



Identifying the Barriers to the Internationalization of Iran's Higher Education System: Recommendations for Developing Countries

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: 30 December 2023 Revised: 06 June 2024 Accepted: 25 June 2024 Online: 12 March 2025	The aim of study was to identify the obstacles to the internationalization of Iran higher education system using a qualitatively meta-synthesis method. For collection of data the documentary method and systematic analysis based on the Strauss & Corbin approach were used. To ensure the validity and reliability of the data, the researchers used Glynn tool and consulted experts. In total, fourteen components and two dimensions were identified through one hundred and eighty-four codes. The findings reveal that the obstacles to the internationalization of Iran higher education system include the internal dimension and its related components such as politics, English language, resources (financial, human and equipment), management, curriculum, technology, and law obstacles. The external dimension includes obstacles such as the macro-management system, cultural, legal, economic, political and international. Based on the findings, it is recommended that planners of higher education systems in developing countries initially concentrate on necessary measures and strategies to overcome internal barriers to the internationalization of higher education; otherwise, achieving this goal will likely fail if efforts focus solely on addressing external barriers.
KEYWORDS External Barriers Higher Education Internationalization, Political Barriers	

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1. Introduction

In most countries, universities are tasked with developing measures, addressing issues, and fulfilling the needs of national development goals. They are regarded as vital components of the educational system and play a crucial role in shaping both the present and future world. Given the significant social, economic, and technological changes that have impacted higher education, the objectives, programs, and orientations of universities have increasingly drawn the attention of policymakers, social reformers, and educational planners (Mousavi Amiri et al, 2020). A review of higher education developments from the establishment of the first universities (such as the University of Bologna and Padua in Italy, the University of Oxford in England, and the University of Paris) in the 13th century to the present reveals that higher education has consistently been a dynamic and evolving institution, adapting alongside social, cultural, and cognitive transformations. In contemporary times, some of the factors driving changes in higher education systems include "globalization," "localization," and "internationalization" (Ghasempour Dehghani et al, 2011). Today, it is clear that globalization and the advancement of information and communication technologies have sparked considerable enthusiasm for the development of higher education and the accessibility of lifelong learning opportunities (Fathi Vajargah, 2007). In the context of higher education, distinguishing between globalization and internationalization, globalization is recognized as a process—whether intentional or natural—that occurs independently, while internationalization is viewed as a deliberate action that converts the challenges of globalization into opportunities. In this context, Qiang (2003) contends that the internationalization of higher education is a response to the effects of globalization while simultaneously honoring national identities. Indeed, internationalization is a strategic response to the phenomenon of globalization (Wilkins & Huisman, 2011).

One of the most significant concerns and challenges faced by universities is the necessity to cultivate international scientific collaborations and to compete on a global scale (Namati & Mousavi Amiri, 2015). In the new millennium, influenced by globalization, higher education institutions must address how to better prepare students to become global citizens and professionals in today's ever-evolving world (Jackson, 2008). In this context, the internationalization of higher education is a process aimed at equipping the higher education systems of societies for successful participation in an interdependent world, fostering global understanding, and enhancing effective work and life methods in today's diverse environment. Rubin (2001) also asserts that internationalization is not merely an identifier of globalization; rather, it is both a product and a driving force of globalization.

Hakimzadeh, (2012) describes it as a complex learning process that encompasses global, contextual, intercultural knowledge transfer, as well as interdisciplinary and comparative dimensions of knowledge structure. For internationalization to take place, universities must embrace ideals such as enhancing global understanding, improving open education, avoiding narrow-mindedness in scholarships and research, stimulating critical thinking, and strengthening the quality of teaching and research while pursuing their academic, political, and socio-cultural objectives (De Wit, 2011). Knight defines internationalization at the national, sectoral, and institutional levels as a process of integrating international, intercultural, or global dimensions to achieve the objectives, functions, and delivery of higher education (Knight, 2014).

In this context, universities today have engaged in initiatives such as attracting foreign students, establishing online courses and universities, sending students abroad, setting up university branches worldwide, and organizing bi- and multilateral joint courses between universities within a country and those from different countries to facilitate access to international higher education markets (Rahmati, 2003). The internationalization of universities yields numerous positive outcomes, including the enhancement of intercultural communication skills, education for global citizenship (De wit, 2002), technology transfer (Tremblay, 2005), an increase in fields of study (Leask, 2004), strengthening diplomatic relations (Tremblay, 2005), and creating opportunities to attract foreign elites, boost international collaborations, enhance research and scientific production, as well as improve economic productivity and financial benefits (Knight, 2006).

