sacred obligation that arises from the primordial covenant to acknowledge and bear witness that Allah is the One and Only God.

Jefferson has called for education to be expanded beyond knowledge in the United States' geographical space, recognising the importance of a clear world view of knowledge. He had argued that mastery of foreign languages was attained, particularly French and Spanish, which were quite dominant at the time.²⁵ This is not surprising given that the last quarter of the 18th century saw France go through a period of revolution as revolutionary thinkers' ideas spread, and Jefferson himself was inspired by this change, as stated in his autobiography "... the whole world must take in this revolution. As yet we are but in the first chapter of its history."²⁶

In this context, Jefferson's actions in enlightening the scientific worldview are inextricably linked to the development of his contemporaries at the time. For example, in the case of language mastery, this serves as the foundation for the individual to explore new knowledge while also serving as a gateway to other civilizations. This was once demonstrated in Western civilization when works in the fields of astronomy and artistic medical philosophy were translated by Europeans from Islamic civilization's treasures contained in Arabic and Persian. This matter is important for the spirit of enlightenment (enlightenment) taken from France because the knowledge is related to questions of politics, individual freedom, the principle of equality, and the separation of powers. When Jefferson emphasised the elements of language mastery and the application of the spirit of modern change, the two things formed an important educational world view for the question of humanity in the United States. Jefferson streamlined these efforts in order to create a space of knowledge that could elevate the status of society in the United States, which was still in its half-century period of independence at the time.

Jefferson also requested that any matter relating to religion, particularly Christianity, be examined and evaluated by each individual before accepting it. In the case of human rights, despite the fact that he was not a Muslim, he later researched and used some content from the Holy Qur'an.²⁷ Attempts were made to form a rational and realistic world view of knowledge so that the public understood the issue of their freedom in making judgments, as stated in Jefferson's letter to John Tyler on 26 May, 1810:

I have two great measures at heart, without which no republic can maintain itself in strength. 1. That of general education, to enable every man to judge for himself what will secure or endanger his freedom. 2. To divide every county into hundreds, of such size that all the children of each will be within reach of a central school in it.²⁸

Through the content of Jefferson's letter, education is clearly linked to the question of human freedom in their lives, as well as the need to build easily accessible research institutions. This issue of freedom must be emphasised so that every action of the educated individual can better understand the meaning of the freedom they have acquired and for the right and dignity of man.²⁹ This has relation with the United States' experience of being under British occupation for so long, with restrictions on various things like political rights, tax evasion, and economic oppression.³⁰ Is there a connection

between Jefferson's concept of education and concept Al-Attas's of education? If this is the case, how can the similarities be identified? For Al-Attas, the emphasis on the world view of education clearly lies in his efforts to rethink interpretations of Malay history and culture.

In this regard, Al-Attas has submitted a critique of previous orientalist studies on the Islamic presence, identity, and history of the Malay race in the region.³¹ Through the concept of Islamization, Al-Attas has proposed a new interpretation of the theory of the arrival of Islam in Malay, claiming that Islam arrived through the role of the clergy. The thesis statement completely refutes the previous reviewer's assertion that Islam in the Malay world originated in the Indian subcontinent based on archaeological evidence, with tombstones in the North sharing similarities with tombstones in the Indian subcontinent. Al-Attas emphasises the significance of the impact of Islam brought by this group of scholars with the statement:

... In contrast to Hinduism and Buddhism, Islam is a scientific literary culture. Furthermore, Islam was the first to introduce the Malay-Indonesian archipelago is the rational thinking of the Western world in the form of Greek philosophy, particularly represented by the ideals of Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus.³²

According to Al-Attas's statement, he attempted to reconstruct a rational and aesthetic interpretation of Malay cultural knowledge. The examples provided by his philosophy-related knowledge serve only to bolster the argument that Islam has revolutionised the Malays' worldview through rational thought. Al-Attas also claimed in another study that the interpretation of the Malays in the region has reached the level of scientific thinking, citing evidence from inscriptions Terengganu in Kuala Berang dated Friday, 4th Rajab 702 A.H. (Friday, 22nd February 1303 A.C.).³³ According to Al-Attas, the Malays are able to master the science of astronomy and human affairs in the context of regular community life.³⁴ Scholars such as Denys Lombard acknowledge the importance of the Malays' changing world view on knowledge when he states that the arrival of Islam changed the Malays' focal point from the government palace to the axis of Islam.³⁵

