

# Examining the Emerging Trends in Higher Education in Iran

**Keiko Sakurai**

Professor, Faculty of International Research and Education, Waseda University  
Director, Organization for Islamic Area Studies, Waseda University

## I. Introduction

The world has witnessed new trends in higher education since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Among these, the rapid growth of tertiary enrollment, the increasing role of the private sector in higher education, and the growing influence of globalization are considered to be the most important, and they have drawn the attention of policymakers and academics.<sup>1</sup> Though the growing influence of these trends can also be observed in Iran, the Iranian government's response to these trends has been influenced by Iran's domestic politics, international relations, and cultural policies. To better understand the extent and nature of these trends in Iran, this paper focuses on three dimensions of the new trends: quantitative expansion, public/private sector relations, and internationalization of higher education in Iran by asking the following questions. (1) To what extent and in what way are new trends dominant in Iran? and (2) What policies did governments adopt to manage these trends? (3) What factors define the characteristics of these new trends? Though the recent trends in higher education have their roots in the previous century, this paper mainly focuses on trends in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## II. Quantitative Expansion of Higher Education

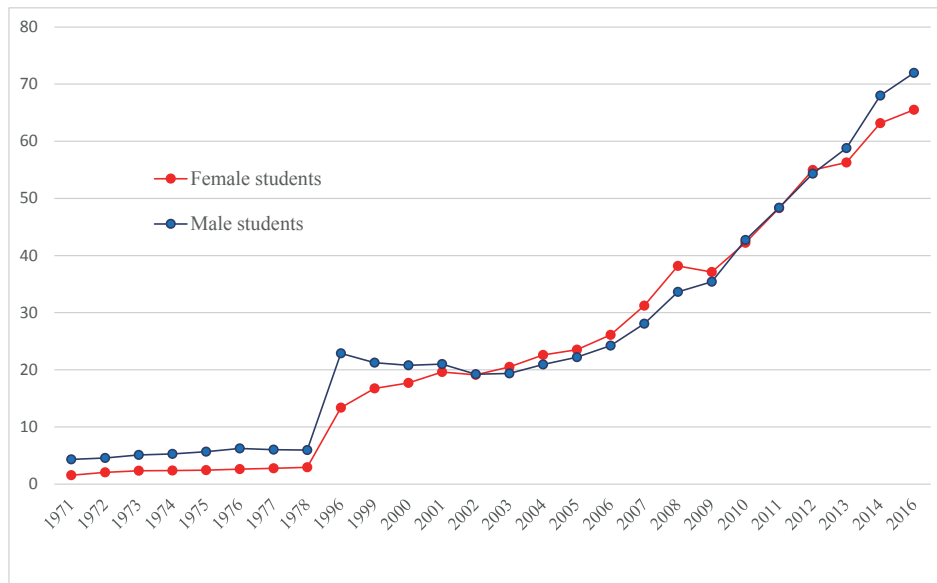
### 1. Gross tertiary enrollment ratio

Iran's tertiary enrollment ratio has improved dramatically in the last few decades. According to Marin Trow's model of growth, which contends that

higher education transforms from the "elite" to the "mass," and then to the "universal", as the enrollment ratio in Iran rose from under 15 percent to between 15 and 50 percent, and then to over 50 percent<sup>2</sup>, Iran moved from the "elite" to the "mass" phase in the mid-1990s, and then entered the "universal" phase by 2012. In 2016, it recorded a 68.8 percent growth in tertiary enrollment. As shown in Figure 1, the tertiary enrollment ratio has increased sharply during the last decade. This rapid growth is attributable to the relationship between the transformation of the 18-year-old population and the increasing capacity of the higher education sector. Iran's 18-year-old population was 1.32 million in 1996, rose to 1.83 million in 2006, and then decreased to 1.4 million in 2011.<sup>3</sup> The 2016 census showed that the 18-year old population further shrunk to 1.11 million in 2016.<sup>4</sup> This fluctuation was the result of a high birth rate in the mid-1980s that suddenly dropped in the 1990s.

In the mid-2000s, when the generation born in the mid-1980s attained 18 years of age, the Ministry of Sciences, Research, and Technology (MSRT) established new government universities to meet the growing demand for higher education. As a result, the number of government universities increased from 52 in 1999/2000 to 80 in 2012/2013. However, government universities' capacity was still insufficient. Actually, the Islamic Azad University (IAU) and Payame Noor University (PNU) substantially enrolled the growing young population seeking higher education. IAU is a tuition-based, non-government, mega-university with branches all over the country. The number of branches grew from over

Figure 1. Gross Tertiary Enrollment Ratio in Iran



Data Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics, <http://data.uis.unesco.org/index.aspx?queryid=142#>  
 There was no date between 1979 to 1995.

Table 1. Students Enrolled by Type of Institution in Iran

Category of University	Type of University	1999/2000		2014/2015	
		Number of Student	Ratio	Number of Student	Ratio
Government	Payame Noor University (PNU)	165,759	25.1%	783,127	28.9%
	Universities under the MSRT	494,575	74.9%	660,384	24.3%
	University of Applied Sciences			816,620	30.1%
	University of Technology and Vocations			184,179	6.8%
	Farhangiyan University *			63,597	2.3%
	Universities under the MHTME			178,410	6.6%
	Others			26,485	1.0%
	Sub-total			660,334	100.0%
Non-government	Islamic Azad University (IAU)	726,228	97.5%	1,685,468	80.3%
	Non-profit Universities	18,318	2.5%	413,311	19.7%
	Sub-total	744,546	100.0%	2,098,779	100.0%
Government ratio			47.0%		56.4%
Non-government ratio			53.0%		43.6%
	Total	1,404,880	100.00%	4,811,581	100.00%

Sources: Ahmad Sa'idi, ed., *Āmār-e Āmūzesh-e 'Ālī-e Irān: Sāl-e Taḥsīlī-ye 1393-1394* [Statistics on Iran's higher education-academic year 2014-2015] (Tehrān: Mo'assese-ye Pazhūhesh va Barnāmerīzī-ye Āmūzesh-e 'Ālī, 1395/2016):152.

