

Identifying the effective factors in the plan for internationalization of education in Shiraz university of medical sciences: A qualitative study

Seyed Mojtaba Mirebrahimi¹, Abbas Yazdanpanah^{2*}, Iravan Masoudi Asl³

¹Department of Healthcare Management, Marvdasht Branch, Islamic Azad University, Marvdasht, IRAN.

²Assistant Professor, Ph.D in Health Policy, Department of Health Care Management, School of Public Health, Shahid Sadoughi University of Medical Sciences, Yazd, IRAN.

³PhD of Health Services Management, Associate Professor, Majlis Research Center, Tehran, IRAN.

Email: jafary_h@yahoo.com

Abstract

Background: In its move towards future, higher education has no choice but to move towards internationalization. In its vision document (2025), Iran is considered as a country with the first scientific position in the South-West Asia, for realizing which in medical sciences it is necessary that the universities of medical sciences of Iran move towards internationalization of their education. The study was conducted to identify the factors effective in the plan for internationalization of education in Shiraz University of Medical Sciences. **Method:** The present study was qualitative conducted using content analysis approach in 2017. Semi-structured interview was used for data collection. The participants, nine authorities of Shiraz University of Medical Sciences, were selected using purposive sampling method and then through snowball method. Finally, the data were analyzed using Lundman and Graneheim's content analysis method. **Results:** None themes were obtained along twenty-two sub-themes. The themes obtained from the research results were the organizational factors that encompassed nine sub-themes: General policies and strategies, facilities, legal issues, international communication, administrative and educational structures, resource management, organizational culture, organizational communication, and cultural differences. **Conclusion:** The implementation of the guidelines of universities internationalization faces various obstacles and various factors play roles in the successful and sustainable implementation of such policies. At present, there are weaknesses of organizational factors in adopting and implementing this guideline. Moreover, the most suitable solutions seem to be policymaking and provision of a strong strategy plan, followed by strong operational planning and strengthening educational and administrative structures.

Key Words: Internationalization, education, medical sciences, challenge.

*Address for Correspondence:

Dr. Abbas Yazdanpanah, Assistant Professor, Department of Healthcare Management, Marvdasht Branch, Islamic Azad University, Marvdasht, IRAN.

Email: jafary_h@yahoo.com

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INTRODUCTION

The comprehensive progress of science and technology has been emphasized in all high-level documents of Iran including the constitution, the fifth plan law, as well as the sixth plan draft, the comprehensive scientific plan of the country, the general policies of resilient economy and the general policies of science and technology. Continuous scientific perseverance has been explicitly recommended for obtaining scientific and technological authority¹. Internationalization of higher education has been one of the most important global processes of higher