Emphasizing the strategy of internationalization and expanding scientific collaborations within Iran's higher education system has also become an accepted policy. In this context, the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology has promoted this policy for all universities over the past decade. Initially, 18 universities identified internationalization as one of their core missions (Mousavi Amiri et al., 2020). However, the history of higher education in Iran indicates that international scientific collaborations have a long-standing background. Despite this, each year a significant number of the country's elites and human resources migrate due to inadequate national planning, moving to various countries without any comprehensive plans for their return or for addressing the damages caused by their migration (Ramazani et al, 2018). The sixth five-year development plan of the Islamic Republic of Iran places a significant emphasis on international interactions compared to previous programs (Islamic Parliament Research Center , 2017). Article 64 of this plan explicitly highlights the expansion of international scientific cooperation and interactions, underscoring the establishment of units and branches of higher education in

collaboration with reputable international universities. The comprehensive scientific map of the country also stresses the enhancement of international scientific interactions. This focus reflects the political will at the legislative and policy-making levels to strengthen the international dimension of universities (Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution, 2010).

In this context, the fundamental question arises: What barriers and challenges does Iran's higher education system encounter? It is evident that the higher education system, as a primary factor and facilitator of the country's development policies, can effectively fulfill its duties, objectives, and functions only when it possesses the necessary efficiency, effectiveness, and quality. Achieving this requires addressing issues in this sector across various dimensions. Undoubtedly, growth and development in higher education and the attainment of international goals necessitate identifying, controlling, and eliminating the barriers and challenges that negatively impact the optimal implementation of internationalization objectives (Khalifeh & Razavi, 2012).

On the other hand, comparing domestic universities with the ranking criteria for internationalization highlights gaps in our higher education system regarding aspects such as the academic quality of faculty, scholarships available, research and experimental equipment, the number of international faculty and students, conferences, and global collaborations. Consequently, Iranian universities receive low rankings in institutional assessments like the Webometrics ranking system (where the highest rank for the University of Tehran is 504), and according to the rankings of four international colleges and universities (none of the Iranian universities are among the top 200 institutions), which evaluate universities at the global level (Najafi Khajeblaghi et al, 2022).

This unfortunate situation has prompted Iranian researchers over the past two decades to focus on examining, identifying, and classifying the barriers and challenges facing the internationalization of Iran's higher education system. The outcome of this research effort has led to the publication and preparation of a substantial volume of reports, books, and articles regarding the opportunities and challenges of Iran's higher education system in achieving the goal of "internationalization." However, what seems necessary after two decades is to establish a general understanding among policymakers and planners of Iran's higher education system regarding the major research findings on the key barriers to internationalization. Furthermore, conducting this research can provide valuable insights to policymakers and planners in the higher education system. Based on this, the objective of the current research is to identify the barriers to the internationalization of Iran's higher education system. The secondary objectives are: 1. Identify and classify barriers, and 2. Provide a conceptual model.

2. Research Method

This study is categorized as qualitative research utilizing a meta-synthesis approach. The data collection method involved documentary analysis, incorporating both primary and secondary sources by searching for published articles in reputable Iranian databases such as SID, NoorMags, Magiran, ISC, and international platforms like Google Scholar. To extract primary sources, the following criteria were applied: language of the research (Farsi), time frame (2003 to 2023), publication in reputable journals, and subject relevance (internationalization of higher education). Consequently, a total of 27 sources were selected from 62 articles. In this research, the seven-stage meta-synthesis method proposed by Sandelowski and Barroso (2007) was employed, which includes: formulating the research question, systematic review of texts, literature search and selection of articles, information extraction from articles, analysis and synthesis of findings, quality control, and presentation of findings. Additionally, the systematic approach of Strauss and Corbin (1998) was utilized for data analysis. To ensure the validity and reliability of the data, the extracted codes were evaluated. The validity of the codes was assessed using the Glynn tool (2006), which comprises four main criteria: population, data collection, research design, and results. This assessment tool is a critical component in systematic reviews that evaluates existing research to identify the most relevant articles on a specific topic (Crowe & Sheppard, 2011). Furthermore, to examine the reliability of the codes, the insights and opinions of several experienced specialists in the field of higher education were taken into account.

3. Findings

In the present study, all evidence extracted from the studies was initially identified as primary codes. In the second step, considering the meaning of each code they were categorized into similar concepts. Thus, the formed concepts and related concepts were classified into a broader category known as components. In the final step, by examining the components and considering the meaning of each, the primary dimensions were determined. At this stage, 184 initial codes, 14 components, and 2 main dimensions were identified (Table 1).