Ya'qūb Entezārī, *Shaḡt Sāl-e Āmūzesh-e 'Ālī' Taḥqīqāt va Fanāvarī dar Irān* [60 years of higher education, science and Technology in Iran] (Tehrān: Mo'assese-ye Pazhūhesh va Barnāmerīzī-ye Āmūzesh-e 'Ālī, 1389/2010-11):117.

\* It is a university for teacher education.

110 in 2001 to about 400 in 2012/13. PNU is a large-scale government university for distance education that provides educational opportunities for lower tuition fees compared to IAU. The rapid expansion of PNU especially in the late 2000s was made possible by the fact that it did not require the establishment of large campuses. Thanks to the increase in numbers and quotas of IAU and PNU, Iran's total number of students grew from 1,404,880 (19.8 percent of whom are in associate programs) in the 1999/2000 academic year to 4,811,581 (22.8 percent of whom are in associate programs) in the 2014/15 academic year. (Table 1) The combination of an increase in the number of university students and a decrease in the 18-year old population led to the rapid growth in tertiary enrollment ratio in 21<sup>st</sup> century Iran.

What motivated the Iranian government to support the expansion of higher education? The Iranian constitution offers an explanation that is titled, "the facilitation and extension of higher education" (Article 3-3)<sup>5</sup> and reads, "the government is responsible for providing the means for public education for everyone up to the end of high school. It must expand free higher education until the point when the nation reaches self-sufficiency." (Article 30)<sup>6</sup> In addition, Article 3-9 mentions, "the elimination of all unjust forms of discrimination and the creation of just opportunities for everyone, in all spiritual and material areas". Since the Islamic Revolution was popularized by its advocacy of the empowerment of deprived social groups, the provision of higher education as the major path to upward mobility has been regarded as crucial to maintaining people's support for the Islamic Republic.

## 2. Gender parity

As shown in Figure 1, as opposed to the stereotypical image of Muslim women being relatively less visible in public space, female tertiary enrollment ratios exceeded that of males for 10 years since 2001; and male and female enrollment ratios reached 50

percent and entered the "universal phase" in the same year in Iran. According to UNESCO's data on the gender parity index (GPI) in tertiary enrollment, Iran's GPI was 0.85 in 2000. Between 2003 and 2009, however, it surpassed 1.00 since the number of female applicants who passed the competitive unified entrance examination for government universities exceeded that of males since 2001. However, after 2009, Iran's GPI started declining and reached 0.89 in 2015 as a result of the government policy of "de-feminizing higher education." In 2013, "33 public universities banned women from programs in 77 academic fields"<sup>7</sup> because these subjects were deemed unsuitable for women. Therefore, the existing level of gender parity is a result of government policy rather than women's choices.

Data on the percentage of female students per field of study indicates that, despite the domination of strict gender norms, in 2014/15, except in technology and engineering (23.6 percent female), female students outnumbered male students in all fields, such as the humanities (53.3 percent), basic science (68.7 percent), medicine (66.8 percent), agriculture and veterinary medicine (52.3 percent), and the arts (57.8 percent).<sup>8</sup> It is worth noting that despite the high female enrollment rate in all fields of study, regardless of their major, many of them cannot join the labor market due to shortages of suitable jobs or lack of family consent to their working. Though both male and female students face chronic job shortage, female students suffer more than male students which results in the high gender parity in working places. Gender distribution in associate degree programs shows a different implication as women only make up 31.5 percent of the enrollment in 2014/15.<sup>9</sup> Many of the vocational programs for associate degree are deemed unsuitable for women, which is the reason for the relatively lower representation of women in associate degree programs. Iranian female students are academic oriented and they show a relatively higher aspiration for post-graduate education. Iranians' high aspirations stem from the fact that post-graduate

degrees are highly valued, especially as a symbol of high social status. Therefore, even though post-graduate degrees may not enhance employability<sup>10</sup>, they are considered to be worth acquiring.

### III. Government and non-government sectors in Higher Education

“Privatization” is widely regarded as an important aspect of changes in higher education today. However, there is no “common set of concepts and measures to define privatization.”<sup>11</sup> It is commonly regarded as “the decline in state support of higher education”<sup>12</sup>, but it has additional aspects, such as de-regulation, commercialization, corporatization, marketization, raising tuition, and for-profit operations.

#### 1. Development of non-government universities

The growing dependency of the private sector on higher education is a worldwide phenomenon and Iran is no exception. However, unlike many countries in the world where private initiatives and market forces have played a significant role in expanding private universities, Iran’s development of the private sector has been monopolized by the single mega, non-profit university called IAU. Though IAU has, from the beginning to date, been categorized as a non-profit, non-government university; it has been ruled by the political elites of the Islamic Republic of Iran, which has fostered IAU’s domination of the private sector.