education in the last decade². Creating communication facilities and using computer facilities and the Internet network will provide the internationalization capabilities of scientific cooperation in the world more than ever⁴. Blomenthal (1996) argues that internationalization policy can have political, economic, educational, cultural, academic, scientific, and technological requirements. In his later studies, Knight (1997) divides the internationalization aspects into four categories including political, economic, academic, cultural, and social ones. Our country's higher education system needs to adapt to changeable domestic and international situations to be able to respond to the needs of the time at the beginning of the 21st century. Moreover, in its relation to future as higher education should go towards internationalization, identifying the solutions in this regard is of great importance. The need for internationalization of university education is because this phenomenon affects the quality of education and the position of a university in the short and long term positively⁵. In fact, the internationalization of higher education is the process of integrating international, intercultural and global aspect into the goals and functions (teaching, learning, research, and service) of the university⁶. Zamanimanesh et al. (2017) showed that the factors affecting the internationalization of universities are divided into two categories: substructure (outside the control of university administrators) and superstructure (in control of university administrators). The substructure factors (global and regional conditions, cultural and economic conditions, political and security conditions) unobtrusively affect the internationalization of medical universities, and substructure factors (management and human resources, scientific cooperation, space and equipment, curricula, extracurricular activities, supervision and review, and academic culture) explicitly give international reputation to medical universities⁷. Considering the progress of the region countries in admitting foreign students, it is necessary to plan and make more comprehensive efforts for the internationalization of medical science universities to compete in the region. The attempt to develop the quality of medical science education through internationalization is one of the ways to reach this as well. As higher education, especially in medical science, must move towards internationalization in their move towards future, identifying the effective solutions in this regard is important. This study identified the most important challenges and provides solutions to eliminate these barriers for the internationalization of higher education.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The study was qualitative conducted using content analysis. Given the purpose of the study and collecting the round view, the key subjects of the study were the officials involved in the internationalization of the university in Shiraz University of Medical Sciences, who were initially selected based on purposive and then snowball sampling methods. Semi-structured individual interviews were used to produce the data, which is suitable for qualitative research due to its flexibility and depth. Overall, nine officials were interviewed. The results reached saturation with this number. Two open-ended interviews were conducted with two head of deputy officials and a topic guide with seven general questions was formed to clarify the objectives of the study according to their idea to conduct the interviews for specifying the validity and ensure the meaningfulness of the questions of the respondents. Besides reviewing the literature, the views of the three expert professors in the field of internationalization and university were used in designing these questions. The interview time was predicted in advance and coordinated with the people in question either on telephone or in person. Moreover, at the same time, during the coordination, while giving explanations regarding the purpose of interviews, people were assured that the confidentiality of the information and the anonymity of the interviewee would be fully observed, and the participants could stop the interview whenever they wish despite the initial agreement. As much as possible, it was tried to provide a quiet place away from the workplace clamor for the interviews, so that the clients and phone calls do not disturb the session to increase the accuracy and confidentiality of the content of the interviews. The average interview time was from 30 to 45 minutes, and all sessions were recorded using an electronic device to prevent possible problems. Data analysis was carried out simultaneously with their collection. Thus, immediately after completing each interview and after listening to every recorded file twice, all the text messages were typed word by word and the substantive codes were extracted. In the next step, classification was done based on the similarities between these units. Moreover, as the key assertions of the interviewees' speeches, their facial gestures, and nonverbal signs had been recorded at the time of the interview, they were also considered at the time of the implementing the files. The data were used based on Lincoln and Guba method to increase the credibility of the data⁸. Moreover, the revision of the observers was used to estimate the level of data verification, such that interviews, coding and extraction of classes were conducted by several experienced people in the field of

qualitative research where no conflict of interest were reported.

RESULTS

In the present study, nine people (eight males and one female) from the officials of Shiraz University of Medical Sciences participated in the study, five of whom were faculty members and four other were influential managers in the internationalization of the university. It is worth noting that all the participants in the interview were among those with a history of university campus. In the analysis of the interviews, 223 semantic units were obtained and after the removal and integration of repetitious and similar codes, nine themes along twenty-two sub-themes were obtained as presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Affective factors on Internationalization of Education

Policies and general strategies	Major and operational plans
Facilities	Educational facilities Welfare and livelihoods
Legal issues	Legal issues of internationalization International accreditation
International communication	International communications of the educational system of the university using the experience of other countries The level of authority of the international deputy
Administrative and educational structure	Educational content of the majors Student admission process Teaching language Separated foreign and Iranian students classes
Resource management	Human resource structure and proper labor force Financial management
Organizational culture	Internationalization thinking Using the past experiences of the university and the private sector Using native potentials
Organizational communications	public relations Informing students Inter-sectional and outsourced interaction
Cultural differences	Cultural differences between Iranian and foreign students working in college

According to the participants of the study, the obstacles of university internationalization are organizational problems, including nine major concepts: “general policies and strategies, facilities, legal issues, international communication, administrative and educational structures, resource management,

organizational culture, organizational communication, and cultural differences.”

General strategies and policies: The first part of organizational factors is general policies and strategies divided into two sub-concepts: “macro and operational policy-making and plans.”

Policymaking: according to the participants in this study, one of the sub-concepts of the general policies and strategies effective in internationalization is policy-making. In this regard, one of the participants noted the wrong policy in the first admission of foreign students and stated: “*In the early days, you remember what problems we had in the first group we admitted. Sometimes we make the things worse. The first time, we brought them from one country with which we were once in war. We did not do much for preparing the context and brought a large group of people from that country, and sensitivity was created...*” (Participant3). One of the participants mentioned the effect of the country's macro policy on political issues and stated: “*Political issues willy-nilly affect the internationalization issue. For example, you want to bring a foreigner student and the focus is on Arab countries, and there are political problems with Arab countries, so your admission faces trouble, or vice versa, when there is better relationship with Europe, it is effective too.*” (Participant 9)