Furthermore, Al-Attas' treatment of Islamic culture in the Malay world based on rational and scientific essence is important to explain that the Malays' thinking has undergone a process of transformation since the arrival of Islam.³⁶ This also undermines and

dismisses the interpretation of Western scholars who claim that Malay culture is densely infused with Hindu-Buddhist elements. According to the statement, Islam does not appear to change anything once it is adopted by Malays in the Malay world after the religion has been established and spread as a way of life. At the same time, the Malays were not influenced by Hindu-Buddhist culture due to the lack of significant places or buildings of worship to demonstrate the religion's strong influence on the Malays. This issue must be clarified so that the interpretation of the Malay race's identity becomes purer by identifying Islam in terms of its history and culture.

In this case, it appears that Jefferson and Al-Attas' efforts had a significant impact on the interpretation of the world view of knowledge according to their perspectives. The actions and criticisms they levelled against a single science are critical in developing the nation's understanding of its identity and culture. Without a critical definition of something we believe in and hold for generations, we will inevitably regress in our thinking. As a result, there will be confusion because there will be no intellectual power to re-evaluate the concept of knowledge that can be used as a guide. This is consistent with a statement made by scholar Samuel P. Huntington, who stated that in order to know who we are, we must first understand who we are not.³⁷

Development of Knowledgeable Individuals

Aside from developing a clear world view of knowledge, Jefferson and Al-Attas sought to detail the end product for educated individuals through their respective educational philosophies. Something intriguing occurs when both of them provide a parallel individual model both internally and externally, with an emphasis on the mental and moral aspects. Jefferson has focused on this question by educating to produce qualities for "head and heart." Through this initiative, Jefferson has outlined the need for human beings to be educated with science for their minds and morals and ethics for their actions.³⁸ Al-Attas, on the other hand, is no less critical when he has presented some things that must be present in educating civilised individuals, such as the emphasis on *din* (religious concept), *insān* (human concept), *'ilm* and *ma'rifah* (knowledge concept), and *'adl* (justice concept).³⁹ According to Al-Attas's glasses, this element becomes an important aspect in the formation of an *adabi* human being (civilised human being) for an individual who is balanced in the attainment of knowledge and life in the world of reality. Jefferson emphasises the importance of individual education as follows:

Man was destined for society. His morality therefore was to be formed to this object. He was endowed with a sense of right & wrong merely relative to this. This sense is as much a part of his nature as the sense of hearing, seeing, feeling; The moral sense, or conscience, is as much a part of man as his leg or arm. It is given to all human beings in a stronger or weaker degree, as force of members is given them in a greater or less degree.⁴⁰

According to the passage of Jefferson's letter, the human presence in society is inextricably linked to moral values such as the importance of the human body being endowed with senses. Jefferson also used an analogy: moral values are like legs and arms that complete the human body, and if a limb is missing, there must be a flaw. Jefferson, as a holistic human being, does not hover over theory alone in the context of education, but he also urges some subject content that is essential to the production of quality individuals. He also presented guidelines for the subjects to be studied, such as sciences, religion, and natural law, in the morning. The subject of General Law and Chancery was then covered until noon. Then it's Politics until 1 p.m., and then it's History for the rest of the day. By the end of the day, education is still going on, with language-related knowledge such as critical thinking.⁴¹ Jefferson's educational schedule arrangement is nothing more than adjusting the individual's spirit and energy while going through the learning sessions that change according to the differences in learning time. Jefferson also urged that geography be studied as thoroughly as possible in order for individuals to better understand their culture and social environment, because the knowledge also includes knowledge related to mathematics and science.⁴²

