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# WHITE PAPER FOR CREDIT RECOGNITION & INTERNATIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION MOBILITY IN THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN



IHEI CONSORTIUM  
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University of  
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Shahid Chamran  
University of Ahvaz

## EDITORS

Escarre Urueña, Roberto.  
Brusini, Debora.  
Gomez de Membrillera Desantes, Luis.

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# Introduction

The project “*Internationalization of Higher Education in Iran*” (IHEI) is co-financed by the European Commission through the Erasmus + programme, particularly within the framework of Key Action 2: Cooperation for innovation and the exchange of good practices - Capacity building in the field of higher education. The aim of IHEI is to raise the International Relations capacities of Iranian Higher Education Institutions by increasing their potential openness and reducing barriers for fluid international exchanges. Hence, IHEI strengthens the international dimension of the Iranian higher education system via transfer of know-how, management capacities and good practices. Through the engagement of 6 Iranian universities (Allameh Tabataba’i University (ATU), Shiraz University (SU), Ferdowsi University of Mashhad (FUM), University of Sistan and Baluchestan (USB), University of Kurdistan (UoK) and Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz(SCUA)) with 3 European partners (University of Alicante (UA), FH Joanneum Gesellschaft (FHJ) and Glasgow Caledonian University (GCU)), the following goals have been achieved:

- ▶ **Modernize International Relations Offices (IRO)** of 6 the Iranian partners universities via extensive capacity building activities (training, workshops and good practices sharing) to update IRO staff skills and deepen research and knowledge on the area.
- ▶ Set-up the **1st National Network in International Relations in higher education in the Islamic Republic of Iran** to cooperate and reinforce initiatives on this field.



- ▶ Elaborating referential documents to harmonize practices within the field of Higher Education Internationalization in Iran. Therefore, IHEI targets:
  - Microlevel management dynamics within Iranian IROs with the publication of **“International Relations Office Management Guide in the Islamic Republic of Iran”**.
  - Macrolevel national policy-making with the dissemination of **“White Paper for credit recognition and international higher education mobility in the Islamic Republic of Iran”**. Therefore, IHEI Consortium is striving to promote dialogue to increase awareness of the importance of international relations and develop **strategies** for its development, especially regarding **credit recognition and student mobility**.

As such, the **“White Paper for credit recognition and international higher education mobility in the Islamic Republic of Iran”** is framed with a structure which starts by introducing briefly “the state-of-the-art” in the Iranian Higher Education System, by then looking in particular to the concept of internationalization in academia and its crystallization at different policies in Iran. Afterwards, the document elucidates the main challenges that internationalization strategies currently face in the country, specially focusing on the situation on credit recognition frameworks within the Iranian Higher Education system. The White Paper moves on by tackling directly some concerning issues to enhance internationalization efforts and finalize the discussion by designing a full proposal to improve internationalization within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Iran.



# The Iranian Higher Education system

## Introduction to the Higher Education System in the Islamic Republic of Iran

The Higher Education System in the Islamic Republic of Iran includes 345 government-approved Institutions (International Unit, 2015). According to the International Institute of Education, there are currently 4.5 million students enrolled at Iranian Higher Education Institutions, which are categorized in the following types:

- Universities
- General/Comprehensive
- Specialized (fine arts, engineering, medicine)
- Comprehensive Technology (applied sciences)
- Payam-e Noor University (distance learning)
- Medical
- Private
- Teacher Training Colleges
- Technical Institutes and Higher Education Institutes (non-university)

All institutions of higher education, except medical institutions, are under the supervision of the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology (MSRT). Medical universities are supervised by the Ministry of Health, Treatment and Medical Education. All programs at private universities must be approved by the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution and recognized by the MSRT. Quality assurance of higher education institutions comes under the auspices of the MSRT.

Universities and research institutes in Iran are open to all eligible Iranians and non-Iranian applicants.

The admission of the Iranian applicants is done through a centralized state exam (Conquer) which is administered by the Organization for Assessment of the State Education (Sanjesh) in the MSRT (Ministry of Science Research and Technology, 2018).

The Higher Education System in Iran includes four prioritized educational degrees as follows:

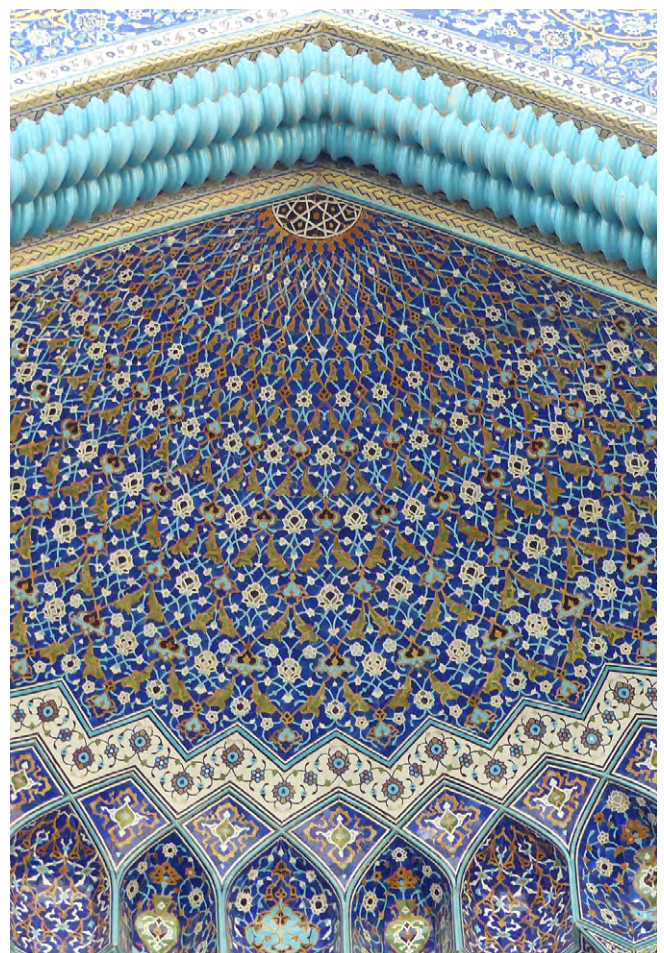
Technicians	2 Years
Bachelor Program	4 Years
Master Program	2 Years
PhD Program	4 Years