Macro and operational programs: In this regard, one of the senior managers stated: “*At the beginning, Iranian students protested to the head of the university for admitting lazy students was and so on as in our first round the students were not very strong, but then we established the system and managed to bring strong students.*” (Participant 9)

Another interviewee who had a history of management in the international department of the university stated: “*The first important thing I think in internationalization, which is everywhere with some policies described in the internationalization package, but not much is done at executive and computation levels is marketing. This means you can see what kind of discipline you can teach, what kind of student can have benefits for you with the exchange of knowledge between universities and countries, now the whole world is marketing.*” (Participant 5)

Facilities and equipment: The second part of the organizational factors is the facilities, divided into two sub-concepts of “educational facilities and welfare and livelihoods issues.”

Educational facilities and equipment: In this regard, one of the experts in the study mentioned this issue as an important obstacle and stated: “*As educational spaces are low, how did they want to educate? You can use the basic sciences to put the student in the classroom and instead of*

one class hold three classes. When you want to go to the clinical space, it is better.” (Participant1) In this regard, one of the members of the university's board of directors, influential in the international section of the university, stated: “If I want to make a general statement about the educational equipment and facilities, I think it is one of the areas where we have fewer problems than other areas. After all, we have some infrastructure in this. This infrastructure can be used, but there is a problem that limits us. We had a unit called the international unit where we admitted Iranian students, but unfortunately, the infrastructure built was outside the campus away from the university and not much compatible with internationalization. We are unfortunately limited in our medical faculty. We tried to think that we have a medical school, and we are training in a college in a form of education, but classes are limited, and we need to develop colleges and educational spaces.” (Participant 9)

Facilities and welfare conditions: One of the interviewees evaluated the university's welfare facilities for foreign students as good, did not consider this as an obstacle, and indicated: “We tried to build good facilities in our dormitories from the very beginning, relative to the money they pay. Nevertheless, there is a view among our students.” (Participant3) Another interviewee said: “If we want to create revenue, we must use civilian facilities, but if we do not do anything, then there will be a serious problem in the next two years.” (Participant 3)

Legal issues: The third part of the organizational factors theme is legal issues divided into the following two concepts: legal and internationalization and international accreditation.”

Legal issues of internationalization: According to the participants of the study, one of the legal issues affecting the internationalization of the university is the legal issues of internationalization.

In this regard, one of the people with roles in the internationalization plan of the university said:

“Making legal laws and regulations based on the principles of international law and the high-level educational regulations of the Islamic Republic of Iran are really effective in facilitating the selection and admitting students' arrival from other countries to Iran, but the educational laws in this regard should greatly be internationalized.” (Participant 2)

One of the senior executives in the study did not consider this as an obstacle:

“It is not currently an obstacle regarding the issues of citizenship rights that you say if it is seen or not.” (Participant 9)

International accreditation: one of the interviewees stated: “The second point that is very important we deal with now is getting accreditation to internationalize a

university. When you want to make a university important globally for the people to come and study, the first infrastructure needed is whether it has internationalization accreditation or not.” (Participant 5) Moreover, one of the participants stated: “In legal issues, one of the limiting factors is international accreditation. Accreditation is an institution or an institution's program, our university as an institution, accredited by international institutions and we have been accredited by it.” (Participant 9)

International communication: The fourth part of the organizational factors is international communication, divided into two sub-concepts: “international interactions of the university education system and using the experiences of other countries.” In this regard, one of the experienced managers with effective history in the international affairs policy-making of the university pointed to: “Anyway, I say that when the communication is mutual, the good point is that the international university is always joined with one or two universities with more close educational systems, and it helps a lot in exchanging students and teachers.” (Participant 4)

Using the experiences of other countries: Using other countries' experiences can help us in planning for internationalization, and one of the participants stated: “Why do we not see what they did and what we want to do?” (Participant 1)

E) Administrative and educational structure: The fifth part of organizational factors is the administrative and educational structure of the university, which divided into five sub-concepts: “The authority of the international deputy, the rules of education and curriculum of the field of study, the process of admitting students, the teaching language and the separation of classes of Iranian and foreign students.”

Administrative and educational structure: According to the participants of this study, one of the most effective organizational factors in the university's internationalization is the concept of the university's administrative and educational structure as described below.

