

Iranian Universities Challenges Facing Internationalization; An Institutional Theory Perspective

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Introduction

Internationalization has been one of the most important factors shaping higher education at least in the last three decades (Knight, 2012, p.2). But it could be argued that these factors, like many other global or international changes, have affected higher education sectors in different countries in different manners, mainly due to policy differences resulting from ‘national filters’ (Gornitzka & Maassen, 2000; and also Meek, 2003) or other unique characteristics of each of these institutions and countries. Iran's relatively large higher education sector is probably one of these cases.

This article tries to examine the internationalization of higher education in general, and in particular in Iran, from an institutional theory perspective. How can the internationalization of higher education in general be understood from an institutional theory perspective? How can the internationalization of higher education in Iran be understood? What are the dilemmas in front of universities in Iran facing internationalization? What are the environmental actors and forces that these organizations deal with? And how have they been affected by all these actors and forces? These are the main questions that this paper tries to answer.

In doing so, institutional theory is first presented and discussed in order to provide a theoretical lens that could be used by the later arguments. Then, based on the existing literature, internationalization in higher education and some of its adjacent concepts are defined. Afterward, the Iranian higher education sector, a brief history of it, and its current situation are briefly introduced. In addition, some of the main macro-level policies regarding internationalization are examined. Finally, following the definitions and introductions, an attempt is made to make sense of worldwide higher education internationalization as well as its implications for Iranian universities from the institutional theory perspective.

Institutional Theory

In political sciences, sociology, and organizational studies, Institutional Theory, in its broadest meaning, emphasizes the importance of institutions in understanding societies and the individuals and organizations in them. At the core of Institutional Theory is the concept of institution; therefore, it is important to define it. According to Scott, “Institutions comprise regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive elements that, together with associated activities and resources, provide stability and meaning to social life” (2014. p.57). As it is clear in Scott's definition, he considers regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive systems as the three main ‘pillars’ of institutions and institutional theory. According to him, though considering all of these three components at the same time has its benefits, most of the authors in this field prioritize one over the others (2014. p.59).

The *regulative pillar* is based on rule-setting, monitoring, and sanctioning activities, which in turn can be divided into rewarding or punishing (Scott, 2014, p. 59). Policymaking is mainly associated with the regulative pillar. Economists and rational choice institutional theorists mainly favor this pillar (Scott, 2014, p. 62). The *normative pillar* focuses on values as preferred and desirable standards and norms as legitimate means to pursue the values. Besides the norms and values, the concept of roles, as “conceptions of appropriate goals and activities for particular individuals or specified social positions” (Scott, 2014, p. 64), is also pivotal to this pillar. The *cultural-cognitive pillar* of the institutions is based on “the shared conceptions that constitute the nature of social reality and create the frames through which meaning is made” (Scott, 2014, p. 67). The word culture here does not refer to traditional rituals common among groups of people; rather, it refers to the “patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting” that the society internalizes in its members. On the other hand, according to Scott, “the hyphenated label cognitive-cultural emphasizes that internal interpretive processes are shaped by external cultural frameworks” (Scott, 2014, p. 67). To Scott, this aspect of culture, contrary to cognition, which is subjective, is external to individuals and therefore objective, a situation that could also be understood as intersubjective.

Scott uses the three mechanisms of isomorphic change among actors: *coercive*, *normative*, and *mimetic*, introduced by DiMaggio and Powell (1983, p.151-152), and relates coercive mechanisms to regulative systems, normative forces to normative systems, and mimetic behavior to cultural cognitive systems. In other words, these are the tools by which institutions force actors to act the same. While the coercive mechanism uses explicit

regulatory processes through the logic of instrumentality, the normative mechanisms use binding moral expectations with the logic of appropriateness. On another level, mimetic mechanisms train actors to think in a certain way by internalizing concepts in their mentality and even providing them with conceptual, theoretical, and even linguistic frameworks, and eventually affecting their meaning-making mental activities (Scott, 2014, p. 59-70).

Based on Scott's classifications, Olsen belongs to the normative group camp that considers normative systems as the most important aspect of institutions (Scott, 2014, p. 64). Olsen, very close to Scott, defines an institution as a "relatively enduring collection of rules and organized practices" which are rooted in "structures of meaning and resources" regardless of changing individuals (Olsen, 2007, p.27).

Olsen can also be categorized as a normative and conceptual wing of historical institutionalists. Historical institutionalists, in opposition to rational ones, have a macro perspective, focusing on the impacts of institutions on individuals rather than the other way around. Historical institutional theorists believe that institutions are not just driven from or based on other social structures or just the sum of the actions of their actors. But they are the result of all the past actions that have happened in their historical context. As a result, any attempt to make new or to change existing institutions might not go as planned (Scott, 2014, p. 39).

Focusing on organizations, as mentioned by Gornitzka (1999), the (neo)institutional theory is based on the Open system perspective, which emphasizes the dependency of organizations on their environment (p.6), and based on the institutional perspective, this environment is "rules, requirements, understandings, and taken-for-granted assumptions" (p.9), or in other terms, structures of resources and meaning which in turn constitute institutions. But it could be argued that the inclination towards the normative, as well as the cultural-cognitive pillar, in comparison to the regulative one, in historical institutionalists could be considered as giving supremacy to the structures of meaning over the structures of resources because, though coercive forces can control the structures of resources, they cannot fully control the structures of meaning. Yet, on the other hand, normative and cultural-cognitive aspects of institutions mainly shape the structures of meaning. They also play a crucial role in shaping the mindsets of individuals, who, as human resources, are an important part of resources. In the long run, structures of meaning and structures of resources must empower and regenerate each other; otherwise, they cannot sustain (Scott, 2014, p. 58).