### **Iranian Universities: Past and Present**

After the Islamic Revolution in 1979, the new government closed almost all the universities in Iran. Closures lasted from 1980 to 1983, during which period the curriculum has been revised. Establishing and reopening Non-Governmental Schools (NGS) was the first action toward the privatization of education after the end of the war with Iraq in 1988 as private institutions were not allowed to operate for nearly 10 years after the revolution. The Islamic Azad University has been the only exception (Arabi, Andas Mdandar, 2014).

Due to this obstacle, the vast majority of current programmes at Iranian private institutions operate exclusively at undergraduate level, with just 5% of institutions offering MA diplomas and even

fewer Ph.D. programs (International Unit, 2015). The country is currently facing a shortage of educational opportunities at the graduate level, a factor which has contributed to the migration of academic elites (Malekzadeh, Shervin, 2015). This shortage is reflected on the highly selective university entrance exam, called Konkur; a 4.5 hours multiple-choice test which provides admission to public universities. As for the case of higher education, especially PhD level, the applicants have to take both oral and written exam which takes 2-3 days. It is highly competitive and educational rigor as well as writing skills are examined.





### Public Higher Education in Iran

Iranian public universities are of relatively good repute, in particular undergraduate education in engineering stands out, as well as their humanities faculties. The University of Tehran is ranked by the Academic Ranking of World Universities as one of the top 400 universities in the world (301-400).

Amirkabir University of Technology is listed among the top 500 universities in the same ranking (401-500). Sharif University of Technology has appeared on the list in previous years and is presently ranked by Times Higher Education among the top 600 universities in the world (501-600). Ferdowsi University of Mashhad (FUM) is presently ranked by Times Higher Education among the top 800-100 and 201-250 in Asia University Rankings.



During the last decade, Iran's higher education sector was not able to fill demand, as a result of which admission rates at public universities were recorded as low as 12 %. Despite efforts to increase capacity by enlarging existing universities, Iran has struggled to get ahead of a rapidly increasing demand for Higher Education. As such, entry into public institutions remains very competitive.

In 2017 a total of 930,208 students took the Konkur or Concours, the national entrance exam, out of which 378,706 passed the test, which means that only 40.7 % of the applicants have been admitted to public universities (Financial Tribune, 2017). Due to the high difficulty of access, the number of participants at the test has drastically decreased; in 2008 the applicants were 1.4 million, half a million by the last year. (Teheran Time, 2017).



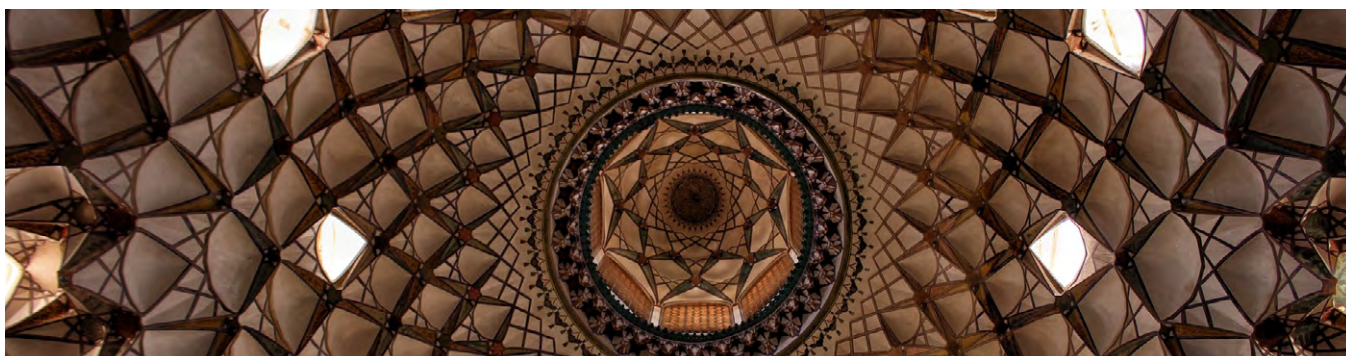
### Private Higher Education in Iran

By the end of 1980s, an exploding youth demographic led Iran's government to reassess its prohibition on private universities, and in 1988, it permitted non-profit private universities to apply for charters to operate.