Table 1: Identification and Classification of Barriers

Dimensions	Components	Concepts	Reference
external barriers	political barriers	<p>Lack of a positive outlook among policymakers towards the internationalization of education.</p> <p>Politicization of the higher education system.</p> <p>Lack of favorable conditions for establishing international communications.</p> <p>Prevention of the development of international collaborations through political requirements.</p> <p>Negative impact of Western sanctions against Iran on scientific collaborations and access to international technology.</p> <p>Migration of specialists and their recruitment by foreign universities</p> <p>Dominance of a security-oriented perspective in the country regarding connections between individuals and universities with foreign countries.</p> <p>Closed doors in higher education to the acceptance of new international ideas and thoughts.</p> <p>Failure of scholarship recipients from the Ministry of Science to return to the country.</p>	<p>Mohseni (2017).</p> <p>Fathi Vajargah, Yemeni & Zare, A. (2022).</p> <p>Galavandi, Hasani & Moradi(2018).</p> <p>Salimi, Azizi & Ali Mohammadi (2015).</p>
	Barriers related to the national management system	<p>The prevalence of complex organizational bureaucracies for international scientific collaborations.</p> <p>A centralized higher education system with centralized management.</p> <p>Unfavorable situation of the International Union of Students and Scholars (negligence towards problems and issues related to internationalization).</p> <p>Lack of policies and organizational procedures for the internationalization of universities.</p> <p>Absence of an organizational structure or specific responsible agents for internationalization.</p> <p>Insufficient independence of university managers and limited academic freedom.</p> <p>Lack of collaboration for implementing cooperative education with other countries.</p> <p>Organizational weakness in establishing connections with other prestigious universities worldwide.</p> <p>Problems in the country's management system.</p>	<p>Arefi & Azizi(2018)</p> <p>Salimi et al (2015)</p> <p>Galavandi, et al (2018)</p> <p>Mehravari Gighlou, Nobakht & Malekpour Lepri(2022)</p> <p>Fathi Vajargah, et al (2022).</p>
	Barriers related to the Ministry of Science	<p>Lack of autonomy and authority granted to universities regarding international collaborations.</p> <p>Weakness concerning scholarships for faculty and students.</p> <p>The education-centered nature of most academic activities in Iran.</p> <p>Weak appropriate communication between government, universities, and industry.</p> <p>Increased inclination of students (due to constraints in domestic universities) to obtain degrees from low-ranked international universities.</p> <p>Not inviting foreign professors and experts and hindering their presence in universities.</p>	<p>Mohseni (2017)</p> <p>Salimi, et al (2015)</p>
	Barriers related to culture	<p>Neglecting intercultural participation and eliminating intellectual borders.</p> <p>Unsuitable cultural conditions in the country's universities.</p> <p>Intolerance towards other cultures in society.</p> <p>Lack of readiness in the academic culture to accept international researchers</p> <p>Fear of cultural hegemony from the West and monoculturalism over Iran's higher education system.</p>	<p>Galavandi, et al (2018)</p> <p>Mehravari Gighlou, et al (2020)</p> <p>salehi, Ebrahim Abadi & Kolahi (2020)</p>