The assumptions of historical institutionalists again could cause more inclination toward the normative, and even more than that, toward the cultural-cognitive pillar, and away from the regulative one. Change in institutions happens very slowly and in most cases incrementally. While it is the same for cultural-cognitive aspects to a larger degree, and normative aspects to a lesser degree, the rules and regulations, on the contrary, can be changed overnight. If regulations were the most important parts of institutions, institutional resistance would have been much lesser.

It could be argued that the very slow and incremental change of the cultural-cognitive aspects of institutions, and as a result institutions themselves, might be due to the inconceivability of something outside the patterns that people have internalized for thinking and feeling. This is related to the discussion of individuals' agency, or, in its older version names, the question of determination and freedom (See Barker, 2002, p. 86; also Scott, 2014, p. 92). The agency, or freedom, in this meaning, is not a natural state that all people naturally reach just because they are alive. It is a capacity that can be increased due to knowledge and awareness of forces that have shaped the self.

Even if someone becomes aware of the impact of culture on her mind, or in other words, the patterns in which she thinks and feels (Scott, 2014, p. 67), and therefore increases her capacity for agency or interval of her freedom, the extent of her effect in changing the mentality of other individuals in the society, and eventually the institutions and culture, are hard to estimate. Probably one of the criteria for the effectiveness of these attempts is that these new ways of thinking should have a very positive effect on human lives and their societies as a competitive advantage to be able to survive as a part of the (new) cultural-cognitive reality.

It could be argued that this competitive advantage is probably due to a better or more profound understanding of the nature of or relations between human beings and their natural or social environment. In other, and maybe older, words, this new insight, which is in essence a form of knowledge, is closer to the ultimate unreachable truth. The unreachability of the ultimate truth is due to the ever-existing distance between the human subjective cognition or understanding, as well as the intersubjective knowledge of humankind, with the objective reality of the world, or in other words, between the being and the appearance, or real and ideal, in philosophical terms.

It is important to note that the social environment and the roots of most of its institutions (such as family, religion, or even legal systems) are rooted in nature. In other words, the social environment, just like nature, predates human agency. Therefore, it could be argued that any agentic or conscious attempt to cause a change in the social environment should have always considered the institutions and the society in which it has been trying to change.

It is also essential to consider that although awareness or consciousness of one's culture might happen to a lesser degree when encountering other cultures, the awareness of the common cultural aspects is very hard to reach. On the other hand, when something becomes a part of one's culture, it starts to fade away from one's consciousness, and if this happens on a universal level, it fades away from the consciousness of all. Then only through deep historical knowledge might it be possible to resist this loss of knowledge.

It might be argued that this has happened before in some cases, such as monotheist or atheist religious movements which have opposed the natural polytheist religions (see Hume's 'The Natural History of Religion' written in 1757), the Enlightenment movement, and the Humboldtian university in a higher education institution. Also, it might be happening now in the case of the economic logic behind neoliberalism, and its implication in the higher education sector, which is internationalization. That could be one of the reasons why, according to some experts, this word is losing its meaning despite all the still-dominant differences it has caused during the last decades in the sector. It has become a natural way of thinking that nobody remembers the way she used to think before. This will be discussed further later in the text.

Giving supremacy to cultural-cognitive aspects of the institutions does not mean that normative or regulative aspects are not important at all. Like the relation between structures of meaning and structures of resources, the cultural-cognitive, normative, and regulative pillars of institutions reproduce and empower each other. As Scott says, when they are "aligned, the strength of their combined forces can be formidable", but when they are not, they might result in confusion and conflict because they provide different resources which could be used for different purposes and eventually lead to institutional change (Scott, 2014, p. 71).

Taking all this into account, in this paper, a form of historical neo-institutionalism is considered that gives supremacy to structures of meaning over structures of resources, though it accepts the importance of both. In addition, while using all three pillars defined by Scott (2014), the cultural-cognitive pillar is considered the most important, and the regulative one the least, when the pillars are not aligned. Therefore, it is assumed that any institutional change starts with a change in the cultural-cognitive pillar, or in other words, mentality or patterns of thinking, feeling, and therefore acting of actors in an institution and in society. It is also assumed that one, an individual or group, can be able to make a conscious attempt to change the mentality of others, the cultural-cognitive aspects of the institutions or society as a whole, first only through the expansion of the capacity for agency in herself by gaining awareness over her own patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting, and then by gaining a relatively profound understanding of the nature of the human being, the natural, and the social environment, which gives the new ideas a competitive advantage in the market of ideas. In other words, a new ideology can prevail only if it is better aligned with the reality of humans and their natural and social environment.

Globalization and Internationalization of Higher Education

Marginson, quoting Held and McGrew (2000), defines globalization as “engagement, integration, and convergence on the world scale” that transforms “the organization of human affairs by linking together and expanding human activity across regions and continents,” which in turn results in wider, deeper, and ever-increasing interconnectedness of individuals and nations worldwide (Marginson, 2010, p. 6963).