For Jefferson, a mental-moral balance is important enough to develop an individual's self as a result of education. This is because the mental aspect that leads to science will aid humans in shaping the development of their nation and exploring technological advancement in accordance with the needs of the times. When examined more closely, Jefferson's recommendation is still relevant today, particularly in the attainment of knowledge based on the fourth industrial revolution. Elements of mental progress can be seen in the current development of science, which has been processed by humans in the form of artificial intelligence capable of benefiting the affairs of life.⁴³ Jefferson's demand for a person to develop moral values is necessary for the formation of human beings who are more ethical in their handling of the knowledge and practise of technological advances they have achieved. Without humanitarian values and rational considerations, such a person will undoubtedly be unable to carry out

his responsibilities as a human being in a moral manner. Jefferson attempted to coordinate a type of balanced development of science and morality as the end product of individual formation with this.

Jefferson's suggestion also demonstrates that he has proposed an orderly pedagogy for a student. He has considered the issue of individual psychology, which can be influenced by learning time and things learned. This effort is beneficial in ensuring that the former students can receive, comprehend, and apply the knowledge they have gained. In terms of geography, Jefferson advocated for more research into the subject. It is essential for every human being, especially when exploring the new life and space that is their social change's environment. This knowledge of geography became an important component of human exploration and exploration in human civilization, as demonstrated by Marco Polo and Ibn Battuta, who explored the world. This circumstance suggests that Jefferson has a clear educational goal of producing holistic individuals.

According to Al-Attas, the purpose of education for human beings must be clear by including the purpose of knowledge search, direct involvement in education, and the scope for knowledge distribution itself. This then includes the educational content, the rules that must be followed during the process, and the methods that will be used in a systematic education. This meticulous detail was made by Al-Attas in accordance with his belief that the Muslim world is vulnerable to the threat of secular ideas from the West. Al-Attas stated as early as 1973:

Western cultures have long separated religion from everyday life, embracing only inherited traditions or customs, arts, philosophy, science, and technology as the foundation of their lives.⁴⁴

Thus, Al-Attas has emphasised the effort to provide a model of human education in a practical rather than idealistic framework, as he admits:

... Wisdom is the knowledge of the "right place" for a thing or a potential human being. Wisdom is defined as "God-given knowledge" that enables a person who obtains "that knowledge" to "use" that knowledge wisely so that "knowledge (i.e. experience or punishment) causes justice to be done".⁴⁵

According to Al-Attas' statement, the elements of wisdom and justice clearly accompany and even complement knowledge. From that, knowledge is a gift from God that can produce benefits in human civilization from time to time. This statement is consistent with the demands made in the first revelation to Prophet Muhammad (*The Final Prophet of Allah, Peace be upon him, his Progeny and Companions*), who emphasised the importance of knowledge in the name of Allah Almighty in order to revolutionise Islamic civilization from Medina to Andalusia and the Abbasids.⁴⁶ The ability of the educational system to produce a complete human being with knowledge is critical in shaping the change of society as well as human civilization itself. Thus, when the element of justice is to put something in its proper place, and wisdom is an important component to supplement knowledge in human self-development.

Al-Attas' philosophy of knowledge, in order to meet the demands of individual self-development, entails not only learning but also the cultivation of human values themselves. The question of wisdom, justice, and humanity that must be included in the formation of each individual is critical, especially when they are dealing with scientific knowledge in managing this nature. These elements serve as joints that shape every human being's behaviour so that they do not greedily arbitrarily ruin life in the world with the knowledge they have.⁴⁷ In the context of the real world, it is critical to develop human beings who can interact harmoniously with nature, which includes animals, plants, whether terrestrial or aquatic life.⁴⁸ Scholars such as M. Afifi al-Akiti and H. A. Hellyer have described Al-Attas' idea as Neo-Ghazalian because of his ability to provide a frame of mind for balanced individual development.⁴⁹

Upon closer examination, both of their ideas focus on individual growth and provide room for a form of education that liberates, as suggested by 20th-century pedagogical thinker Paulo Freire.⁵⁰ Jefferson is described by scholars today as an individual who championed the aspect of education for the newly formed United States at that time.⁵¹ For Al-Attas, his idea of Islamization attracted the interest of Malaysia's Minister of Education (1986-1991), Anwar Ibrahim, during a period when Malaysia became a global hub for Islamic finance and was seen as a modern and democratic nation.⁵² This explanation reinforces that the educational ideas of Jefferson and Al-Attas remain relevant because their primary goal is to develop the individual.