The number of private higher education institutions in Iran has increased drastically since then. Iran's Ministry of Higher Education and Research presently lists 51 public universities on its website while in 1977 there were only 16 universities operating with a total of 154,315 students. The Ministry's website does not provide information on the number of institutions in the dynamic private sector, but some reports suggest a rapid increase from 50 private HEIs in 2005 to 354 in 2014, an increase of more than 600 percent in less than 10 years. For this reason, the overwhelming majority of Iran's students are enrolled in the private sector. More than one third of all Iranian students attend the semi-private Islamic Azad University (IAU), Iran's largest university and simultaneously one of the largest mega universities in the world with 1.7 million students. (WES, 2017).

Nurtured by former Iranian president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, Islamic Azad University (IAU), was established in 1984 as the first non-governmental higher education institution to address the unmet and escalating demand for higher education. "Azad" means "free" in Persian and refers to the fact that the university provides "open access" compared to the highly competitive public universities. Admission to IAU is much easier than gaining entry to Iran's public universities, indeed this is the most attended university in the private sector, the third largest university in the world. It services around 1.7 million students, over the 4.5 abovementioned, spread over 400 Iranian campuses (International Unit, 2015).

However, IAU charges high tuition fees, which made it not affordable for many aspiring students. Despite this funding structure, the university is, however, not a purely private institution. The government maintains oversight on degree programs and controls important aspects of university administration.



# Internationalization of the Iranian Higher Education System

## Premise

The traditional concept of “HEIs internationalization”, exclusively rooted in Western countries, might appear to clash with the widespread perception of Iranian policy in Higher Education. However, historically the country boasted some of the most influential centers of knowledge and science since the Persian empire, with a long and prolific history of exchange and international connections abroad. In fact, the Iranian Government is promoting Iranian HEIs position as a referent for the region. As such, we can define internationalization as a process based on economic, cultural, scientific, and political transactions that are based on consensus among interacting nations.

Applied in the field of Higher Education, this concept refers to “the process of integrating an international/intercultural dimension into the teaching, research and service functions of the higher education institution” (Knight, 1994, p.7). According to Marmolejo (2012), there are five major reasons for Internationalization of Higher Educations (IoHE):

- to improve student preparedness
- internationalize curricula
- enhance an institution’s international profile
- bolster research and knowledge production
- diversify faculty and staff.

IoHE enables governments to develop university systems that hold a broader global framework and

produce a skilled workforce with cosmopolitan awareness and multi-cultural competencies. Moreover, IoHE permits a nation to expand and elevate its countrywide and international profiles; leverage institutional strengths through strategic partnerships; enlarge the academic community and benchmark scholarly achievements; mobilize domestic intellectual resources; add significant contemporary learning outcomes to student experience; and develop stronger research groups (Hamidifar et al., 2017).

### Iran case

Iran's higher education sector has undergone significant growth in recent years. The 2016 removal of nuclear-related UN sanctions strongly contribute to opening the country's borders, which has the potential, inter alia, to accelerate Iran's outbound international student mobility numbers. This is giving rise to widespread speculation that the country may become an even more substantial market for international education.

An Iranian sponsored Delphi Panel of IoHE expert confirmed an encouraging overview that provides a viable outline for the future of IoHE in Iran through operative management and leadership platforms. The panel identified major trends in current national planning for the future. These included:

1. The growing importance of internationalization at all levels encompassing a broad range of activities, strategic approaches and emerging national ambitions;
2. Increased institutional IoHE strategies and praxis including homogenization while recognizing limitations such as a sole focus on quantitative results;
3. Mounting funding challenges;
4. Increased privatization via revenue generation;
5. Effects of competitive pressure with an evident shift from 'cooperation only' to fierce rivalry;
6. Emerging regionalization with rising numbers of stakeholders and participants resulting in a storm of quantity vs. quality;
7. Insufficient data for comparative analysis and decision-making;
8. Notable emerging areas of focus such as the internationalization of curricula, transnational education and digital learning. (2017).

Iran's IoHE strategy began with the Government's Twenty-Year Vision program "to become an economic and technological power is at the heart of Iran's new understanding of Iran's foreign and security relations". The program's vision, mission and motivators were further reinforced by the Fifth Five-Year development plans "Creating instructional interaction with other countries and international institutions such as UNESCO and IESCO". After the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA, 2015), internationalization has progressed to national and institutional levels (2017).



## EducationIRAN

According to the growing relevance of this topic, the organization EducationIRAN has strongly developed in the past year. This organization is part of the strategic plan towards IoHE and indeed it aims to govern, monitor and expand the international aspects of Iran's higher education system. For this reason, it can be considered as a part of the already ongoing internationalization strategic plan. EducationIRAN stems from the necessity to foster involvement in constructive cooperation and competitions on a global scale and joining the international higher education community has witnessed a significant development in Iran. The center is expected to facilitate Iran's effective entrance into the global setting of higher education and help the country adopt a significant role in this landscape. Not only will it show the Iran's existence in the international panorama, but it will also improve the status of domestic higher education and raise all standards regarding education, higher education, educational management, resource management, and other related fields.