According to him, globalization combines economic and cultural aspects. On the one hand, it holds a global market that includes worldwide production and distribution of different goods, and on the other hand, it “rests on the creation of the first worldwide systems of communications, information, knowledge, and culture, tending towards a single world community”. These two aspects reinforce each other. Cultural globalization promotes economic globalization by improving communication methods and also providing a knowledge basis for economic production. Economic globalization, in return, provides the necessary accumulated wealth to spread communication tools and cultural and educational institutions vital for cultural globalization (Marginson, 2010, p. 6964). In this higher education, as the intersection of education and research, plays a very important role. It is the most important factor “in the formation of the global environment, being foundational to

knowledge, to the take-up of technologies, to cross-border associations, and to sustaining complex communities” (Marginson, 2010, p. 6964).

Hazelkorn also emphasizes the intertwined nature of economic and cultural aspects of globalization by defining it as “the process of convergence and integration over national borders, creating a ‘single world market’ and a common store of knowledge” (Hazelkorn, 2011, p. 16). The knowledge base market and the market of knowledge are two sides of the same coin of globalization. This again emphasizes the importance of higher education in the globalization process.

As a result, internationalization of higher education could be seen as a natural and crucial component, both an agent and, at the same time, a consequence, of globalization in general. Knight considers “increased privatization and commercialization of higher education, the knowledge economy, GATS, for-profit providers, new quality assurance and accreditation regulations, global higher education ranking systems, international research networks, and increased emphasis on learning outcomes” (2012, p.2) as some of the examples of the two-way relation of higher education and globalization which could be understood as internationalization of higher education. DeWitt and Hunter, based on Knight’s definition, define internationalization (De Wit et al. 2015, as cited in De Wit & Hunter, 2018, p. 4):

the intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions, and delivery of post-secondary education, in order to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff, and to make a meaningful contribution to society

De Witt and Hunter (2018) categorize higher education internationalization into two categories: at-home and abroad internationalization. Abroad internationalization is related to different modes of mobility in higher education, including student mobility, staff mobility, and program or institution mobility. On the other hand, at-home internationalization is concerned with “the purposeful integration of international and intercultural dimensions into the formal and informal curriculum for all students within domestic learning environments” (Beelen & Jones, 2015, p. 76, as cited in De Wit & Hunter, 2018, p.3).

Internationalization and Iran's Higher Education

History is important to neo-institutionalists; therefore, to have a better understanding of the Iranian higher education institution and the internationalization attempts in it, from an institutional perspective, it is necessary to look at the history of the sector. The history of the higher education institution in its modern sense in Iran could be categorized into two distinctive parts: from the beginning til the 1979 revolution, and from the revolution til now.

Throughout the whole post-Islamic period of Iran's history, scientific centers (under names such as 'Howza-Ilmiyya' or 'Madrasa') have been the centers for higher education in Iran. This institution and its actors have always been interesting for both the government and the religion as an institution. Depending on different situations, it has been supported by either the government, by religion, rarely by direct endowments, and mainly by a combination of all these. After the fall of the Safavid dynasty in 1722, and the political instability of the next century, these scientific centers became an appendix to religion. During this period, these scientific centers gave up all the other subjects and became solely focused on religious and semi-religious topics.

In 1851, Amir Kabir, the reformist prime minister of the Qajar King, established Dar-al-Fonoon (house of techniques), introducing modern 'European' sciences and funded by the government, in order to make a scientific institution independent of the institution of religion that could be able to answer the technological needs of the country and especially the army. The fields of study in Dar al-Funoon included seven fields: infantry, cavalry, artillery, medicine, surgery, pharmacy, and mineralogy. The classes of each course and each discipline were fixed and specific. All subjects had history, geography, math, and foreign language lessons. First, the foreign language was French, and then Russian and English were also taught (معتدی، ۱۳۸۸). Following Dar-al-Fonoon, the College of Political Sciences was founded in 1899.

By 1934, these two schools were merged into the University of Tehran during the first Pahlavi period. Following the University of Tehran, "by the 1979 (revolution) they added up to 26 universities, 87 colleges, and 226 higher education institutions, admitting over 180,000 students" (Arani et al., 2018, p.317). It is also important that in 1979-80 there were more than 50,000 Iranian students studying in the US (Arasteh, 1994), which is more than one-sixth of all international students in the US at that time (International Students, 2021).

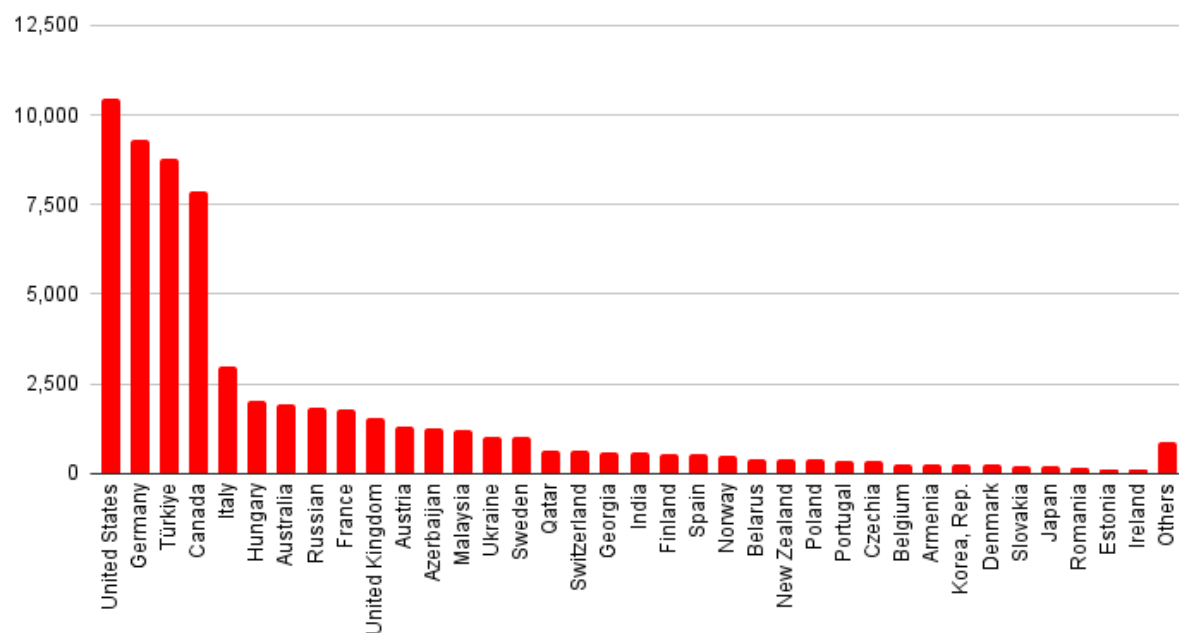
After the Islamic Revolution in 1979, and following the Cultural Revolution, universities were temporarily closed to purge them from the East and the West affiliations and make them Islamic. It is estimated that about 8,000 professors, almost half of all professors in the country, were fired by the reopening of the universities (Razavi, 2009, p.6). Since then, the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, an organization working under the direct supervision of the Supreme Leader, is the primary macro-level policymaker in Iran's higher education sector (Vafadari, 2022, p.8).