In order to understand the uniqueness of Iran’s private sector, it is important to go back to the origin of IAU. In April 1980, about a year after the Islamic Revolution, in response to Ayatollah Mūsavī Khomeynī’s (1902-1989) speech “the Meaning of Cultural Revolution,”<sup>13</sup> the headquarters of the Cultural Revolution (reorganized as the Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution as the highest authority in educational affairs in 1984) was established. In June, 1980, all universities were closed and faculties and students who were accused of being

anti-Islamic were expelled from campuses.<sup>14</sup> All private universities were converted into government institutions and placed under strict state surveillance.<sup>15</sup> This policy aimed to ensure that all universities were filled with ideology-committed staff, and that students were selected for both academic performance and ideological commitment.<sup>16</sup>

The headquarters of the Cultural Revolution did not lift the ban on private universities, but facing financial difficulties due to Iran’s war with Iraq in 1980, government universities were unable to increase their capacity and could “absorb only eight percent of the applicants nationwide”.<sup>17</sup> Facing growing demands for higher education, Hāshemī Rafsanjānī (1934-2017), the then-Speaker of the Congress, suggested the establishment of tuition-based IAU as a non-government, non-profit organization in 1982.<sup>18</sup> The suggestion was well received by Khomeynī, and IAU was established with donations from Khomeynī and the government in 1982 under commercial law. Therefore, despite being categorized as a non-government university from the onset, IAU is influenced by the political elites of the Islamic Republic.

Initially, IAU used existing buildings as it did not have its own campus to respond to the urgent demand for higher education. IAU accepts students through its own unified entrance examination, and its criteria for acceptance are less rigorous than those of government universities. As a result, IAU enrolled students who were excluded from the highly competitive government universities but could afford tuition fees,<sup>19</sup> and it speedily grew to be the largest university in Iran.

However, the progress of IAU was far from smooth, especially in its first decade. One of the challenges it faced was that the headquarters of the Cultural Revolution did not recognize the degrees issued by IAU on grounds that it lacked a system of externally evaluating its education. This caused a serious problem for its graduates whose degrees were not officially recognized in the labor market.<sup>20</sup> In

October 1985, the 41<sup>st</sup> meeting of the High Council of Cultural Revolution approved a bylaw recognizing the establishment of non-governmental, non-profit, higher education institutes in order to “mobilize all the country’s resources to expand higher education,”<sup>21</sup> but this bylaw failed to solve the issue of the lack of recognition of degrees awarded by IAU.<sup>22</sup> In 1989, as a result of discussions in Parliament, the MSRT and Ministry of Health and Medicine (MHTME) were charged with the responsibility of evaluating the degrees awarded to the graduates of IAU.<sup>23</sup> Thanks to these measures, IAU went on to monopolize higher education in the private sector to the extent that it enrolled almost half of the total number of the country’s students. High school students applying to university participated in two kinds of unified entrance examinations, one for the national universities and the other for the IAU; and this created a dual structure of higher education.

Though no institution can compete with IAU, especially in size, there are non-government, non-profit universities that enjoy a high reputation due to their genealogical uniqueness and high educational standard. They were all founded by renowned religious scholars or religious institutions to teach both religious science and modern academic studies with the aim of producing new elites armed with Islamic and modern sciences. Like traditional Islamic seminaries run by various kinds of religious endowments, these universities are financially independent.

One of them is Imam Sadiq University established by Ayatollah Mahdavi Kanī (1931-2014) in 1983. Imam Sadiq University aimed to unite Islamic seminary and academic education, by teaching both of them at the same time. This university became one of the most important suppliers of the elites in the Islamic Republic. Another important non-profit university of the same kind is Mofid University founded by Ayatollah Mūsavī Ardebīlī (1926-2016) in 1989 in Qom, a city known as the centre of Shi’ite religious learning. Baqir al-‘Ulum University is also

a university of this kind that was founded in Qom in 1992 and obtained university status in 2003. This university only accepts students who have finished at least the first stage of seminary education.<sup>24</sup> Along with their financial independence, their relation with religious establishment and political elites of the Islamic Republic of Iran granted them a considerable autonomy that other universities in Iran do not have.

As opposed to many countries, where competition between universities is encouraged in order to facilitate the diversification of educational and administrative strategies among universities, Iran has adopted a highly centralized educational system whereby state guidance and surveillance is enforced in both government and private sectors.

## **2. Changing the share of government and non-government sectors**

Despite all the private universities being taken over by the government and converted to government institutions at the time of the Cultural Revolution, the share of the non-profit, non-government sector has steadily increased since the late-1980s. In 1995, for the first time after the Cultural Revolution, the total number of students enrolled in the non-government sector exceeded 50%, reaching 50.4 percent. In 1999/2000, the total number of students from the associate to doctoral degree levels was 1,404,880, 47.0 percent of whom studied at government higher education institutes and 53.0 percent studied in the non-government higher education sector.

However, in 2007, the balance tipped back toward the government sector, and this trend has since continued.<sup>25</sup> In 2014/15, among the 2,712,802 students in the country, 56.4 percent were enrolled in the government sector and 43.6 percent in the private sector. A comparison of 1999/2000 and 2014/15 indicates that the number of students in the government sector grew 4.1 times in 15 years, while that in the private sector grew only 2.3 times. This resulted in a 10 percent increase in the share of the government sector and reversed the government-non-

government balance.

This begs the question: why and how did the government sector increase its capacity?

The government's strategy to counter balance non-government universities was to expand the capacity of the government sector by increasing the intake quotas of PNU and Comprehensive University of Applied Sciences established in 1993, which provides post-secondary vocational and technical education.<sup>26</sup> In 1999/2000, PNU had 165,759 students and operated 168 study centers around the country.<sup>27</sup> According to PNU's official website, the latest number of students enrolled is about 940,515 and the university has 502 local study centers and campuses all over the country administered by 31 provincial centers.<sup>28</sup> The enrollment of the Comprehensive University of Applied Sciences grew rapidly to 816,620 students, who made up 30% of the total number of students in the government sector in 2014/15.