## Internationalization achievements

Internationalization can assume different forms in higher education (Ghasempoor, 2011). In a virtual sense, new knowledge may be produced through international exchanges without university researchers and professors traveling abroad for their groundbreaking work to be recognized around the world. One of the main aspects regarding internationalization in higher education concerns

the curriculum. Its structures and products are disseminated beyond national borders in order to develop international knowledge, skills, and values in the existing programs of institutes for training and international education.

The internationalization of the curricula is a process of developing and changing the curriculum in order to infuse international aspects into formal and operational dimensions. The formal aspect is related to the objectives, course content and educational materials and the operational aspect includes teaching/learning and evaluation methods. (Vajargah, 2013).

Ghaheri (2005, in Vajargah, 2013) found out which curriculum elements are affected by the increase in international communications among higher education in Iran. Curricula contents change in different ways, for instance there is more attention to teaching foreign languages, technological and research skills. Moreover, students get familiar with different cultures, consider global issues using interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary integrative approaches and discover different teaching and learning methods as well as formative evaluation.

Therefore, in order to enable this virtual form of internationalization, acquiring foreign language skills is essential to overcome communication and information barriers is essential. In this regard, an evidence regarding Iranian progress is the growing number of English-language taught courses. This is getting possible thanks to the official recognition received by Parliament and the enshrining of a new legislation (International Unit, 2015).

While this virtual form of internationalization through the Web has become an integral part of the academic process, another form of international exchange requires actually physically crossing borders. Indeed, one of the sectors that has been affected the most by the internationalization process is the Student Mobility. More than 48,000 Iranian students were studying abroad in 2014, according to figures published by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics. The 2014 total represents a 78 percent increase over 2008 numbers, when just under 27,000 Iranian nationals were enrolled at foreign institutions of higher education (WES, 2017).

This increase is not only due to the borders opening achieved but also to the severe shortage of seats at graduate and postgraduate level that Iranian Higher Education System still suffers from, despite its rapid expansion during the last decades. Only 6% of the approximately 900,000 students who applied in 2011 for a master's degree have been enrolled and as regards to PhD candidates, it drops to 4 out of 127,000 applicants (Malekzadeh, 2015). Therefore, these are both important factors that drive considerable outbound mobility among Iranian students.

As can be seen, Internationalization is a complex process that involves different actors and it develops in different aspects in the Higher Education System. One of the most influential actions in this process are taken at governmental level. Since taking office in 2013, President Rouhani has emphasized the importance of internationalizing HE, encouraging collaboration

between domestic and foreign universities. As a relatively stable country there is also an interest to make Iran a regional education hub, encouraging inward mobility from Central Asian and other neighboring countries and assisting the development of HE in nations with Persian-speaking populations, such as Afghanistan and Tajikistan.

The Iranian government now allows local students to take undergraduate courses offered online by Western universities. This provides scope for major TNE programmes, not least since 24% of Iranian students (tertiary) currently participate in e-learning. Besides, scholarships for PhD students are also offered too (International Unit, 2015).



## Main challenges identified in the Report on barriers for credit recognition and international mobility of students & academic staff

Iran was pioneer in terms of HEIs internationalization with extensive historical records from Persian universities becoming referential in terms of scientific production since the 5th century, establishing themselves as a meeting point of civilizations at the heart of Central Asia (Rezaei, et al., 2018). However, from the very onset of the IHEI project and during the writing of the proposal, it was clearly acknowledged that currently Iranian HEIs face a very **complex context** in terms of their internationalization outlook. Some of the problems identified at this stage were: *“lack of specialized staff, unbalanced mobility flows with regards to students and academic staff, lack of internationalization strategies integrated within the institutional policies, difficulties regarding the recognition of credits/titles, lack of international networking, etc.”* IHEI CONSORTIUM (2017).

In fact, in the course of the implementation of the IHEI project, some of the shortcomings have been directly addressed, at the micro-level by developing capacity building activities with partner's staff, and at macro-level, attempting to influence national policy-makers and carrying out awareness-raising activities on these issues. However, while some of the challenges have been overcome, others have aroused or redefined. In that regard, the collaborative elaboration among IHEI partners of the “Report on barriers for credit recognition and international mobility of students & academic staff” represented a cornerstone in the attempts to produce an in-depth analysis to delineate the “state-of-the-art” of Iranian HEIs on internationalization processes. This needs analysis sketched a series of challenges, which have been



Main challenges identified in the Report on barriers for credit recognition  
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further polished and delineated throughout IHEI project development.

As such and organized accord to scheme from the widest to narrowest topics, the main general areas of concern which hinder internationalization are systematized as follows:

**1. Political instability in the region:** After reaching an agreement on 2015 with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action between Iran, the European Union and the United Nations Security Council on the Iranian sanctions, all involved stakeholders resolved an unnecessary crisis, showing to the world how constructive engagement effectively worked and new horizon emerged with a focus on shared challenges on the region. Among these new challenges, HEIs internationalization positioned as a key priority for all sides, ceasing with years of sanctions and partial academic isolation in the country, which in the past have affected Iranian human capital production. It was a great opportunity for all stakeholders to engage in a new context of flourishing scientific partnership and profitable exchange of ideas, which was underpinned by a new political framework which promoted relationships and cooperation.