After the reopening of universities, with the approval of SCCR, two new major actors have entered higher education in Iran: Islamic Azad University (IAU) and Payame Noor University (PNU). IAU, having more than 1,000,000 students and 400 branches worldwide, is probably one of the biggest universities in the world (Arani et al., 2018, p.317). Also, according to their website, PNU has 490 branches in the country and more than 450,000 students (About-us, n.d.). As is visible in the case of IAU and PNU, during the last three decades, higher education has experienced massive growth in Iran. According to the Ministry of Sciences, Research, and Technology website (Statistics, n.d.), Iran had 3,370,000 tertiary students in 2019.

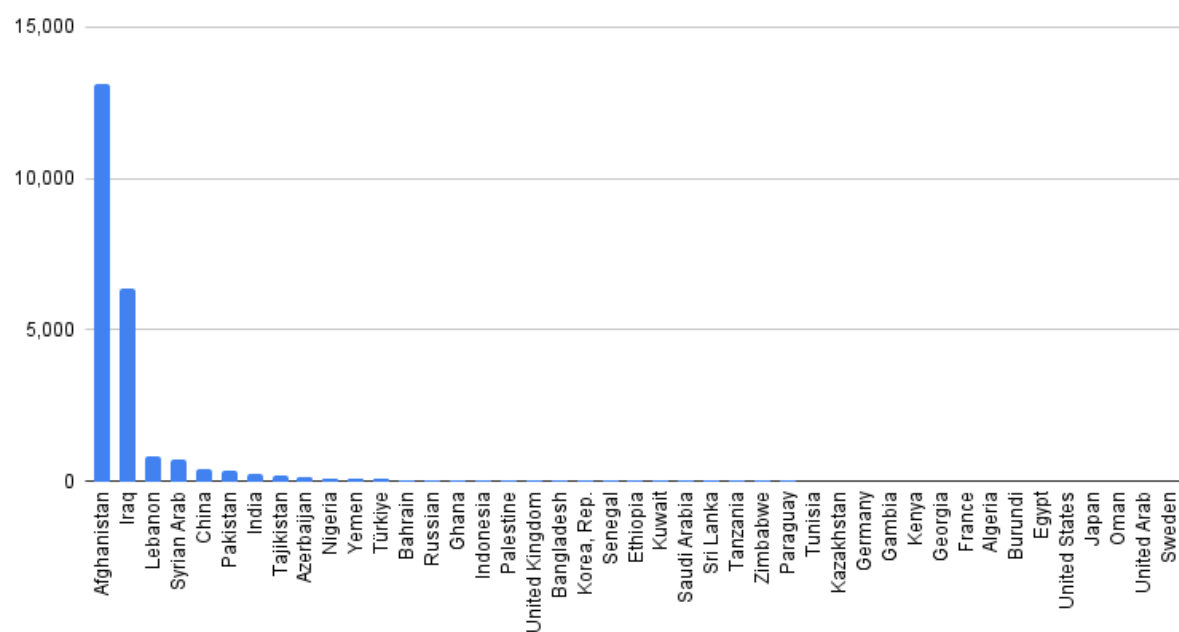
Internationalization abroad

On student mobility, according to UNESCO, Iran has hosted 24,379 international students, and 66,701 students have studied outside of the country in 2020. The charts below show the destinations of mobile students abroad and the country of origin of the hosted students (*Global Flow of Tertiary-Level Students* | UNESCO UIS, n.d.). Just to increase the readability of the charts, 10,462 Iranian students study in the USA, 1,007 in Ukraine, and 99 in Ireland. On the other hand, Iran has hosted 13,130 students from Afghanistan, 6,370 from Iraq, 802 from Lebanon, 102 from Yemen, and 10 from Sri Lanka. It is important to note that, according to UNHCR, around 800,000 refugees currently reside in Iran, of which some 780,000 are indicated to be Afghans, along with some 20,000 Iraqi refugees (*Country - Iran (Islamic Republic Of)*, n.d.). Unfortunately, there is no available statistical data about the mobility of Iranian academics or international academics working in Iran.