	Barriers related to laws at the macro level	<p>The multiplicity and conflict of laws and regulations of the Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology</p> <p>Ambiguity and lack of clarity in national laws and regulations</p> <p>Issues related to obtaining visas and the presence of international researchers in the country and Iranian researchers in other countries</p> <p>Problems and limitations regarding the extension of foreign researchers' visas</p> <p>Lack of transparency and inflexibility in current laws regarding international collaborations</p> <p>Instability and outdated nature of many domestic laws</p>	<p>Fathi et al(2011)</p> <p>Mehravari Gighlou, et al (2020)</p> <p>Mohseni(2017)</p>
	Barriers related to the economy	<p>Isolation of academic institutions in the country's economic environment</p> <p>Dominance of rent-seeking economic</p> <p>Existence of periodic economic crises</p> <p>Fluctuations in currency exchange rates in the country</p> <p>Devaluation of the national currency and inflation and their negative impact on the development of international collaborations</p>	<p>Mohseni (2017)</p> <p>Mehravari Gighlou, et al (2020)</p>
	Barriers related to the international arena	<p>Negative impact of unfavorable political relations between Iran and other countries</p> <p>Dominance of Iranophobia and negative image due to negative propaganda from international media</p> <p>Lack of willingness for cooperation from many prestigious universities worldwide with Iranian universities due to political issues</p> <p>Limitations on Iranian universities' access to credible databases</p> <p>Unsatisfactory rankings of Iranian universities in global rankings</p> <p>Strict laws in some countries for scientific collaboration with Iran</p> <p>Pressures and sanctions from the international community against Iran due to the development of nuclear energy centers</p> <p>Low reputation and credibility of Iranian universities at the international level</p>	<p>Mohseni (2017)</p> <p>Fathi Vajargah et al (2011)</p> <p>Mehravari Gighlou, et al (2020)</p>
Internal Barriers	Barriers related to laws (at the micro level and within the education system)	<p>Inflexible laws for curriculum reforms</p> <p>Weak adherence to intellectual property rights</p>	<p>Mohseni (2017)</p> <p>Galavandi, et al (2018)</p>
	Barriers related to technology	<p>Weakness in the field of online education</p> <p>Weakness in the evaluation of online education</p> <p>Poor implementation of new technologies in education</p> <p>Issues with information technologies due to low internet speed</p> <p>Slow communication lines due to website filtering</p> <p>Lack of joint electronic seminars with foreign universities</p> <p>Inadequate attention (weakness in utilization and application) to the use of electronic networks</p> <p>Inadequate attention (weakness in utilization and application) to the use of new technologies</p> <p>Inadequate attention (weakness in participation and follow-up) to the use of online discussion halls</p>	<p>Salehi, et al (2020)</p> <p>Salimi, et al (2015)</p>

<p>Barriers related to policymaking</p>	<p>Lack of a competitive culture in Iranian universities University administrators' indifference to holding joint courses with prestigious universities worldwide Little appreciation by administrators and policymakers for the presence of faculty members in international scientific assemblies Limited recognition by administrators and policymakers for gaining a share of the international higher education market Unclear criteria for admitting elite students Existence of bias and one-sidedness in university management Multiple policymaking and decision-making bodies for the country's higher education system Numerous higher-level documents Inappropriate university structures for effective planning and policymaking for internationalization Weak organizational leadership and vision Lack of prioritization for the internationalization of higher education in major scientific policymaking Centralization in the process of attracting faculty members Weakness in adopting interdisciplinary approaches in higher education curricula Dominance of quantitative metrics in defining the main objectives of universities Extreme focus by university administrators on the revenue-generating aspects of research, without regard to the economic realities of society International activities limited exclusively to sending students abroad</p>	<p>Malekzadeh (2002) Salehi, et al (2020) Mehravari Gighlou, et al (2022) Javidi Kalateh Jafarabadi & Aali (2008) Galavandi, et al(2018) Mehravari Gighlou, et al (2020)</p>	
<p>Barriers related to the English language</p>	<p>Unfavorable conditions for the teaching and application of English in universities Lack of proper instruction in international languages, such as English Extreme emphasis on teaching in Persian at universities Weakness of faculty members in speaking international languages Lack of transparency and limitations in the laws and regulations of the Ministry of Science regarding the development of international language education, such as English Linguistic weakness in producing science with export potential at the international level</p>	<p>Mehravari Gighlou, et al (2020) Galavandi, et al (2018) Salimi, et al (2015)</p>	
<p>Barriers related to resources</p>	<p>Lack of physical infrastructure up to international standards in universities Limited number of international technology companies in Iran Lack of adequate hardware facilities in the fields of internet and technology</p> <p>Reliance on budget from government sources (lack of diversity in funding) Universities facing budget deficits and insufficient financial resources for carrying out internationalization activities Very limited research budgets of universities on an international scale Few joint international projects Limited number of research contracts established at the international level Insufficient annual grant funding for faculty members</p>	<p>Equipment and Facilities</p> <p>Financial Resources</p>	<p>Arefi and Azizi (2018) Salimi, et al (2015)</p> <p>Arefi and Azizi (2018) Mohseni (2017) Mehravari Gighlou, et al (2022) Salehi, et al (2020)</p>

Lack of collaboration culture among faculty members
Lack of proficiency in international languages among students and professors
Universities' inability to cover the costs of faculty and student exchanges
Low number of foreign faculty members and students
Limited mastery of new teaching methods by faculty members
Limited familiarity of faculty members with information technology
Limited interest of professors and students in international cooperation and partnerships
Lack of job stability for international affairs experts in organizational positions at universities
Shortage of experts and policymakers in the field of international cooperation
Legal restrictions on accepting foreign students and professors in the country
Weak presence of faculty members in international academic positions
Strong inclination of professors towards traditional teaching methods
Lack of student participation in international research projects
Faculty and student non-membership in international societies and associations
Unavailability of necessary opportunities for professors
Lack of utilization of expert analyses and research regarding internationalization
Absence of interest and motivation among professors and faculty members for producing international content
Weakness in student access to necessary resources for research and learning