Hinging upon the geopolitical context, important advancements and milestones have been reached on Iranian HEIs internationalization. Nevertheless, recent setbacks on the implementation of Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action threatens progression on this front, bringing a whole

new set of uncertainties to the Iranian HEIs internationalization process.

**2. The role of the European Union** has spearheaded this process of internationalization, in close collaboration with the MSRT from Iran. The interaction has been very fruitful, showcasing how enriching for both sides is advancing on these experiences. The European Union and Iran share a rich history of academic relations stretching back to over two centuries. Scholarly mobility and research collaboration between both parties have taken place in a range of disciplines from social sciences and humanities, to natural and medical sciences. In fact, during the past decade Iran's scientific output, citation ranking and global visibility have increased exponentially.

Contributing to this achievement, the relationship of mutual trust and understanding between the two actors has yielded several cooperation projects and initiatives with European universities and research institutions, which have also sprung up during the last decades, building up a significant human capital stock likely to support a growing number of exchange and collaboration opportunities in the future. Many Iranian universities have participated in mobility programs such Erasmus-Mundus, IIY consortium over the past decade and are encouraged by MSRT to materialize the government-level agreements already signed, namely with Germany Italy Austria and France, together with a fair number of collaboration agreements signed between the universities from both sides.

## Main challenges identified in the Report on barriers for credit recognition and international mobility of students & academic staff

While academic relations and the prospects for their further development are, however, constrained by various practical obstacles stemming from an uneasy political context (especially in the short term and considering the foreseeable future), a strong will remains among the two key stakeholders, with vested interests in HEIs internationalization, to continue collaborating and progressing with that purpose.

**3. Financial problems:** Interrelated to the aforementioned challenges, in Iran securing a stable, sustainable and adequate funding for HEIs internationalization initiatives in the current context remains a very complex issue. The Iranian MSRT allocates annual funds for International collaborations, mainly staff sabbatical, participation in academic activities, joint researches and travel funds for PhD students' sabbatical abroad. There is also financial support to set up joint projects between ministries, international organizations and foreign education institutions. Scholarships for research institutions, while existing, are limited in terms of their scope and size. In addition, Iranian HEIs also provide with funding to PhD and Postgraduate students and researchers to travel and carry out exchanges abroad.

While universities mainly receive funds in their annual budget to support participation of academic staff in conferences sabbaticals and scientific visits, this fund is only limited to PhD students for a 6-month sabbatical period abroad. Currently no specific fund is available for master/ undergraduate mobilities. For example, by tapping into these resources and through student's

exchange, FUM has been able to carry out summer school programs with a few universities for Master students over the past three years. Other universities organize workshops and extensive dissemination activities to raise awareness about different funding opportunities to these initiatives.

However, no specific funds are foreseen to be implemented to support undergraduate and postgraduate student mobility. Iranian HEIs institutions, students and government agencies need to recognize that internationalization is as an imperative necessity on the current higher education panorama, specifically student and scholar mobility. Universities also need to find resources to at least support physical international exchanges for students and scholars. A specific area of concern is the promotion and financial support for young scholars mobilities, incentivizing their experiences abroad and interactions with international actors.

**4. Lack of management commitment:** To progress further on internationalization, high-ranked academic members, university managers and board of trustees should increase their commitment to tackle these issues. In fact, while personal motivation and interest towards internationalization among academic staff in Iran



## Main challenges identified in the Report on barriers for credit recognition and international mobility of students & academic staff

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has burgeoned in the last decades, there is still a gap in terms of top-management commitment to internationalize HEIs, which seems to remain reluctant to allocate resources for these purposes.

Factors which also explain this hesitation might stem from the contested nature and definition of the concept of internationalization related to market-driven and Westernized approaches, which favor one-way process of communication and creation of knowledge (Rezaei et al.2018). However, in recent years a more inclusive a peripheral conceptualizations of internationalization in the HEIs environment has been framed by taking into contributions from non-western countries postulating multidimensional approaches, new sensitiveness to different cultures and socio-political environments and giving voice to new stakeholders in the HEIs internationalization process. This disruptive approach to internationalization has resonated in Iranian HEIs educational policies which emphasize the role of Iran in nurturing and leading this process to overcome the aforementioned barriers.

Raising awareness on the relevant advantages of engaging internationalization among all HEIs communities should become a priority in order to effectively provide incentives to internationalize. On that area, the organization of workshops, trainings and international conferences around the topic of internationalization seems to yield very positive results to spread commitment, communicate achievements and opportunities and engage with all stakeholders to galvanize support on these matters.



### 5. Bureaucratic, managerial and administrative obstacles:

In the last decades some of the bureaucratic practices, organizational cultures and administrative structures (within the University and other State agencies) have proven lack of the necessary flexibility to adapt to the fast-paced and demanding task of handling internationalization at all levels (student and academic mobility, marketing, ICT implementation...). While this an evolving area and significant progress has been recently made, Iranian HEIs bureaucratic environment still calls for the urgent incorporation of adaptive, creative, and flexible integrative behaviors to improve management practices on these areas. Experiences from students, scholars and administrative staff highly agree on the idea that current programs of exchange and collaboration between Iranian HEIs and international would be greatly benefited by reduction of the administrative paperwork and bureaucratic requirements which delay and render difficult the implementation of these internationalization programs in place, especially for incoming and outgoing students and academics.