Iranian Outgoing Students



Students Hosted by Iran



On the mobility of programs and institutions, both IAU and PNU present themselves as international institutions. According to the PNU website, it has 31 international branches worldwide (About-us, n.d.). Also, IAU, which is more prestigious than PNU at least inside

the country, has branches in Afghanistan, Lebanon, the United Arab Emirates, and Oxford in England, according to its website (*IAU in Brief*, 2020). Based on the data available on its website, the Dubai branch offers two bachelor's programs in management and architecture, three master's programs in management, architecture, and law, and two doctorates in management and architecture (*IAU*, n.d.). The Kabul branch offers four master's programs in management, political sciences, law, and criminology (*IAU.af*, n.d.). The Oxford branch offers no programs (*Azad University (IR) in Oxford - AUO*, 2022), and the Lebanon branch has no website (www.iau-lebanon.com cannot be reached). On the other hand, it seems that no foreign university has any branch in Iran.

Regarding the policies made about internationalization, SCCR approvals should be examined. [The following are directly translated by the author from Persian (*sccr.ir*, n.d.)] Act #634, approved in March of 1992, obliges all governmental and semi-governmental universities (like IAU) to allocate part of their capacity for foreign students. Act #1096, approved in November of 1998, states that policymaking and determining the criteria for accepting foreign students should be with SCCR, but the determination of the number, disciplines, and the preparation of executive instructions could be determined by the relevant institutions.

An example of the policymaking by SCCR on internationalization in Act #1096 is Act #1750, approved in June 2010. The act permits international units of Tehran University, Tehran Medical Sciences, and Sharif Industrial University to provide some courses in a non-Persian language in special cases. But these classes should only be used by foreigners who cannot study in Persian. In addition, for all foreign students, a special Persian language training course must be held, and successful completion of this course should be an obligatory prerequisite for graduation for these students. Also, a comprehensive cultural and Islamic program centered on the representative body of the Supreme Leader in the above universities should be prepared for foreign students.

Maybe one of the most essential documents regarding internationalization in higher education is Act #1735 “Comprehensive Plan of Country's Scientific Affairs” approved in January 2011. Its ‘Grand Strategy #9’ is “active and effective interaction in the field of science and technology with other countries, especially the countries of the region and the Islamic world”. Throughout the section, the focus is on Islamic countries. The main National Strategies of GS9 are

- 1- The development of the Persian language as one of the scientific languages in the world.
- 2- Development and strengthening of national and transnational relations networks of scientists and researchers and international cooperation with the priority of Islamic and Persian-speaking countries.
- 3- Reforming recruitment mechanisms and rules, promoting researchers and allocating incentives, academic awards (scholarships), and study and research opportunities to increase international cooperation among researchers.
- 4- Active cooperation with the Islamic world and playing a pioneering role in the production of scientific knowledge needed by the modern Islamic civilization.
- 5- Planning in order to gain the first rank of science and technology in the region and the Islamic world.

Act #236 on regulating the capacity of higher education institutions, approved by SCCR in July 2014, is another example that could be helpful in understanding the mentality of the policymakers in Iran. Its 8th item is “Increasing the capacity of attracting students from other countries, especially the Islamic world, by qualified universities in line with increasing scientific, technological, economic, social and cultural influence in those countries, realizing scientific authority and improving the financial capacity of higher education institutions”.

Internationalization at home

On the other hand, regarding what is called internationalization at home by De Witt and Hunter (2018), the policy of the Islamic Republic could be understood as completely opposite. The Islamic Republic not only does not intentionally integrate international and intercultural aspects into its educational systems but actively resists it. In fact, the key term regarding this issue in the SCCR is *Cultural Invasion*.

In Act #1168, “Policies on Confrontation with Cultural Invasion”, approved by SCCR in March 2000, cultural invasion is defined as

The planned and organized effort of all or part of one or more sociocultural groups, nations, societies, civilizations, or governments, to impose their own

social foundations and principles, beliefs, values, ethics, and behaviors on other groups and societies and by providing mass information to nations, which will lead to a political and economic gain of the countries that use this tactic.

According to the document, education, advertisements, communications, publications, and research are the means of cultural invasion. In the section about education, it says:

The leaders of Western civilization and culture, after they did not see their direct presence in other countries, in order to expand their economic, political, social influence and domination, possible, they tried to choose representatives from the self-lost westernized ones among the third world nations and gave the responsibility of providing the ground for domination to them. After traveling to the West and studying and communicating in that country, those who had become subject to the progress and superior technology of the West, returning to their country, became speakers of foreign culture.

Regarding the policies to oppose and resist this phenomenon in the higher education sector, the document proposes 12 guidelines:

- 1- Effort to publish and introduce the thoughts of Imam Khomeini (Blessings of God on him) and the foundations of the Islamic Republic.
- 2- Educating the revolutionary and Islamic generation that understands the message of the revolution and, by preserving and acting on it, causes the permanence and continuity of the blessings of the revolution and the internalization of revolutionary values.
- 3- Paying attention to sharing ideas and exchanging opinions by adhering to logical methods.
- 4- Adequate attention to solving the problems of the age by referring to religious teachings and the opinions and views of Imam Khomeini (BG) and the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution.
- 5- Paying attention to providing the cultural needs and scientific strengthening of professors.
- 6- Attention to education and research in human sciences.