The Quranic revelation has consistently served as the primary source of reference for Al-Attas in his discussions on the nature of knowledge. As evidence, he examined verses from *Surah Surah al-Mu'minūn* (23:12-14) to elucidate the reality of human existence. This effort clearly demonstrates Al-Attas's intention to affirm the unique status of human creation in comparison to other beings, whether unseen or existing in the physical realm. From this understanding, Al-Attas courageously proposed an alternative framework for determining the chronology of human civilization as a counter-argument to conventional views, particularly regarding the issue of prehistoric man. He asserted that the appearance of humankind on earth occurred approximately 17,800 years ago, differing from the conventional view held by many Western scholars who estimate human existence to span hundreds of thousands of years⁵³. However, it was his own analysis.

In this regard, Al-Attas has implicitly shown that the effort to strengthen the foundation of knowledge cannot be separated from the purification of history. Without an objective understanding of history, a civilization would inevitably lose its sense of humanity, national identity, and the noble character of an orderly and cultured society. His work, *Islam: The Covenants Fulfilled* appears to affirm the universality and consistency of his ideas, which continually emphasize the importance of historical understanding as the basis for comprehending society within a civilization. This is consistent with several of his earlier writings produced before 2015, such as *Preliminary Statement on a General Theory of the Islamization of the Malay-Indonesian Archipelago* (1969), *A commentary on the Hujjat al-Siddiq of Nur Al-Din Al-Raniri* (1986), and *Historical Fact and Fiction* (2011) which also reflect his enduring concern with the relationship between history, knowledge, and civilization.

Al-Attas's intellectual framework remains firmly grounded in the Islamic conception of knowledge as the ultimate measure of truth, despite the passage of time and changing circumstances. In facing the challenges of the modern world, his ideas have also been incorporated into initiatives aimed at cultivating leadership based on true knowledge.⁵⁴ The purpose of this is to ensure that the knowledge acquired by individuals and communities is properly situated, whether within systems of governance or in the broader social sphere. Indirectly, this demonstrates that Al-Attas's ideas are not merely theoretical; rather, the synthesis of knowledge he developed can be applied in practical contexts. This claim is not rhetorical, as his intellectual framework has been adopted as a conceptual foundation

and applied model for a leadership course implemented at the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) in 2025.

In this case, Jefferson and Al-Attas appear to share a common goal in shaping the individual self through educational tools. According to Jefferson, organised and applied education should lead to a person's happiness in life.⁵⁵ Similarly, Al-Attas' use of happiness as the goal of human life is clear in terms of its meaning not only for this world's life but also for life in the hereafter.⁵⁶ These two people's ideas are quite practical if they are combined in one philosophy and purpose of education capable of elevating human self-worth.

Establishment of Holistic Educational Institutions

It was not enough for the two figures to inspire the idea of establishing a university after forming a scientific worldview and a model of human formation. This concept was proposed by Jefferson and Al-Attas, and it was successfully translated with the construction of the Academical Village by Jefferson, while ISTAC was built through the efforts of Al-Attas. Although these two institutions emerged in different centuries and eras, their functions remain the same: to develop the quality of the individual self-based on knowledge and the highest level of morality. According to Jefferson, the existence of this Academical Village is not limited to male individuals only, but also provides space for female individuals, in keeping with his position that is not biased towards those groups. Al-Attas, on the other hand, offers the same opportunities to those who have studied at ISTAC since its inception.

Jefferson's basic framework for the Academical Village was a large, open area. He desired architecture that included pavilions to house professors' and scholars' rooms, while other pavilions would house student dormitories.⁵⁷ The area also included rooms for educational activities, and each pathway had columns to shade students' walks. Jefferson's letter to James Dinsmore on April 13, 1817, stated that the location for the Academical Village was in Charlottesville, and Jefferson himself indicated that the environment of the Academical Village would develop over time according to funding and needs.⁵⁸ This Academical Village area later served to house the University of Virginia, which continues to this day.