Human Resources - Faculty and Students

Arasteh (2006)
Salimi et al (2015)
Arefi & Azizi (2018)
Mohseni (2017)

Barriers related to management	<p>Lack of acceptance of foreign students interested in studying in Iran Weakness in utilizing domestic research facilities to attract foreign researchers Weak implementation of reward policies and promotion of faculty participation in international activities Weakness in organizing international conferences and seminars Absence of a strategy and program to guide the internationalization process Lack of awareness among university administrators about international collaboration opportunities and areas Signing memorandums of understanding with foreign universities without practical support Failure to commercialize research outcomes Lack of appropriate mechanisms to introduce Iranian institutions and organizations to international bodies Low educational and research standards Limited attention to the quality of scientific outputs Lack of necessary authority granted to academic groups regarding student exchanges Insufficient attention from academic departments to create a suitable cultural environment for international relations Lack of exhibitions at universities to introduce and explore other cultures Weak quality control over online publications Weakness in training suitable academic faculty across various disciplines Fragmentation and difficulty in national and international academic communications</p>	<p>Javidi et al (2008) Fazeli (2004) Rozban (2016) Arefi and Azizi (2018) Galavandi, et al (2018)</p>
Barriers related to the curriculum	<p>Limited attention to the adherence to cultural diversity indicators in the curriculum Unfavorable status of interculturalism within the university and learning in the classroom Lack of flexibility in the curriculum for participating in international education programs Inadequate curriculum for raising students' awareness of the development and dissemination of international values Lack of attention to providing content online Outdated course materials in relation to global developments and intercultural societies Neglect of global issues such as environmental problems, peace, and combating poverty and unemployment Insufficient focus on new scientific fields Weakness in producing content with international export potential</p>	<p>Fathi Vajargah et al (2011) Salehi, et al (2020) Salimi et al (2015)</p>

Presentation of a Conceptual Model

After identifying the main barriers to the internationalization of universities, the findings will be presented in the form of a conceptual model (Figure 1).