- 7- Establishing a cultural and social planning, monitoring, and evaluation system in universities.
- 8- Legalizing cultural activities and providing material and spiritual support for legal activities in the university.
- 9- Expanding the fields of communication between universities and cultural institutions and organizations
- 10- Utilizing as much as possible the participation of students and professors in the production and implementation of cultural programs.
- 11- Maintaining and deepening Islamic-Iranian ties of scholarship students studying outside of the country with Iranian intellectuals abroad.
- 12- Expanding the communication fields of non-attendance and evening students with cultural institutions and organizations of the university.

In Act #1165, approved on the same day as Act #1168, SCCR considers the following as the main desired ‘measurable outcomes’ of compliance with the Islamic values in universities and other higher education centers:

- Increasing public faith in Islamic beliefs and elevating the spirit of spirituality and moral virtues,
- Increasing the level of practical commitment to Islamic rules and values and ideals of the revolution,
- Providing opportunities for participation as much as possible in carrying out religious and moral programs, and
- Increasing mental and spiritual power to effectively and reasonably defend the achievements of the revolution and fight the cultural invasion.

Discussion

In this section, the internationalization of higher education in general and the internationalization of higher education in Iran are discussed based on an understanding of the institutional theory which was discussed before. As mentioned before, in this analysis a form of historical neo-institutionalism which gives priority to structures of meaning and cultural-cognitive aspects of institutions is used as a theoretical lens. In this part, first,

internationalization of the higher education institution as a worldwide trend is discussed, and then the internationalization of higher education in Iran in comparison to internationalization, in general, is explored.

Internationalization of Higher Education from an Institutional Theory

As mentioned before, globalization has enforced the internationalization of higher education. De Witt and Hunter believe that it “is a recent phenomenon that has emerged over the last 30 years as the consequence of a mix of political, economic, sociocultural, and academic rationales” (De Wit and Hunter, 2018, p. 1). But there are also scholars who have argued that knowledge has always been international in its essence, and this recent wave of internationalization is just a return to a renaissance time before the dominance of nation-states over universities, when the workforce, as well as the audience of higher education, were international, and the only difference is that Latin has been replaced by English (Gornitzka et al., 2008, p.3). Though Gornitzka and her colleagues (2008) believe that there are reasons to consider the current internationalization of higher education as different from the international higher education during the Renaissance era, they consider it uncontested. They state that almost all of the individual and organizational participants, both inside and outside of the higher education institution, at least apparently, are content with the situation. “Internationalisation, at least on the surface, seems to be relatively tension-free and uncontroversial (Gornitzka et al., 2008, p. 12).

It seems that amongst the academic community, internationalization is regarded as “integrated in academic basic values, and academia seem hardly to need to resist, translate or decouple the environmental changes related to” its increase (Gornitzka et al., 2008, p. 9). But at the same time, Gornitzka and her colleagues consider marketization as an important part of internationalization. Internationalization is aligned with “increasing belief in market control and competition” and “de-regulation and opening of markets” (Gornitzka et al., 2008, p. 7). They state that

“In many countries, such as Australia and the UK, curtailment of government financial commitments has led to increased competition for income, and higher education institutions are trying to recruit full fee-paying students from abroad. This is one of the reasons why higher education is increasingly

becoming a commodity in a global educational market.” (Gornitzka et al., 2008, p. 7)

These are completely aligned with what Olsen describes as viewing higher education as “a service enterprise embedded in competitive markets” (2007, p.32). He argues that it is a vision of the university as an “instrument for external ‘stakeholders’ and ‘customers’ treating the University as a service enterprise embedded in competitive markets,” which to some degree contradicts the view of the university as an institution based on academic values (Olsen, 2007, p.29-33), or in other words, the Humboldtian cultural-cognitive mentality.

From a cultural-cognitive institutionalist perspective, it could be argued that the logic of the free market has, at least partially, replaced the Humboldtian mentality or has synthesized it into a completely new phenomenon. This change has happened incrementally and slowly, and it has not used any coercive forces; therefore, it has faced almost zero resistance. When the cultural-cognitive aspects of institutions change, the normative aspects become meaningless rituals and might change unless they can fit into the new cultural-cognitive mentality. This change might partially be seen as the settlement of the old conflict between the Continental/Kantian (deontological) school of thought and the Anglo-Saxon/Utilitarian one, in favor of the latter. In that sense, internationalization of higher education could be regarded as the next bead of a chain of events that starts with the emergence of the American model university and reaches the new public management movement (for a history of change see Olsen, 2007, p. 36, on NPM see Hazelkorn, 2011, p. 17).

Though it is hard to distinguish cultural-cognitive changes over time in institutions and societies, there could be pieces of evidence for this turn. One of them is the ever-increasing competition between universities. In a mindset in which investigation of the truth is the main goal, competition is almost meaningless. In fact, in that case, cooperation is much more important because the increase in collective access to the truth empowers individual efforts in their efforts. But obviously, this has changed. In Hazelkorn's words (2011, p.16),

academic research is no longer solely the pursuit of individual intellectual curiosity but is driven in large measure by national funding priorities which are tied to strategies of economic growth and competitiveness. Knowledge is

important primarily in its ability to be converted into new products and services.

This is visible through the growing importance of worldwide rankings. Hazelkorn sees the dramatic rise of the ranking consciousness as a response to globalization in which the economy is based on knowledge, and therefore society tries to keep higher education institutions accountable for the support they receive (2011, p.6). Aligned with her ideas, Knight discusses the possibility of “competition for status, bright students, talented faculty, research grants, and membership in global networks” as the reason for the importance of achieving a specific position in rankings as a measurable outcome to gain worldwide profile and prestige (Knight, 2012, p. 16).