The period of rapid growth of the government sector's higher education corresponds to the administration of President Maḥmūd Aḥmadīnezhād (2005–2013), who considered overexpansion of IAU undesirable as his political rival, Rafsanjānī, was the head of Islamic Azad University's board of founders. The policy of increasing the capacity of PNU as an open-access institution with moderate tuition, as well as expanding the vocationally oriented Comprehensive University of Applied Sciences, appealed to the population and was in line with his populist policy. This indicates that it was not the market, but rather the political rivalry between Rafsanjānī and Aḥmadīnezhād that determined the balance between the government and non-government sector in higher education.

The academic hierarchy in post-revolutionary Iran was such that government universities in metropolitan cities ranked highest, as they succeeded in attracting well-qualified students and faculties. However, regarding tuition, the division between the government and non-government sector was blurred because dependency on tuition is no longer limited to

the non-government sector as students in nighttime courses at government universities, PNU, and the Comprehensive University of Applied Sciences must pay tuition. This implies the government's willingness to mobilize financial support. However, unlike other countries, Iran opted to maintain strict state control on both government and non-government universities. Therefore, if privatization means granting autonomy to each university or a process of reducing public responsibility and placing greater emphasis on the private interests of owners, stakeholders, and students, full-scale privatization has not happened yet. In addition, due to cultural and ideological concerns, the Iranian government hesitates to accord the private sector full autonomy, as that might lead to a weakening of politico-cultural integrity. Accordingly, privatization has been mostly limited to the increasing dependence on private financial sources.

#### IV. Internationalization of Higher Education

P. Altbach and J. Knight distinguished globalization from internationalization and defined the former as "the economic, political, and societal forces pushing the 21st century's higher education toward greater international involvement" and the latter as "the policies and practices undertaken by academic systems and institutions—and even individuals—to cope with the global academic environment."<sup>29</sup>

There are many initiatives to cope with globalization, such as sending students abroad, accepting international students and faculties, joint degree programs with universities outside the country, promotion of international collaborative researches, and opening branch campuses outside the country.

Along with these cross-border activities, various internationalization projects have been implemented inside universities, such as English-medium classes, English-based degree programs, enhancement of cross-cultural understanding, provision of multilingual-multicultural campuses, and increase

in the number of English publications. Though these internationalization measures have gained popularity around the world, the application of these measures depends on the choice of each university as well as the national system of higher education in which each university operates. The importance of the latter is indicated by the fact that “an increasing frequency of border-crossing activities” happens “amidst a persistence of national systems, even though some signs of ‘de-nationalization’ might be observed.”<sup>30</sup> Given this context, this section examines the internationalization of higher education in Iran.

### 1. Internationalization and the Cultural Revolution

Iranian universities have been predominantly domestic-oriented since the Cultural Revolution started, a year after the 1979- Islamic Revolution. The major objectives of the Cultural Revolution are to purify Iranian universities from Western influence, including the Eastern Communism and the Western liberalist democracy, and to instill in youth a strong belief in Islam as well as the *velāyat-e faqīh* or government of jurists as the fundamental foundation of the Islamic Republic.

Due to this ideological mission, post-revolutionary Iranian universities are first and foremost designed to educate religiously devout and ideologically committed youth who are willing to sacrifice themselves for the sake of the Islamic Republic.

Iranian universities’ domestic-oriented policy was also the result of political isolation by the international society. Iran’s anti-monarchical revolution was considered by the six Arab monarchies in the Gulf to be a threat; and they formed the GCC in 1981 to contain Iran’s ambition to spread revolutionary messages in the Gulf. The relationship between Iran and the United States deteriorated when Iran occupied the United States embassy in Tehran in November, 1979. Iran’s eight-year war with Iraq that began in 1980 aggravated Iran’s position in the international society. Under this environment, Iran was completely isolated from the international society especially

during the 1980s and that limited Iranian universities from having relationships with the rest of the world in the decades that followed. However, this does not mean that Iranian academics were indifferent to the rest of the world but rather that they have been waiting for an opportunity that would allow them to have contact with foreign academics.

### 2. Inbound internationalization in Iran

The number of international students is considered to be one of the important indicators of internationalization. There were 980 international students enrolled at institutions of higher education in Iran in 1999/2000, the largest group being Afghan students, followed by Turkish and Bosnian students.<sup>31</sup> The number of international students has since steadily increased, so that in 2014, 14,000 international students from 92 countries were studying at Iran’s universities. The number of international students grew to about 21,000 the following year. The General Director of Foreign Students Affairs of MSRT, Šamad Hājj Jabbārī, said that “although target countries are neighboring countries and Muslim nations with whom we have cultural and historical commonalities, we have African applicants and are now seeking to attract European students.”<sup>32</sup>

This trend accelerated after the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with the five members of the United Nations Security Council and Germany came into effect in January 2016. The minister of MSRT, Moħammad Farhādī stated, “The ministry is trying to double the number of foreign university students in Iran and prepare the grounds for greater international academic cooperation,” in 2017.<sup>33</sup> In 2017, 25,000 international students were enrolled at government universities affiliated to the MSRT.<sup>34</sup>

This number increased to 26,000 in 2018. In addition, about 2,000 students enrolled in the universities affiliated to the MHTME. It is worth noting that the IAU has attracted about 10,000 international students.<sup>35</sup>