## Main challenges identified in the Report on barriers for credit recognition and international mobility of students & academic staff

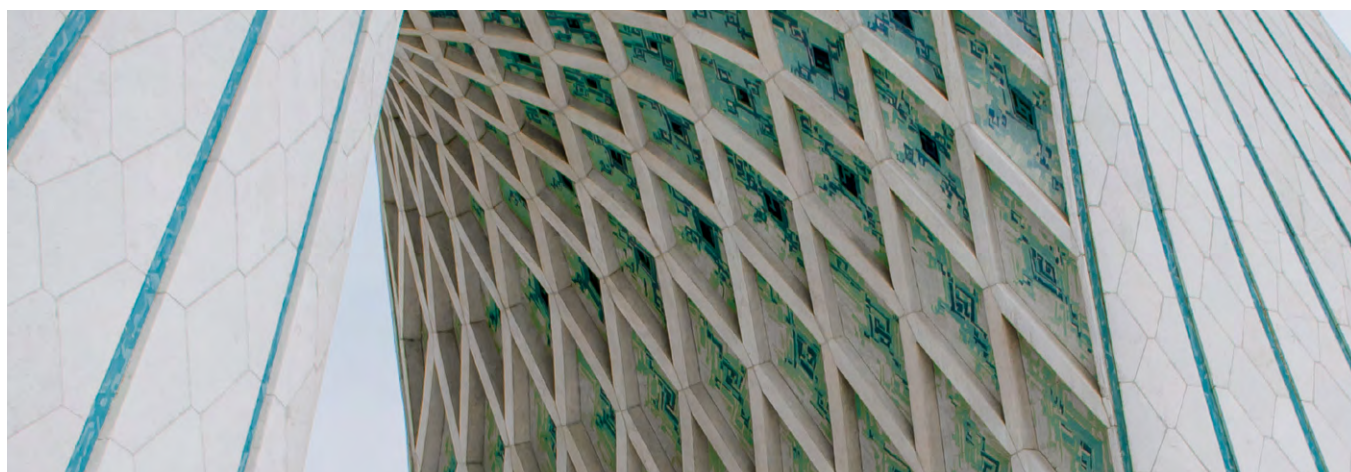
Particularly interesting to overcome these issues of administrative efficiency are the recent attempts to incorporate electronic and paperless software systems and programs, increasing knowledge on E-system managements. For example, FUM has been successfully utilizing ICT systems in recruiting international students and post-doc applications together with requests for research at FUM. Through web-service pages available at FUM website, international students are now able to apply for courses, research periods, post-doc and mobilities and send their applications together with supporting documents and receive a formal reply by FUM which later on enables them to proceed with request for visa.

Therefore, the application of ICT systems to administrative processes heralds huge benefits for internationalization processes by streamlining current bureaucratic practices and creating more agile channels for international interaction. Nevertheless, the impact of these measures in some Iranian HEIs still has to be seen as their implementation continues progressing.

### 6. Shortage of English language proficiency:

Although English still holds the hegemonic position as a catalyst of any internationalization process, Iran posits a less instrumental approach to these issues favoring the development of a global citizenship skills and intercultural understanding. Nevertheless, from a strict pragmatic point of view, English proficiency among all actors involved in HEIs internationalization is crucial to guarantee success. Despite that, at the general population level, Iran still ranks low and very low at EF EPI English Proficiency Index which compares level of English command in between countries. While English is taught within the curricula since primary and high school level, high competences in this language are not widely spread among students, scholars and administrative staff within the HEIs environment.

Nevertheless, it is necessary to emphasize that Iranian HEIs offer plenty of English courses for their students and count with fully established English departments, English Language Teaching (ELT) sites, software, tutors, classes and professors



## Main challenges identified in the Report on barriers for credit recognition and international mobility of students & academic staff

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applying modern methodologies, and prestigious institutes of research and teaching. For instance, FUM university has set up guidelines to incentivize faculty members and PhD students to publish their articles in English in journals which are indexed in Scopus and WOS-indexed Core Collection.

Taking into consideration all these measures, English proficiency in Iran is expected to undergone relevant progress in the upcoming years. However, an additional effort should be undergone in order to spread competences in English among all stakeholders and make these great resources widely available for the whole HEI community.

**7. Lack of English taught courses:** Another related area of improvement is the deficit of English taught courses within the Iranian HEIs system. An excessive focus of Persian exclusive taught courses within the Iran HEs system limits their

scope and potential attraction of foreign students. It does not contribute the mandatory requirement to learn Persian in order to study within the framework of the Iranian HEIs. Although, Iran HEIs posit itself as the central pole for preservation and dissemination of the Persian culture, an emphasis on diversifying the academic offer towards a more accessible international language will serve as a powerful gateway to Farsi culture and enrich cultural interactions.

Recent internal policies among some Iranian HEIs have showcased the potential of investing in English taught courses in order to attract foreign student mobility, promote academic exchange and cooperation and enhancement of English language skills among their staff. It is important to emphasize that almost all Iranian HEIs are working on enlarging their English taught courses while maintain the same commitment to promote Persian culture and scientific production.