But although competition is severe, there is also cooperation between academics and academia in different places. This cooperation might be regarded as the remnants of the old cultural-cognitive ideas related to the Humboldtian university or even before it. But even in this case, cooperation is only allowed among partners who more or less respect the logic of globalization and the global order that is in place for securing the global free market. The limitations of academic collaboration, or, in extreme cases, the sanctions that prohibit academic collaboration, are shreds of evidence of this phenomenon. In this case, unresolved territory or even occupation disputes (like the cases of Tibet, Taiwan, Nagorno-Karabakh, or the three islands in the Persian Gulf), Human Rights, or even Academic Freedom violations are not as important as active disturbance of the market-oriented world order with invasions (such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine) or threats of invasion (like the Islamic Republic threatening Israel).

In conclusion, it might be argued that the fundamental logic behind the institution of higher education, or in other words, the cultural-cognitive aspects of the institutions, has changed. The Humboldtian mentality, if not completely replaced by the free market mentality, is highly transformed by being integrated with utilitarianism, capitalism, and neoliberalism as the logic of the free market. The change in the cultural-cognitive aspects has changed the higher education institution, but since the change has taken place slowly and incrementally, due to the wide acceptance of the new ideology, there has been very little resistance to this institutional change.

Internationalization and Iran's Higher Education from an Institutional Theory perspective

Changes in Iranian society since the mid-19th century can be explained by institutional theory. From this perspective, by 1850, traditional higher education had completely accepted the cultural-cognitive foundations, values and norms, and laws and regulations of religion. It could be regarded as an absolute form of institutional imperialism mentioned by Olsen (2007) (Vafadari, 2022, p.10).

The government, on the other hand, faced with the realities of the emerging powers of the new era and changes in international relations, is willing to commit to reforms to secure its very existence. As a result, it tries to build an entirely new sector of higher education. An attempt which, according to Milani, is opposed from the beginning by the institution of religion. "Muslim clerics, by and large, opposed the creation of such secular institutions as threats to their monopoly in the important fields of education and law" (Milani, 2000, p.40). At the same time, due to encounters with the Europeans, and also partially due to Babi and Baha'i movements in Iran, a liberal and progressive trend is shaping among the upper middle class. The change in the power balance in society consequently results in the Constitutional Revolution in 1905-11, and eventually in the replacement of the Qajar dynasty with the Pahlavi family in 1925.

The new and modernist government of the Pahlavis tried to use modern higher education to strengthen the pro-reform social class and to be its ally in facing the conservative forces of religion and its appendix, the traditional scientific centers (Vafadari, 2022, p.10), allied with the conservative classes which had a strong hold on the economy, referred to as 'Bazar', the market. But eventually, the alliance of the conservative forces with the Marxist-socialists, which were popular among university students, resulted in the 1979 revolution.

It could be argued that fundamental cultural-cognitive/ideological elements, or in other words, the underlying meaning of modern higher education, at least in its Humboldtian meaning, are incompatible with the Political Islamist ideology and mainly 'Absolute Guardianship of Jurist'. In the Humboldtian worldview, an unbiased and uninterrupted individual search for truth is pivotal (Anderson, 2004, p.52-56), while Absolute Guardianship of Jurist is based on the Shia Islamic *Taqlid*, which is a general conformity of ordinary people

to the teaching of the mujtahid who is qualified to know the truth. In a nutshell, Humboldtian higher education is based on Philo-Sophy, loving to know, while the Islamic republic is based on some people being Sophists; they know (for more on this distinction, see Anderson 2004, and also *The Conflict of the Faculties* written by Kant in 1798). Regarding this fundamental difference, it could be concluded that the institution then lacked a strong cultural-cognitive pillar. Though many university professors who had mostly studied in Western countries had internalized these ideas, and also the normative and regulative tools were to a good degree aligned with these ideas, they were not successful in transferring them to their students. This, in turn, could be regarded as the main reason for the alliance of the majority of university students with Islamist groups.

After the revolution, the young and weak institution of higher education in Iran became even weaker. The new government, this time hand in hand with religion, using coercive forces such as laws, regulations, and even physical removal of opposing individuals, conquered universities. Since the reopening of universities after the Cultural Revolution, higher education in Iran, using Olsen's words, has become an *instrument* in the hands of the government. Since then, as is visible through the policy documents, the government has constantly tried to internalize its worldview and, based on that, its norms and values, through the *Islamization* of the universities. This effort has been enforced by regulatory forces. To give an example of the scope and scale of the interventions by the government, it might be helpful to know that female and male students are not allowed to dine in the same canteens in Iranian universities. Student affairs vice-chancellor of the University of Tehran, during the students' protests in October of 2022, declared that "mixed canteens are a red line for the university" (*SNN*, 22 October 2022).

The internationalization policies regarding higher education, made by SCCR, can also be understood only through understanding the underlying ideology and mindset of the government. A deep understanding of this ideology requires a different study in itself. But it could be argued that the underlying ideology of the Islamic Republic is, in many aspects, in opposition to utilitarianism, capitalism, liberalism, neoliberalism, and therefore globalization and internationalization in general, as discussed in this text. For the Islamic Republic, everything, including higher education and its internationalization, is a tool in the eternal war between the good, with a specific form of Islam as its only definition and the Islamic Republic as its leader, and the evil, with a specific definition of Materialism at its core and

the leadership of the West. While the logic behind internationalization, as discussed here, could be to increase gain, not necessarily by making the other party lose, and in more sophisticated interpretations, by creating win-win situations.