Currently only a limited number of universities have the capacity to accept international students, and the University of Tehran, the Amir Kabir University of Technology, and the Ferdowsi University of Mashhad have the highest number of international students.<sup>36</sup> The University of Tehran accepts around 1,000 foreign students from 44 countries, 7% of whom enroll in an undergraduate program, 74% in a Master's program, and 19% in a PhD program.<sup>37</sup> The Ferdowsi University of Mashhad accepts foreign graduate students, mostly from Central Asia and neighboring countries. Imam Khomeini International University in Qazvin also attracts a considerable number of International students. This university opened in 1991 with a special mission of "furthering and promoting Islamic culture in the Muslim world."<sup>38</sup> It has a Center for Teaching Persian to Non-natives where international students acquire proficiency in the Persian language before starting their university education. Due to the limited capacity of this university, some students join other national universities after they complete their Persian language training. In 2009, Qazvin had 500 international students from 55 countries.<sup>39</sup>

Despite the upward trend, UNESCO statistics in 2016 indicated that the number of students from abroad, as a percentage of the total tertiary enrollment in Iran was 0.43 percent less than that of the neighboring Gulf States.<sup>40</sup> Though there are no statistics on the number of foreign faculties working in Iranian universities, only a small number of them are working on a short term contract.

### 3. Teaching in English

In the early stages of the Cultural Revolution, English was regarded as "the language of the enemy," and the government discouraged universities from using imported teaching materials in a bid to prevent the influence of Western culture. However, following the post-war reconstruction period after the Iran-Iraq war, a pragmatic view of English gradually emerged. In 2007, the Supreme Council of the Cultural

Revolution issued a decree "permitting English to go from being a subject of instruction to being the medium of instruction at selected universities."<sup>41</sup> This decision changed the status of English inside Iran, and even though Persian remains the official language of instruction<sup>42</sup> in higher education and international students are requested to attend intensive Persian language courses before studying subjects, some Iranian universities introduced programs taught in English. For instance, the University of Tehran's Faculty of World Studies was opened in 2007 to promote inter-disciplinary post-graduate studies in different countries in North America, Europe, Asia, and Africa. This faculty also opened a program that specialized in Iranian studies for non-Iranian students. Though students have to receive intensive Persian language training, courses are taught in both English and Persian.<sup>43</sup>

An attempt to introduce English-based programs was made in universities established on Kish Island, a resort island in the Persian Gulf, which is a designated free-trade zone. Kish University was the island's first university. It started as a small school offering an associate degree in accountancy and a bachelor's degree in business administration in 1996. From 2003 to 2007, it offered an undergraduate co-operative program in electrical and computer systems engineering in collaboration with Monash University in Melbourne, Australia.<sup>44</sup> Students who completed the first four semesters of the Monash Bachelor of engineering program at Kish University could proceed to higher levels of study in Melbourne. In 2005, the Sharif University of Technology, Iran's premier university in technology, opened an international campus on Kish Island and agreed to take over the management of the university in 2009. The international campus of Sharif University of Technology provides bachelor's to PhD-level courses in engineering and sciences, and a master's course in management. All courses are offered in English. To facilitate the internationalization of the MBA program, the international campus of Sharif



University of Technology launched an online MBA course in partnership with the Multimedia University, a private university in Malaysia.<sup>45</sup> The University of Tehran also opened an international campus in Kish in 2007 to facilitate the enrollment of foreign students. It provides bachelor's to PhD course levels in English as well as courses in engineering, science and biotechnology, economics, fine arts, law, and management, among others.<sup>46</sup> However, international campuses in Kish have yet to attract a significant number of foreign students. Iranian students consider the English-based education of these universities to be an alternative to studying-abroad.

#### 4. Outbound student mobility

Iran has been regarded as one of the countries that send a large number of students abroad. According to the data published by UNESCO, the total number of Iranian students abroad was 44,775 in 2011. The three most popular destinations were North America and Western Europe (57 percent), Central and East Europe (9 percent), and the Arab States (8.5 percent). The number of Iranian students abroad increased to 51,082 in 2017. The popular destinations were North America and Western Europe (60 percent), Central and East Europe (15 percent), and the Arab States (6 percent). Studying abroad would be beneficial if a country could utilize students' academic experiences when they returned home or work closely with the academics at home, but Iran failed to do so, as majority of the students who studied abroad opted not to return home and chose to disconnect from academics at home. This led to a significant loss of educated Iranians. According to the report issued by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), "Iran has the highest rate of brain drain in the world: every year, 150,000 educated Iranians leave their home country to pursue better opportunities abroad".<sup>47</sup>

#### 5. Outbound internationalization in Iran

Some of the Iranian universities have opened or are planning to open branches overseas. Islamic

Azad University (IAU) took the lead in operating overseas campuses and branch campuses outside Iran. Currently, it has four overseas campuses, the first of which was opened in Beirut, Lebanon, in 1990. It offers 22 courses at different levels, including Islamic education, educational science, political science, and computer engineering.<sup>48</sup> The Dubai campus was opened in 1995 in the Knowledge Village in the Dubai Technology and Media Free Zone. It offers degree programs in accounting, architecture, engineering, business management, computer engineering, and hotel management.<sup>49</sup> In 2004, IAU opened an Oxford campus in the suburbs of Oxford in the UK, which offers courses such as general English and IELTS (International English Language Testing System) preparation.<sup>50</sup> Finally, in 2010, the Afghanistan branch of IAU was opened, providing education in political science, management, and law for master's students; and civil engineering at the bachelor's level.<sup>51</sup> In addition to existing branches, IAU has decided to open new branches in Lebanon and Iraq. 'Alī Akbar Velāyatī, head of the Founding Council and Board of Trustees of the IAU, mentioned plans to extend educational co-operation with "neighboring and friendly countries," and revealed that IAU plans to open branches in Baghdad, Basra, and the Kurdish regions of Iraq. He also mentioned a conversation with the Secretary General of the Lebanese Hezbollah Resistance Movement, Ḥasan Naṣrallāh, on promoting cooperation with Lebanese academic centers.<sup>52</sup> In addition to its overseas branches, IAU currently has international offices in Russia, Italy, Germany, UAE, Afghanistan, Lebanon, and the UK; and is planning to increase this number to 16 offices in various parts of the world.<sup>53</sup>