Jefferson's efforts to establish an educational institution culminated in the establishment of the University of Virginia. In terms of architecture, layout, and reference content in the educational

institution, he has combined not only the core of scientific knowledge, but also the construction of the university, which is also blended with imperial and rational elements. Jefferson was instrumental in the creation of a sketch of the University of Virginia based on the layout of the building in Paris, France, which he saw while serving as Ambassador there.⁵⁹ In terms of architecture, Jefferson incorporated Renaissance elements, particularly those from Andrea Palladio's works (1508–1580, an Italian Renaissance architect active in the Venetian Republic).⁶⁰ The book's contents provided Jefferson with critical information for developing a dynamic development plan for a building that would later become an important landmark within the Academical Village. Jefferson's architectural philosophy is to provide a conducive and effective educational environment for students. Jefferson acknowledges this:

It either is, or ought to be the rule of every collegiate institution to teach to every particular student the branches of science which those who direct him think will be useful in the pursuits proposed for him. And to waste his time on nothing which they think will not be useful to him.⁶¹

According to Jefferson's statement, the University of Virginia is indeed designed to provide every individual with an education that meets his or her needs. This is consistent with the United States, which had only recently gained independence less than a half-century before to guarantee the principles of freedom and human rights. Aside from science, Jefferson urged the University of Virginia to provide education in law and economics, specifically based on ideas from Scotland, specifically from individuals such as Lord Kame and Adam Smith.⁶² The presence of the University of Virginia within this Academical Village exemplifies a truly remarkable idea from a man of his time. The question here is whether there are any parallels between Jefferson's concept of educational institutions and Attas's concept of educational institutions. When examined, there are some similarities between their ideas, as evidenced by the educational institutions they built.

Jefferson's determination in combining his experience and knowledge to create a futuristic and classic educational institution. Both of these elements are required in order for an institution to be competitive in terms of current needs and future uses without jeopardising traditional values. Jefferson also demonstrated that the university concept he proposed was not a pipe dream, but could be

realised if properly planned, shaped, and managed. The resulting University is not solely based on the structure of its building, but it is capable of providing a conducive environment for students to deepen their knowledge. The tradition of developing these educational institutions is not new in the Western world, as institutions such as Gymnasium were established in the ancient Greek kingdom, as were the Universities of Cambridge and Oxford in the 13th century in England.⁶³

The intellectual spirit of the heyday of Islam in Andalusia from the mid-8th century to the 15th century AD inspired construction Al-Attas's of ISTAC. This was confirmed by Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud who stated that Al-Attas drew the sketches for the ISTAC construction, building layout, landscape, and logo.⁶⁴ Furthermore, Al-Attas later invited big names like Syed Hussein Nasr and Fazlur Rahman to attend as intellectuals who would educate the students. Al-Attas, in 2020 emphasises the importance of a holistic educational institution in his book, *Islam and Secularism*, with the statement:

Core knowledge at the university level must be developed first, and must include materials relating to human reality (*insān*), religious reality (*dīn*), and human involvement in it; knowledge (*‘ilm* and *ma‘rifah*), wisdom (*hikmah*), and justice (*‘adl*) relating to man and his religion, and the nature of true deeds (*‘amal-‘adab*). All of this must be in reference to the concept of God, His Essence and Attributes (*tawhīd*); Revelation (Holy Qur’ān), its meaning and message; and the revealed law (*sharī‘ah*) with all of its demands...⁶⁵

According to the passage, Al-Attas' idea of an Islamic university is not merely rhetoric. In its heyday, ISTAC emerged as an important intellectual centre in the Southeast Asian region in general, and in Malaysia in particular. Philosophical works from both the Western and Eastern worlds, as well as scientific references, have been collected as reference material. This situation demonstrates Al-Attas's seriousness in creating and developing the concept of holistic education, not only in terms of knowledge content, but also by involving an educational institution. Inadvertently, his idea to establish a research centre to enrich Malay Muslim civilization during a public lecture in 1970 became a reality.