Maybe one of the important outcomes of the Islamic Republic worldview is the lack of importance of the tangible world, and therefore reality as the source of knowledge, the concepts that are underlying foundations of the modern worldview, whether it is neoliberalism or Humboldtian ideology.

This self-righteousness, in addition to the lack of respect for reality, is, for example, visible in act #1750 when the policymaker assumes that a foreign university student (at least the ones who have other options) should be willing to study in a university where her graduation is contingent on learning Persian and, even more, be subjected to “a comprehensive cultural and Islamic program centered on the representative body of the Supreme Leader”. This approach is one of the reasons that makes the attempts by the sector to attract international students fail, a fact which would be visible if one excludes the refugee students from the total number of international students hosted by Iran.

The same attitude is visible in Act #1735, item 1, about making the Persian language one of the scientific languages of the world, and even more in items 4 and 5, where even though item 5 accepts that the country is not the leading country in scientific or technological aspects in the Islamic world or even in the region, in item 4 the Islamic Republic is considered as the pioneer of science production among them. This could be better understood when considering the fact that despite all the apparent efforts regarding strengthening ties with Islamic countries, the government is not that successful in it. It, in turn, may stem from the fact that the Islamic Republic's doctrine, based on Shiaism, is in opposition to the majority of other Muslims who are Sunni, and even also many Shia Muslims.

The combination of the unrealistic mindset with the war mindset could also be detected in act #1168 on cultural invasion, the act which could be regarded as completely opposed to the accepted idea of internationalization (at-home) of higher education. Surprisingly, the idea of cultural invasion is very similar to what the Islamic Republic is trying to build in other countries, an attempt which could be seen in Act #236. The same act is considered different because the actors are different, actors whose side in the war of good and evil is considered predetermined. This mindset is the reason that while the Islamic

Republic does not allow international higher education institutions to have branches in Iran, it encourages its institutions to do so. According to this mentality, merely opening a university branch outside the country is a sign of ideological victory, no matter how efficient or successful the branch is.

On the other hand, the outward flow of students, which in the case of Iran is almost the same as brain drain, is an essential issue for the country. In a survey (رصدخانه مهاجرت ایران, n.d.) on the level of willingness to immigrate, conducted by the School of Policymaking of the STU, the results showed that 40% of students and 53% of the academic staff very highly, and 26% of students and 18% of the academic staff highly wanted to immigrate. This shows that despite all the regulative and normative efforts, the government of Iran has not been successful in internalizing its ideology. In other words, higher education in Iran has not accepted the cultural-cognitive aspects of the institution of religion or government in the country.

It seems that the government, controlling higher education with every regulatory force possible, is unable to present a cultural-cognitive foundation to the actors involved in the sector, appealing and convincing enough that could confront the underlying way of thinking, feeling, and acting presented by the logic behind the globalized economy and international higher education, whether it could be named utilitarianism, capitalism, liberalism, neoliberalism, or all of them.

Conclusion

Regarding all the discussions up to this point, the Internationalization of higher education at an international level could be understood as the soft replacement of the Humboldtian way of thinking with a more Anglo-Saxon-inclined way of thinking, which starts with utilitarianism and leads to neoliberalism at this time. Though the cultural-cognitive pillar of the institutions has changed significantly, the change has been in a way that has allowed the normative and regulative pillars to keep some of their elements. Also, it is essential to note that this change has not happened overnight, but has taken almost two centuries.

Also, it could be concluded that the three pillars of the institution of higher education in Iran are misaligned, supporting and motivating “differing choices and behaviors” (Scott, 2014, p. 71). Its cultural-cognitive foundations have moved towards the cultural-cognitive foundations of the international higher education institution. The normative pillar has a

sometimes contradictory mix of Islamic republic ideology, the Humboldtian university model, and a utilitarian-neoliberal way of thinking. Finally, the regulative pillar is almost completely controlled by outside forces, especially by the government. Whereas the cultural-cognitive ideas upheld by the government are not strong and appealing enough to become internalized by most of the actors in the section. This misalignment has provided “resources that different actors can employ for different ends” (Strang and Sine, 2002, p.499, as cited in Scott, 2014, p.71) and resulted in confusion and conflict and is likely to give rise to institutional change, as mentioned by Scott (2014, p.71). One of the most important pieces of evidence of this conflict, confusion, and waste of resources could be the brain drain crisis of the country. The Iranian higher education organizations are the main losers of this situation.

One way of interpreting this situation is that the cultural-cognitive mentality of the international institutional coalition of higher education and the economy is so strong that, even without any regulative power inside the borders of Iran, it is causing a good share of students and academics, the most crucial resources of the sector, to leave the country. This could be proof of the superiority of the cultural-cognitive pillar over the regulative one.

This could also be regarded as a sign of superiority of the underlying cultural-cognitive foundations of international higher education and the globalized economy institutions over the way of thinking, feeling, and acting presented by the Islamic Republic. As discussed before, this could mean that the fundamental underlying assumptions of the current globalization movement, whatever they may be, are closer to the ultimate unreachable truth than the underlying assumptions of the Islamic Republic. In other words, it is better aligned with the reality of humans and their natural and social environment.

The case presented here could also be interesting to look at through the concept of institutional power mentioned by DiMaggio and Powell. They categorize institutional power into two parts: the power to set premises, and the power to define appropriate models of organizational structure (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983, p. 157). Also, any comparative study on Iranian society and its institutions and Western ones could be an interesting case due to the fundamental cultural-cognitive differences in many of the Iranian institutions that might be hard to find in other places.

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