With regards to the number of international students at IAU in 2016, Dr. Ebrāhīmī, Director General of the IAU International Affairs Department, stated that there are 8,123 non-Iranian students at Islamic Azad University and of this, 6,381 students are in Iran while 1,742 students are studying at overseas branches.<sup>54</sup>

Iran's government universities also seek to expand overseas activities. For example, Iran announced that it had agreed to build the first foreign university of medical sciences in Iraq in July 2017. Tehran University of Medical Sciences will oversee the opening of a university under the supervision of Iran's MHTME.<sup>55</sup> Expansion of Iran's overseas outreach is part of Iran's cultural diplomacy, which generally seeks to enhance the country's cultural appeal and to strengthen diplomatic ties with neighboring countries.

### 6. Academic strategies

The growing influence of world university rankings pressured Iranian policy makers and academics to take measures to elevate Iran's international academic reputation. However, as Iran has endeavored to protect her cultural independence by eliminating Western academic influence, she was concerned about promoting international academic collaboration without undermining her religio-cultural values.

Under these circumstances, research collaboration with Western institutions in the field of science and technology was prioritized on grounds that these subjects have neutral value. However, some topics and approaches in humanities and social sciences were not embraced as they are considered to be incompatible with Islamic values. Despite these concerns, the MSRT began encouraging Iranian academics to promote international research collaborations, to present papers at international conferences and to publish papers in prestigious English language journals in order to enhance Iran's international academic reputation, especially after the conclusion of JCPOA.

However, reacting to the United States president Trump's decision to exit JCPOA, Iran's supreme leader, 'Alī Khāmene'ī, presented a "look east" policy in which he encouraged Iranian academics to strengthen academic ties with scholars in Asia.<sup>56</sup>

### V. Conclusion

Iran has experienced quantitative expansion, increased the role of the private sector, and internationalized higher education, like many other countries around the world. However, these developments took place in a context where cultivation of a strong belief in Islam and *velāyat-e faqīh* have been the top priority, and that has influenced the trajectories of these developments.

Iran experienced rapid quantitative expansion since 2000 and the number of tertiary enrollments tripled within about 15 years. The driving force of the rapid expansion was the government policy aimed at strengthening the political foundation of the Islamic Republic by responding to the demand for higher education, rather than the demand from the labor market, which caused a mismatch between education and employment.

During this period, gender parity improved so much that it tipped the balance in women's favor until the government introduced a policy to restrict female entry into some departments. It is worth noting that the high female enrolment ration is not the result of government's initiative to empower women, rather it was the combination of women's high aspirations to acquire higher education and the government's policy of "the creation of just opportunities for everyone" prescribed in Article 3-9 of the constitution, which opened the opportunity of joining many departments if not all to women.

Though the expansion of the non-government tuition based IAU can be regarded as a form of privatization of higher education, the IAU's monopoly of the non-government sector and its close ties with the political elites of the Islamic Republic limits Iran's development of an autonomous private sector in higher education.

As discussed, the newly launched internationalization of higher education seeks to enhance relations between Iran and foreign countries, especially in neighboring regions, mainly by increasing the number

of international students studying in Iran. However, the prioritization of the country's cultural integrity with special emphasis on Islam prevents Iran from welcoming foreign faculties as full-time tenured professors. Likewise, the extent to which Iran is willing to admit cultural diversity is not yet clear. In summary, being in the midst of the globalization

of higher education, domestically, Iranian has expanded her higher education by mobilizing financial support mostly in the form of tuition to meet the demand of higher education among young people. Internationally, Iran has tried to enhance the country's cultural appeal by embracing some aspects of internationalization.