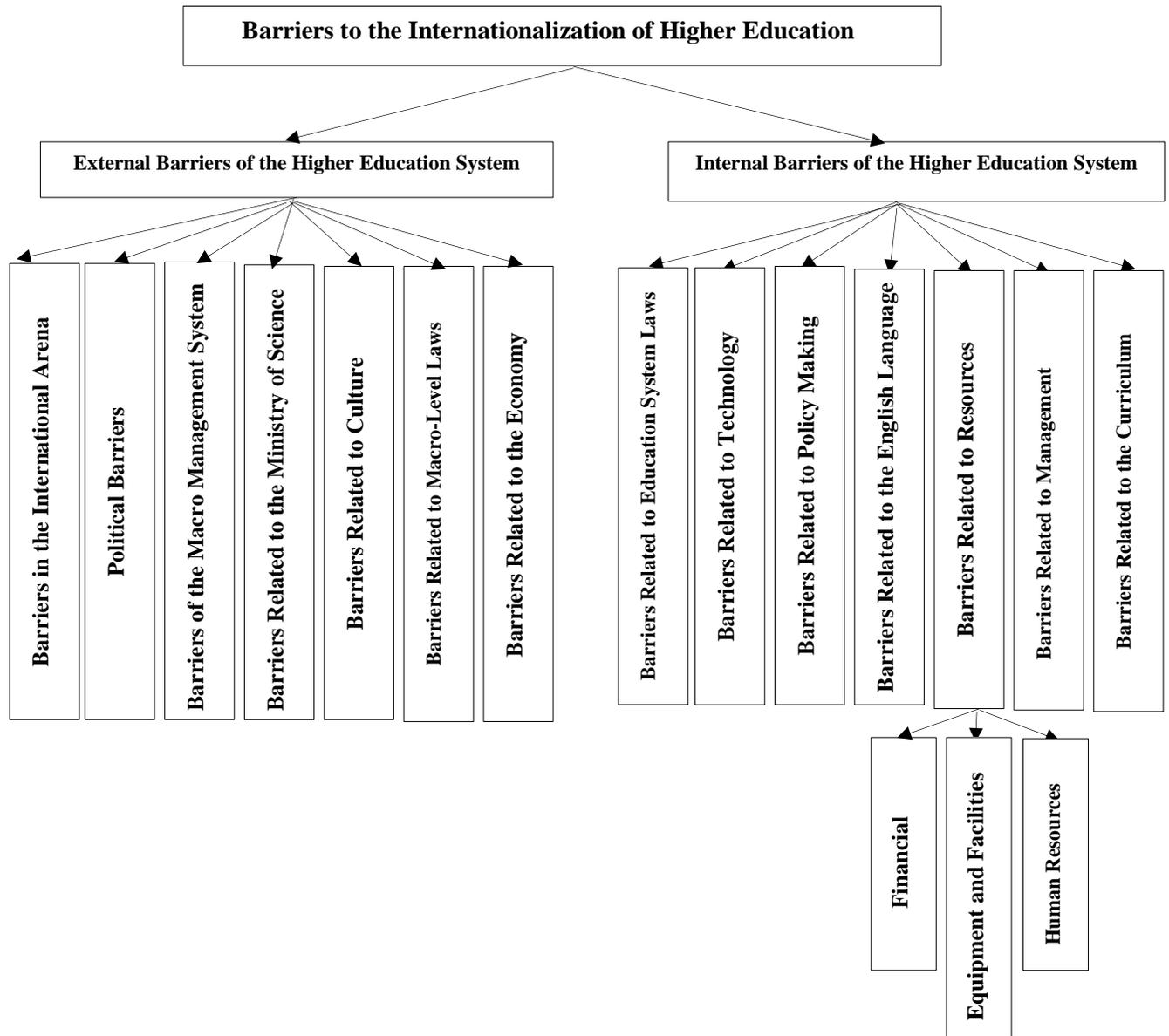


Figure 1: Conceptual Model of Barriers to the Internationalization of Higher Education

The present conceptual model indicates that the barriers to the internationalization of higher education in Iran can be divided into two main dimensions: 1. Barriers that exist within the higher education system itself, and 2. Barriers that are outside this system. Each of these two dimensions includes 7 components. The components of the internal dimension are: policy-making barriers, barriers related to the lack of development and use of the English language, resource barriers (financial, human, and equipment), management barriers, curriculum barriers, technology barriers, and barriers related to education system laws. The barriers related to the external dimension of the higher education system include: barriers of the macro management system,

barriers related to the Ministry of Science, barriers related to culture, barriers related to laws, barriers related to the economy, political barriers, and barriers in the international arena. Fourteen components, such as policy, management, laws, economy, and financial resources, are common between both the internal and external dimensions, although differences between the primary concepts are observed.

4. Conclusion

Considering the research findings and particularly the conceptual model, one of the most significant internal barriers to the internationalization of higher education in Iranian universities is related to policy-making. The multiplicity of policy-making institutions and the abundance of high-level documents in Iranian higher education have complicated the ability to envision a clear outlook and objectives for internationalization. This barrier impacts various aspects, including educational and curriculum planning, student dispatch and acceptance, faculty recruitment, participation in international forums, and creating opportunities for other countries to engage with Iran. This finding largely corroborates the results of research conducted by Galavandi, et al (2018) and Mohseni (2017).

The second significant finding of the research highlights the impact of barriers related to the English language on the internationalization of higher education in Iran. While the dominance of English in the globalization process is clear as the most widely spoken foreign language globally and is taught as a compulsory subject in many countries, in Iran, primarily due to political reasons, English language education begins not in elementary school but in the first year of middle school. This has severely hindered English language acquisition, leaving most students and faculty members lacking skills and proficiency in the language. All of this occurs while English serves as the primary medium of communication in scientific exchanges such as publishing articles, conducting conferences, and implementing workshops. The emphasis on teaching and instruction in Persian at universities, the limited proficiency of faculty members, weaknesses in English-language content, and the lack of clarity in laws related to the English language in higher education have all complicated interactions with other international educational systems. This finding has also been underscored in studies of Larbi & Fu (2017), and Mehravar Giglu, et al (2019).

Access to adequate and appropriate financial, human, facilities, and equipment resources is one of the most critical indicators of development and success in educational systems worldwide. However, our educational system faces shortages in this area, which are among the identified barriers to internationalization. Weak physical infrastructure, issues related to hardware and

software concerning the internet, a limited number of international science and technology companies, reliance solely on government funding, inappropriate and insufficient budget allocation for the international sector, weak support for international initiatives, limited collaboration among faculty members, instability in the job rotation of managers and officials related to internationalization, faculty members' inclination towards traditional methods, and weaknesses in adopting modern teaching methods and international content hinder the participation of students and faculty members in international forums. Additionally, the lack of access to up-to-date resources and various other issues have led to challenges in higher education regarding human resources (students and faculty), financial resources, and equipment. This finding closely aligns with research results from scholars such as Kasenene (2011), Arefi & Azizi (2018), Mehravar Giglu, et al (2023), and Salehi, et al (2020).