International deputy's authority: according to the participants in this study, one of the sub-concepts of the administrative and educational structure of the university that is effective in internationalizing the university is the authority of the university's international deputy. One of the experts in this study stated the inadequacy of the university deputies' authority stressing that: “This authority should be given that if he is the international deputy, he should prepare his own students. The international deputy does not have enough authority. He cannot be a facilitator either; we unfortunately have unnecessary involvement in our system.” (Participant 1)

Educational rules and curricula of the majors:

According to the participants, another subcategory of the administrative and educational structure of the university effective in the internationalization of the university is the educational rules and the curricula of the majors.

One of the interviewee stated: *“Of course, the educational rules of these students should also be internationalized to a large extent.”* (Participants 2) The lacks of coordination of the educational rules at the university with other countries, as well as the different contents of the fields of study were mentioned as the barriers that a university faculty member who had an effective role in internationalization said: *“In my opinion, this duality prevents the internationalization of a university. You want to exchange students tomorrow. An Iranian student, say third year, wants to go one term in a country where the system is consistent with us to study for one term. The programs should be so many matches that when he studies the seventh term there and returns for the eighth term, he faces no problems in his education, even the number of lessons is sometimes the same. That is the lesson offered here is the same as that university, the student goes and then goes back to his own place. That standardized educational system is precisely the same with partial differences in parts.”* (Participant 4)

Student admission process: From the perspective of the participants in this study, the student admission process is one of the sub-concepts of the administrative and educational structure of the university effective in internationalizing the university. The lack of clarity and slowness of the administrative and institutional process of admitting students is one of the obstacles that one of the participants said: *“Its administrative processes are somehow slow - from the headquarters to the college is slow. It sometimes takes at least one or two weeks to complete this process. It is too much really too much. We must identify our routes. There are security path that, in my opinion, have their own place and should be done quickly, and the educational paths should not be time-consuming and should be defined in advance.”* (Participant 8)

One of the major obstacles to the process of admitting a foreign student is the process of obtaining a visa, where a participant stated: *“If I want to continue to say the cases still bothering us, it is the visa issue. In visa issue, unfortunately, issuing visas to students is not a very quick process. Earlier, three years ago, the university began to admit foreigner students; the process took almost about two months.”* (Participant 9)

Teaching language:

The teaching language was recognized as one of the most influential issues in the administrative and educational structure of internationalization. One of the most

influential scholars in the implementation of the internationalization plan of the university described as one of the important obstacles, referred to the lack specifying teaching language, and said: *“Imagine, for example, in medicine they wanted to train medical students to contact a patient with a series of services or a series of illnesses. He cannot say it in Persian and the doctor cannot use English because the patient does not understand. What language should the patient use to spoke to him? Maybe, it was essential to think about this issue.”* (Participant 5)

Separated Iranian and foreign students' classes:

Another sub-concept of the administrative and educational structure of the university with a role in internationalization of the university is the separation of the classes of Iranian and foreign students. One of the experts asserted: *“The next issue that will take place as an important international university is that we have one educational system for everyone. For example, suppose this university has a number of students as home student called native students and some foreigner students from different countries. They are trained in one educational system. We do not have two systems. We do not two systems. You will not see anything like this in any university abroad.”* (Participant 4) One of the interviewees stated: *“The purpose of internationalization is to promote both parties. This means foreigner students came to our classroom with our student. Two incidents happened: English was taught for both sides, and the Persian language was taught to both. We divided these two terms.”* (Participant 1)

Source management: The sixth part of the organizational factors is the resource management, divided into two sub-concepts: human resources structure, appropriate force, and financial management.

The structure of human resources and the appropriate force:

One of the well-informed people referred to the importance of the above issue and stated: *“Given the recent development of international education in the country and at this university, and many problems of human resources in medical science universities, it is necessary to explain specific foundations for this purpose, based on which knowledgeable experts with command over English and international law are recruited”* (Participant 2).

Financial management: One of the top executives in implementing internationalization at the university said: *“The next issue is that we should see who is coming here and who pays for it.”* (Participant 1)

Organizational Culture: The seventh part of organizational factors is the organizational culture that includes one of the sub-concepts “internationalization thought.” Internationalization thought: Regarding this,

one of the participants stated: “We are not ready to accept them in our system, nobody is ready. Our colleges are unprepared to accept and they are not mentally ready.” (Participant 8)

Organizational communication: The eighth part of the organizational factors is organizational communication that divided into five concepts: “using the past experiences of the university and the private sector, using native potentials, public relations, informing the students, and inter-sectorial and intra-sectorial interaction.”