## NOTES

- 1 Philip G. Altbach, Liz Reisberg and Laura E. Rumbley, *Trends in Global Higher Education: Tracking an Academic Revolution: A Report Prepared for the UNESCO 2009 World Conference on Higher Education*, (UNESCO, 2009), [http://www.cep.edu.rs/public/Altbach\\_Reisberg\\_Rumbley\\_Tracking\\_an\\_Academic\\_Revolution\\_UNESCO\\_2009.pdf](http://www.cep.edu.rs/public/Altbach_Reisberg_Rumbley_Tracking_an_Academic_Revolution_UNESCO_2009.pdf). Thammika Songkhaeo and Loke Hoe Yeong, *Defining Higher Education Issues and Challenges in Southeast Asia/ASEAN within the International Context* (The HEAD Foundation, 2016), [http://www.headfoundation.org/papers/2016\\_-\\_2\)\\_Defining\\_Higher\\_Education\\_Issues\\_and\\_Challenges\\_in\\_Southeast\\_AsiaASEAN\\_within\\_the\\_International\\_Context.pdf](http://www.headfoundation.org/papers/2016_-_2)_Defining_Higher_Education_Issues_and_Challenges_in_Southeast_AsiaASEAN_within_the_International_Context.pdf). Jung Cheol Shin and Grant Harman, "New Challenges for Higher Education: Global and Asia-Pacific Perspectives", *Asia Pacific Education Review*10 (2009):1–13.
- 2 Martin Trow, "Reflections on the Transition from Elite to Mass to Universal Access: Forms and Phases of Higher Education in Modern Societies since WWII", in *International Handbook of Higher Education*, eds. James J.F. Forest and Philip G. Altbach (Netherlands: Springer Netherlands, 2007), 243–280.
- 3 Markaz-e Āmārī-ye Īrān, *Sālnāme-ye Āmārī-ye Īrān 1375*, (Tehrān: Markaz-e Āmārī-ye Īrān, 1376/1998), 35. Markaz-e Āmārī-ye Īrān, *Sālnāme-ye Āmārī-ye Īrān 1387*, (Tehrān: Markaz-e Āmārī-ye Īrān, 1387/2011), 97. Statistical Center of Iran, *Iran Statistical Yearbook 1392* (Tehran: Statistical Center of Iran, 2015), 135, <https://www.amar.org.ir/english/Iran-Statistical-Yearbook/Statistical-Yearbook-2013-2014>. (accessed July 20, 2017)
- 4 "TABLE 1. POPULATION BY SINGLE AGES, SEX, AND RESIDENCE STATUS" in Statistical Center of Iran, *Population and Housing Censuses 2016* (Tehran: Statistical Center of Iran), <https://www.amar.org.ir/english/Population-and-Housing-Censuses/Census-2016-Detailed-Results>. (accessed July 15, 2018)
- 5 The constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, <http://www.wipo.int/edocs/lexdocs/laws/en/ir/ir001en.pdf>. (accessed November 1, 2018)
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Stefan Trines, "Educating Iran: Demographics, Massification, and Missed Opportunities", *World Education News and Reviews* (February 7, 2017), <http://wenr.wes.org/2017/02/educating-iran-demographics-massification>. (accessed October 30, 2018)
- 8 Aḥmad Sa'īdī, ed., *Āmār-e Āmūzesh-e 'Ālī-e Īrān: Sāl-e Taḥsīlī-ye 1393-1394* [Statistics on Iran's higher education-academic year 2014-2015] (Tehrān: Mo'assese-ye Pazhūhesh va Barnāmerīzī-ye Āmūzesh-e 'Ālī, 1395/2016), 54.
- 9 Ibid., 63.
- 10 Nader Habibi, "Iran's Overeducation Crisis: Causes and Ramifications", *Brandeis University, Crown Center for Middle East Studies, Middle East Brief*, no. 89 (February 2015):4.
- 11 Alisa Hicklin Fryar, "What Do We Mean by Privatization in Higher Education?" in *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research* 27, eds. John C. Smart and Michael B. Paulsen, (Netherlands: Springer Netherlands, 2012), 521.
- 12 Ibid., 523.
- 13 Imam Khomeini, *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations*. Trans. Hamid Algar (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1985), 295–299.
- 14 Keiko Sakurai, "Iran: Three dimensional conflicts" in *Education in West Central Asia*, ed. Mah-E-Rukh Ahmed (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 60–61.
- 15 Governmental universities are affiliated with one of the ministries, such as MSRT (until 2000, the Ministry of Culture and

- Higher Education), MHTME, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Telecommunication, and Ministry of Transportation.
- 16 Keiko Sakurai, "University Entrance Examination and the Making of an Islamic Society in Iran: A Study of the Post-Revolutionary Iranian Approach to 'Konkur'", *Iranian Studies* 37, no.3 (2004):390–393.
  - 17 Islamic Azad University, *A Guide to Islamic Azad University 1988*, (Tehran: Islamic Azad University Publication Office, 1988),1.
  - 18 Ibid.,1.
  - 19 Vezārat-e 'Olūm, Taḥqīqāt va Fanāvarī, *Dāyerat ol-ma'āref-e Āmūzesh-e Ālī, Jeld-e Avval*, [Encyclopedia of higher education, vol.1] (Tehrān: Bonyād-e Dāneshnāme-ye Bozorg-e Fārsī: 1383/2004-5), 50.
  - 20 Ibid., 50.
  - 21 Kollīyāt-e Ā'īn-nāme-ye Tā'sīs-e Mo'assesāt-e Āmūzesh-e Ālī-ye geyr-e Dowlatī geyr-e Entefā'ī [General rules of the establishment of non-government, non-profit higher education institutes], <http://rc.majlis.ir/fa/law/show/100916>. (accessed August 20 2017)
  - 22 *A Guide to Islamic Azad University 1988*, op.cit., 1. However, the University charter was officially approved by the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution in 1987, and gradually the situation has improved and all the degrees from IAU have been officially approved.
  - 23 Vezārat-e 'Olūm, Taḥqīqāt va Fanāvarī, op.cit., 389.
  - 24 Keiko Sakurai, "Iran: Three dimensional conflicts", op.cit., 62.
  - 25 Ya'qūb Entezārī, *Shaṣt Sāl-e Āmūzesh-e Ālī, Taḥqīqāt va Fanāvarī dar Īrān* [60 years of higher education, science and technology in Iran] (Tehrān: Mo'assese-ye Pazhūhesh va Barnāmerīzī-ye Āmūzesh-e Ālī, 1389/2010-11), 117, 145.
  - 26 Institute for Research and Planning in Higher Education, *National Report on Higher Education Research and Technology 2012-2013*, (Tehran: Institute for Research and Planning in Higher Education, 2016), 43.
  - 27 Islamic Republic of Iran, Ministry of Science, Research and Technology, *Higher Education in Iran, A National Report 2000*, (Tehran: Institute for Research and Planning in Higher Education, 2001), 34.
  - 28 PNU website, <http://pnu.ac.ir/portal/Home/Default.aspx?CategoryID=07bf5d3d-9bde-4f9a-ae79-61e5704dc4d9>. (accessed August 25, 2017)
  - 29 Philip G. Altbach, Jane Knight, "The Internationalization of Higher Education: Motivations and Realities", *Journal of Studies in International Education* (2007):290.
  - 30 Ulrich Teichler, "The changing debate on internationalization of higher education", *Higher Education* 48 (2004):23.
  - 31 Vezārat-e 'Olūm, Taḥqīqāt va Fanāvarī, op.cit., 49.
  - 32 "More foreign students to apply for studying in Iranian universities after JCPOA: Official", *The Iran Project*, (October 4, 2015), <http://theiranproject.com/blog/2015/10/04/more-foreign-students-to-apply-for-studying-in-iranian-universities-after-jcpoa-official/>. (accessed November 4, 2018).
  - 33 "More foreign students interested in Iranian universities", *Financial Tribune*, (April 25, 2017), <https://financialtribune.com/articles/people/63073/more-foreign-students-interested-in-iranian-universities> (accessed November 2, 2018).
  - 34 Out of 25,000 students studying at government universities, 4,150 were master's students while 1,225 were doctoral students. Siyāvosh Nowrūzī, "Şandalī-hā-ye khālī-ye dāneshgāh-hā va talāsh-e Īrān barā-ye jazb-e dāneshjū-ye khālejī" [vacant seats in universities and Iran's effort to attract international students] *BBC Persian*, (January 8, 2017), <http://www.bbc.com/persian/iran-features-40532340>. (accessed November 1, 2018)
  - 35 "55,000 international students studying in Iran", *Tehran Times*, (May 25, 2018), <http://www.tehrantimes.com/news/423901/> (accessed November 2, 2018)
  - 36 *Financial Tribune*, (April 25, 2017) op. cit.
  - 37 Website of the University of Tehran, <http://ut.ac.ir/en/page/788/>. (accessed November 6, 2018)
  - 38 Website of Imam Khomeini International University, <http://www.ikiu.ac.ir/old/en/page-view.php?pid=434>. (accessed September 24, 2017)
  - 39 Ibid.
  - 40 UNESCO Institute for Statistics "Inbound mobility rate", <http://data.uis.unesco.org/index.aspx?queryid=173#>. (accessed November 1, 2018)