Barriers related to management present another obstacle to the internationalization of higher education. The lack of awareness among managers regarding internationalization, its processes, and requirements; negligence in hosting international forums; weaknesses in research and related communications, both among domestic and foreign researchers; poor performance in student and faculty exchanges; and the absence of precise and scientific programs for enhancing and training faculty and students suitable for internationalization are all significant issues. Additionally, restricting or interfering with academic groups disrupts their internationalization efforts, while weaknesses in monitoring and planning for international university communications in the context of technology and the internet, along with instability due to frequent management changes, are challenges that higher education management must address. The findings of Kasenene (2011), Salimi et al (2015), as well as Mehravar Giglu, et al (2019), largely align with this conclusion from the present study. Curriculum also represents a significant barrier to internationalization. The low cultural diversity within the curriculum, the inflexibility of the curriculum in response to international education initiatives, neglect of global issues and alignment with global developments, failure to meet students' needs in accordance with current global demands, and a lack of emphasis on new fields of study are among the factors that can hinder the internationalization of education. It can be said that this finding somewhat correlates with the research results of Fathi Vajargah, et al (2011).

Information technology has created new opportunities amid the threats and changes of globalization for various communities. Societies that can quickly identify these opportunities can make significant structural advances to overcome their deficiencies. Online education, strong communication lines, and access to new technologies in web domains provide the means for better

alignment with global changes. Unfortunately, these aspects have often been overlooked in our higher education system, and sometimes access to technology and its facilities has been restricted for faculty and students due to other barriers, such as political and financial issues. This finding can be somewhat aligned with the results of research by Salehi, et al (2020) and Salimi, et al (2015).

Rigid regulations represent another significant factor complicating the internationalization of higher education. It is well known that many current laws governing international scientific collaborations and international students in Iran are ambiguous, unclear, outdated, and lack sufficient flexibility. Changing traditional administrative structures may be necessary to enter the global arena and address the challenges of resistance to change while also considering the importance of preserving domestic culture alongside international innovations. Galavandi et al (2018) have noted similar findings

Some obstacles are broader and sometimes lie outside the higher education system, relating to the overarching management of the country, which consequently affects the higher education system. External barriers to internationalization include issues within the national management structure, such as heavy and complex bureaucracies hindering internationalization, a centralized educational system, the absence of organizational structures responsible for international affairs, discrepancies between the structures, policies, and overall practices of our universities compared to those worldwide, and weaknesses in academic independence and limited academic freedom. All of these factors present challenges that higher education must grapple with for successful internationalization. In this context, it is suggested that a center be established to foster international communications based on the country's cultural standards and to manage international relations. Research by Rozban (2016) and Arefi & Azizi (2018) supports this finding.

The Ministry of Science, Research & Technology as the governing body for higher education, has occasionally become a barrier to internationalization due to certain policies and management styles. The Ministry's reluctance to grant independence and authority to universities, particularly regarding international collaborations, has resulted in cumbersome and at times illogical processes related to scholarships for faculty and students. Additionally, the acceptance of degrees from low-accreditation international universities and the lack of invitations extended to foreign professors and specialists have further complicated the internationalization of universities. A significant weakness in its relationship with industry has also contributed to these challenges. If the Ministry of Science were to exhibit greater flexibility in collaborating with universities, it could facilitate these matters and secure necessary resources, thereby significantly advancing higher education. Mohseni (2017) identified issues related to the Ministry of Science in his findings.

Given that the cultural dimension is the most influential factor affecting the education system, it is evident that in an educational environment where tolerance for other cultures is low, intercultural communication is weak, and there are security concerns regarding international scientific collaborations—coupled with fears of Western hegemony—the result is a lack of focus on intercultural participation and a reluctance to accept international researchers. This situation persists despite numerous studies by both domestic and foreign researchers demonstrating a correlation between culture and the internationalization of universities. Efforts to foster a multicultural environment, promote multicultural education, assist foreign students in adapting to the country's culture, and encourage cultural flexibility are all elements related to the internationalization of universities. Research has also shown that the lack of emphasis on an intercultural approach in educational planning and curricula is one of the most significant factors obstructing the internationalization of universities. The findings of Larbi & Fu (2017), and Salehi, et al (2020) corroborate this conclusion from the current research.