## Specific challenges of students & academic staff

Special consideration deserves the **Standardization of Credit Recognition Systems** within the Iranian HEIs system, which remains a very specific challenges in terms of its implementation and development. The current system lacks a standardized and homogeneous methodology to transfer credits between Iran and foreign HEIs systems and vice versa. The actual practice in place leaves the final decision to accredit courses awarded outside the Iranian HEIs system to the criteria of each university department. Therefore, it is difficult to find integrated solutions to each credit recognition process. The main problems that undermine the setting up of a full-fledged credit recognition system are as follows:

- ▶ Equivalences in terms of **working hours** devoted to obtain credits varies depending on the country where the course was studied. For example, in Iran Higher Education system students typically receive one credit for each weekly hour they spend in formal instruction, while in the European Union, students receive one credit for every 25 to 30 hours of work they do. As such, it is complicated to find shared criteria to elaborate time equivalences.
- ▶ **Final decisions** on each credit accreditation process are conducted on a case by case basis, unilaterally and within the framework of each university department. This situation undermines the reliability and uniformity of the criteria, jeopardizing potential mobility experiences as there are no general rules to abide by.



- ▶ Another relevant setback is related to the **disparities** on how Iran and other countries recognize subjects of the bachelor's degree curricula. For instance, at the level of bachelor or even master and PhD programs there are major differences between general or major/basic modules in terms of structure, content selection and teaching methodology which seriously comprising credit recognition. Due to these structural singularities, it can be difficult to see whether a particular course taken in the European Union can be considered equivalent to a particular Iran's general-education or major/minor program.

In the last years, there have been attempts to develop a standardized system of credit recognition between different institutions, trying to come up with guidelines and regulations on different disciplines and areas of knowledge, reaching out to internal and external experts to obtain advice on credit recognition strategies on diverse degrees and HE programs. One successful experience to mention is the establishment of dual degree programs between Iranian and European Universities at both MSc and PhD levels. Due to this trend and the recent approval by MSRT, joint programs on specific disciplines are considered to be carried out among two universities, with possibility of joint supervision of final MSc dissertation or PhD thesis. This joint program becomes an opportunity to test the scaling up of more comprehensive credit recognition system. As such, both parties consider their courses, credits



assessments and course requirements, coming to an agreement to recognize credits earned by students at other university. FUM has, over the past two years, started dual degree programs with some European universities under this joint collaboration and have come to sort out all the courses taught by its European partner in the program to be operated jointly and have developed recognition and evaluation tables to convert all parts of the courses according to its curriculum, the same has been carried out by the partner. It seems that through dual degree programs which is definitely a new and interesting trend in Iranian current HE system, credit recognition will come under consideration, through which mobility and exchange programs will further benefit.

However, considering the overall picture in terms of credit recognition and given the current situation of uncertainty about the transferability of academic courses taking abroad, mobility experiences are hampered, setting up a discouraging framework for student, academic and staff exchange. Therefore, further initiatives on that are should be fostered and implemented.

## Some issues to solve in the internationalization process

- ▶ **How bureaucratic processes may be streamlined in order to promote international mobility of students & staff?** As aforementioned, ICTs and on-line management system have been recently implemented in some Iranian HEIs. Early reviews from these experiences seem to produce very efficient results.
- ▶ **Are there good practices to share in the field of teaching English at country level?** Almost all HEIs offer and promote English courses and are adapting very modern methodologies and approaches to teach foreign languages. One of the most successful experiences is being developed by FUM with its English for Special Purpose Programme, this university has started to teach English to its PhD students, administrative staffs; and faculty members. Also, the programme encourages to teach courses only in English when the numbers of International students are more than 50% of the class. Therefore and at in the medium term, an increase general command of English language among HEIs students, scholar and staff is expected.
- ▶ **Are Iranian universities offering (or planning to offer) courses in English to international students?** The majority of the Iranian HEIs are aware of the crucial advantage of offering part of their curricula in English as potential window and source of attraction to the rest of the world. However, extension of these initiatives should be more encouraged and supported by the political authorities.

- ▶ **How Iranian universities recognize the credits gained abroad by their students?** As very thoroughly accounted in the previous section, credit recognition still a huge obstacle within the framework of the Iranian HEIs internationalization outlook. More political willingness to cooperate and generate mutual understanding on this issue should be applied in the short term to make significant progress on the promulgation of national regulations to transfer and recognize credits for other HEIs systems.
- ▶ **How may we promote trust and mutual understanding between Iranian and EU universities?** While the European Union has led multiple cooperation programs in Iran with satisfactory results, there is plenty of scope to expand these initiatives as well as devising complementary interventions to support current cooperation programs. These reforms are related to easing finance transactions, visa accreditations and regulatory adaptations.
- ▶ **Which are the main funding sources for international activities in Iranian universities?** Are there good practices in this field also at country-level? The main source for HEIs international activities in Iran is the MSRT and its diverse programs for research and partnership promotion. However, as IHEI project has elucidated, there are potential resources for funding by fostering partnerships with international actor which should further explored and advanced.
- ▶ **How may we successfully raise awareness about the importance of internationalization between our academics? Any good practice?** Some of the most commonly good practices are the organization of workshops, trainings and international events with collaboration of foreign actors, which contributes to raise awareness of the benefits of continue working with that goal. Other interesting initiatives to incentivize internationalization experiences is to award special recognition for internal promotion to scholars and members of staff according to their participation in international activities.