- 41 Maryam Borjian, *English in Post-Revolutionary Iran: From Indigenization to Internationalization*, (Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 2013), 157.
- 42 Article 15 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran stipulates Persian as the official and common language and script of the people of Iran. The constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, <http://www.wipo.int/edocs/lexdocs/laws/en/ir/ir001en.pdf>. (accessed November 10, 2018)
- 43 University of Tehran, Faculty of World Studies, *Iranian Studies: Prospectus 2017-2018*, (Tehran: University of Tehran, n.d.).
- 44 Website of the Department of Electrical and Computer Systems Engineering (ECSE), Monash University, <http://www.ecse.monash.edu.au/teaching/kish/> (accessed May 29, 2015)
- 45 Website of the Sharif University of Technology, International Campus-Kish Island, <http://iso.sharif.ir/kish>. (accessed November 5, 2018)
- 46 Website of the University of Tehran, Kish International Campus, <http://kish.ut.ac.ir/en/history>. (accessed November 4, 2018)
- 47 Shahrzad Kamyab, “Flying Brains: A Challenge Facing Iran Today”, *International Higher Education* 47 (Spring 2007):23.
- 48 “Lebanon”, General Directorate of International Affairs, Islamic Azad University, [http://intl.iau.ir/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=189&Itemid=598](http://intl.iau.ir/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=189&Itemid=598). (accessed November 3, 2018)
- 49 “Dubai”, General Directorate of International Affairs, Islamic Azad University, [http://intl.iau.ir/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=187&Itemid=584](http://intl.iau.ir/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=187&Itemid=584). (accessed November 3, 2018)
- 50 Website of Azad University in Oxford (AUO), <http://www.auox.org.uk>. (accessed November 3, 2018)
- 51 “Afghanistan”, General Directorate of International Affairs, Islamic Azad University, [http://intl.iau.ir/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=191&Itemid=599](http://intl.iau.ir/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=191&Itemid=599). (accessed November 3, 2018)
- 52 “Iran’s Islamic Azad University Plans to Open Branches in Iraq, Lebanon”, *Tasnim News Agency* (July 11, 2017), <https://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2017/07/11/1462067/>. (accessed November 3, 2018)
- 53 “Rāhandāzī-ye 16 daftar-e beyn ol-melalī-ye Dāneshgāh-e Āzād dar khārej az keshvar” [Launching 16 international offices of the Islamic Azad University in foreign countries] *Mehrnews* (November 3, 2018), <http://mehrnews.com/news/3835535/>. (accessed November 10, 2018)
- 54 “New Websites at the IAU’s International Network”, General Directorate of International Affairs, Islamic Azad University, [http://intl.iau.ir/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=259:outstanding-increase-in-the-number-of-non-iranian-students-at-the-islamic-azad-university&catid=78:news&Itemid=591](http://intl.iau.ir/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=259:outstanding-increase-in-the-number-of-non-iranian-students-at-the-islamic-azad-university&catid=78:news&Itemid=591). (accessed September 3, 2017)
- 55 “Iran to build Iraq’s first foreign uni. of medical sciences”, *Mehrnews* (July 27, 2017), <http://en.mehrnews.com/news/126765/Iran-to-build-Iraq-s-first-foreign-uni-of-medical-sciences> (accessed September 3, 2017)
- 56 “Khamenei instructs Iranian scholars to look eastward”, *Al-Monitor* (October 18, 2018), <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/10/iran-khamenei-leader-look-east-jcpoa-europe-trump-china.html>. (accessed November 2, 2018)