Bureaucratic laws and regulations, including issues related to obtaining visas and the presence of international researchers in the country, as well as restrictions on visas for Iranian researchers wishing to travel abroad, the lack of clarity in national regulations, the Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology's bylaws, and the outdated nature of many of these regulations, all represent legal obstacles to internationalization. This finding does not closely align with the results of Fathi Vajargah et al (2011). Economic factors and related issues consistently present weaknesses and challenges that can hinder development; however, a robust economy can foster growth. In our country, a rent-seeking economy, economic crises, currency fluctuations, and high inflation have led to the isolation of academic institutions within the country's economic environment, causing their issues to be overlooked. Meanwhile, higher education institutions worldwide are regarded as a means of generating income and promoting economic growth. Today, higher education specialists believe that the economic motivations for internationalization are increasingly tied to long-term impactful goals, viewing internationalization as a collaborative mechanism for human resource development.

The impacts of sanctions, Iranophobia, negative propaganda abroad, the reluctance of many prestigious universities to collaborate due to political issues, unfavorable political relations with other countries, limited access of Iranian universities to credible databases, and the stringent regulations of certain countries can all be viewed as barriers to the internationalization of higher education. Addressing many of these challenges is significantly beyond the capabilities of an educational system or a single country and necessitates a change and improvement in the global

situation. Nonetheless, in some instances, such as establishing political and diplomatic relations with other countries, these barriers can be somewhat alleviated. Our educational system must acknowledge that today, internationalization is not an option but a necessity for academic systems. This necessity is increasingly felt due to the growing interconnectedness of academic systems within the global knowledge network. Fathi Vajargah, et al (2011) reached similar conclusions in their research findings.

Currently, there is unfortunately a bleak outlook within the country's structure concerning the internationalization of higher education. The only indicators considered for this internationalization are the mere increase in the quantity and number of foreign students in the country's higher education institutions. Political motivations for the internationalization of higher education were particularly prominent after World War II and especially during the Cold War. Moreover, following September 11, 2001, when national security in the United States became increasingly significant, political motivations for internationalization gained further justification. Our country has not been exempt from this trend; the politicization of universities, the closure of higher education to new international ideas and perspectives, the hindrance of international collaboration under various political pretexts, a security-oriented view of foreign relations, the failure of scholarship recipients to return to the country, and the prevailing political atmosphere all indicate a politically biased perspective and environment regarding internationalization. Yemeni Dozi Sarakabi, et al (2009) noted similar findings in their research.

In this study, political barriers were the most frequently mentioned issues in the interviews with experts. Based on this, more emphasis has been placed on addressing this topic. Among the proposed activities to reduce the aforementioned political barriers are conducting studies to provide documented and statistical data about the benefits and advantages of internationalizing education for the development and growth of the country's economic and scientific culture, as well as promoting a culture of collaboration and interaction with other countries in education and research to utilize successful experiences from other nations. Additionally, revising essential laws to enhance the capacity for civic participation is necessary: constitutional laws should be reviewed to ensure that citizens' rights, especially those of the academic community, are acknowledged and guaranteed within the political space.

Creating an environment for open political dialogue among academics, reorganizing policies and laws related to the immigration of professionals abroad to retain skilled talents in the country, and, alongside this, improving the social and scientific welfare of professionals and academics (by creating adequate and well-paying job, research, and activity opportunities) are also critical.

Addressing brain drain through the implementation of strategies and policies can help retain skilled professionals and maintain a robust scientific workforce. Supporting policy changes that favor internationalization can create a more conducive environment for universities to engage in international activities. Establishing reciprocal relationships with foreign universities can help develop a more balanced and sustainable approach to internationalization.

Moreover, many factors, while not explicitly political, can effectively reduce these barriers and enhance motivation among faculty, students, the educational system, the broader governance body, and all stakeholders involved in internationalization efforts. Such factors include initiatives to bridge the technological gap between the country and the rest of the world, providing scholarships, ensuring non-discrimination in services towards minority groups, defining scientific and industrial projects with governmental support, offering psychological counseling to students and their families prior to migration or scholarship regarding potential challenges in language acquisition, navigating the new labor market, the psychological costs of leaving past interests, adapting to a new culture, and addressing injustices in the educational system based on various quotas, especially in graduate education. All these factors, in conjunction with the political stability of the government and the continuity of policies supporting internationalization despite changes in administration, can help liberate universities from political influences and create an academic environment that is open to scientific interactions with foreign institutions, thereby welcoming international scientific ideas and programs.

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