## Proposals to improve internationalization/ international mobility of students & staff

After analyzing the context, strengths and weaknesses of the Iranian HEIs system, all key stakeholders agree on the following course of action to foster international mobility of students and staff:

- **Determine strategic countries:** In terms of geostrategic position, research output and previous collaborations, economic ties, political influence and cultural relevance, Iranian HEIs are able to leverage its international and geopolitical position in order to become the **regional education hub in Central Asia**. Encouraging inward mobility from Central Asian and other neighboring countries and assisting the research capacity development of HE in nations with Persian-speaking populations should be priority among Iranian HEIs. By selecting, refining and advancing cooperation with already existing strategic partnerships in the region, Iranian HEIs capitalize on current successful relationships. They will target universities considered as peers in terms of quality, research output, reputation, and international outreach. Factoring on these sociocultural, economic and politic ties, Iranian HEIs will elaborate sustainable international mobility fluxes.
- Formal international relationships have traditionally focused more on student and faculty exchange. Nevertheless, while student **and scholar mobility should be the priority** of the Iranian internationalization strategies moving forward, it is also mandatory to seek enlargement of the scope of the university's international development, including collaborative researches, joint academic



programs design and delivery, innovation and entrepreneurship, and activities with companies.

- ▶ **Focus on key projects and programs:** By selecting areas of expertise of each institution to spearhead internationalization strategies bring an added value to the process by paving the way to new avenues for cooperation. Iranian HEIs are global leaders on scientific production in fields such as Engineering, IT, Literature and Humanities, which should be areas of strength to build new international relationships.
- ▶ **Allocate adequate funding:** Secure realistic, sustainable and sufficient funding to ensure ongoing success on internationalization should be a priority for Iranian HEIs. In the short term and given the foreseeable evolution of the political context, funding is going to be one of the most challenging aspects to underpin internationalization strategies. However, Iranian HEIs should maintain and reinforce their commitment to influence policymaking and budget allocation at the top level by raising awareness on the relevance, benefits and positive impacts of internationalization.

▶ **Establish a professional international team:**

This was one of the main areas of action of the IHEI project, contributing to bridge the gap in terms of management, knowledge, skills and expertise on internationalization with actions of capacity building, training and networking. Each Iranian HEIs should form, hire and develop a professional unit to govern internationalization within the framework of each university.

▶ **Reform administrative practices:**

Current Iranian HEIs bureaucratic system is outdated and not suited to deal with internationalization processes. As such, a package of ICTs tools to manage administrative services within with the dissemination of e-learning teaching methodologies will help to circumvent funding uncertainty and outdated practices on this field.

▶ **Continue promoting English language enhancement:**

While Iranian HEIs boast a solid teaching and research structures on foreign languages, they should keep progressing on making these learning resources available to the whole academic community. English proficiency is key to engage with multiple actors in the field of internationalization across the world.



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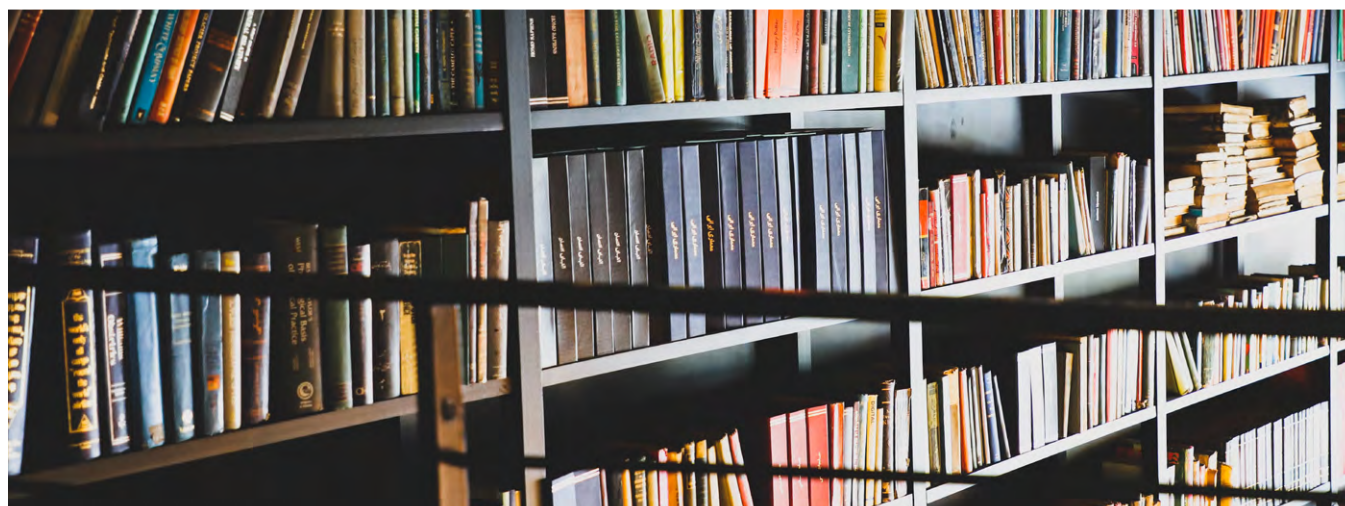
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