Furthermore, Al-Attas' note emphasises the issue of divinity in the concept of an educational institution. This evidence is important in demonstrating that the educational institution to be developed will

not be secularistic in its implementation. The emphasis on divinity is also a symbol that education in the context of Islam does not distinguish between spiritual and material questions, which are the catalyst for a holistic educational institution. From another perspective, the emphasis on the subject demonstrates that Al-Attas' stance on the Islamization of knowledge, which is also related to educational institutions, is consistent. This is consistent with Al-Attas's call to the world of Islamic education, which he made in 1978 at the international Islamic education conference in Jeddah. Al-Attas presented an Islamic university model at the conference, which was later realised in the form of the ISTAC construction in Malaysia.

In this case, it turns out that Jefferson and Al-Attas' efforts were critical to the advancement of knowledge in their respective eras. In the early nineteenth century, the United States received a contribution of ideas that were no less significant for the revolution of the advancement of science-based society. Surprisingly, remnants of Jefferson's educational concept can still be found on Virginia soil today. As for Al-Attas, his fate was different due to the political turmoil in 1998 between Malaysia's fourth Prime Minister, Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, and his Deputy, Anwar Ibrahim, which resulted in Al-Attas' ouster from continuing to lead ISTAC, which was built on his own inspiration and thoughts.⁶⁶ Al-Attas is no longer a part of the institution, and all that remains is a historical record of the existence of such an intellectual centre. In any case, both Jefferson and Al-Attas' roles deserve to be considered as superior intellectual endeavours on the map of the journey of knowledge.

In terms of Jefferson and Al-Attas' efforts to develop an educational institution, the results of both of their efforts have already been proven in physical form. The emergence of Academical Village as a result of Jefferson's efforts, and ISTAC as a result of Al-Attas' efforts, has aided many people in their quest for knowledge. The Academical Village, which also houses the University of Virginia, has expanded not only as a university but also as a publishing division that produces useful books and monographs for reference. ISTAC also serves as a knowledge dissemination institution, publishing books and magazines that strengthen and deepen knowledge based on the concept of Islamization. These two institutions serve as an important example of how the concept of education can be successfully implemented through perseverance and collaborative efforts, transforming it from an idea into a reality.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Jefferson's and Al-Attas' ideas about education had their own significance during their respective times. Jefferson's ideas, for example, aided the rapid growth of knowledge in the United States, particularly in Virginia, until his death in 1826. The presence of the Academical Village in the state became a symbol of achievement and a barometer of Jefferson's educational success. Regarding Al-Attas, his contribution is no less significant for Islam-based education in Malaysia to successfully form a new era in the world of education, particularly after the establishment of ISTAC. His educational ideas found a home not only in Malaysia, but also in Indonesia, the Middle East, Africa, and the United States. In addition, the intellectual frameworks of both thinkers reveal significant similarities in their efforts to create an educational sphere that nurtures the holistic development of human beings, despite the differences in their backgrounds and historical periods. Consequently, such ideas should serve as a conceptual framework for the present generation, fostering an educational philosophy that is systematic rather than merely idealistic, and functioning as a catalyst for transforming human life towards a better and more meaningful existence in tandem with the evolution of time.

Furthermore, this study demonstrated a type of comparison of two individuals' ideas about education based on the same principles. In today's context, the ideas of Jefferson and Al-Attas should be emulated by policymakers and thinkers seeking a realistic vision of education for human development. Although Jefferson and Al-Attas lived in different eras, their ideas about education are so relevant in shaping an individual's world view, the spirit of thinking in the acquisition of knowledge, and the effort to develop a holistic institution of higher learning. Through this comparison, a new acquisition can be understood when a leader possesses intellectual thinking, and an intellectual who has vision as a leader is undoubtedly capable of developing ideas for the benefit of his country. For future research, the ideas of Jefferson and al-Attas may be further explored by examining societal responses to their thoughts, as well as the critiques offered by their contemporaries. Such an approach has the potential to broaden the scope of study and deepen the understanding of the influence and reception of both thinkers' ideas within intellectual and social contexts.

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