1. **Using the experiences of the university and the private sector:** An interviewee stated: “In Shiraz, I expected that the past academic record of the university should be used positively.” (Participant 4)
2. **Using native potentials:** One of the experts in the study stated: “Malaysia is a Muslim country. How many foreign students does it have? There are many students. What has Malaysia done for its tourists? What did we do? Now, we in Shiraz could not use Shah-e Cheragh shrine...” (Participant 1)
3. **Public Relations:** One of the managers affiliated with the international department of the university, with enough information, stated: “We have so much to do in the international development and advertising sectors. Nothing is done, in the case of non-related executive parts.” (Participant 3)
4. **Informing the students:** An interviewee stated: “In the cultural discussion, we must come up with this with a series of promotional tasks, i.e. we really have to work on this concept, and first of all it needs a series of theoretical and promotional tasks, and a series of calculations.” (Participant 3)
5. **Inter-sectorial and intra-sectorial interactions:** One of the members of the university's board of directors, who considered the role of inter-sectorial interaction as effective stated: “They may not be completely aware and it is better to write that the lack of coordination the consular affairs of the Ministry of Health of the Ministry of Science and other relevant ministries should be coordinated.” (Participant 9)

K: Cultural Differences: The ninth part of the theme of organizational factors is cultural differences, with the following sub-concept: “cultural differences between countries.”

Cultural differences between countries: An interviewee pointed to this issue and stated: “Considering the need to introduce the rich Iranian-Islamic culture to students who will come to Shiraz after the process of

internationalization at the university, attention to the culture and customs of these students and respecting them, while introducing the Iranian culture impartiality and maintaining the principles of national-religious culture is essential. Of course, they will be very effective in the success of these students.” (Participant2)

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

One of the obstacles to the implementation of the international education guidelines in Shiraz University of Medical Sciences was cultural differences between Iranian and foreign students studying at the university. Fathi et al. stated one of the main obstacles to the curriculum of universities and higher education institutions from the viewpoint of faculty members as not holding classes that can be used to familiarize foreign students with the culture and economic, political, country history of the country. The reality of the existence of identities, races, and beliefs and in general different cultures in academic environments does not provide the necessary fields and elements in curricula to meet the needs of students who come from other countries and whose purpose is progressing in scientific, cultural experiences, as well as the introduction of their own culture⁸. One of the hurdles to the implementation of the international education guidelines in Shiraz University of Medical Sciences is the organizational structure, administrative and educational structure of the university, one of whose sub-concepts is the teaching language. The lack of facilities for internationalizing the curriculum in higher education and the establishment of scientific connections with accredited foreign universities and the inadequate familiarity of faculty members with the techniques of day use of technology has not been unaffected. This may be due to the low number of foreign students in the university and the lack of change in the teaching methods of professors, which was a barrier to international in the study of Fathi *et al*⁸. In the present study, one of the obstacles to the implementation of the international education guidelines in Shiraz University of Medical Sciences was the structure of human resources and proper labor force. Regarding this, one of the participants stated that, given the infancy of international education in Iran and at this university, as well as many problems of human resources in medical science universities, it is necessary that special organization be explained for this, based on which experts fluent in English and international law are recruited. Fathi et al. mentioned the difficulties faced by the professors in study term abroad (including visas and travel expenses) to establish ongoing scientific communications with professors and specialists from other countries. Moreover, the lack of facilitating international cooperation with

reputable universities abroad, the impossibility of exchanging professors and students with major universities in the world, non-inclusion of the students in international projects, loses the country's higher education elite due to the lack of appropriate conditions for them, and non-implementation of the international studies in Iran were considered as the barriers⁸. Comparing the results of the present study with other studies like Zamani Mansheh et al. (2017), Shafi (2016), Naderi (2011), and Fathi Vahjargah *et al.* (2009) showed that most of the problems to internationalization of universities and higher education in all countries and Iran are not much different. In the majority of universities trying to implement the internationalization of the university, the same cases are obtained and mentioned as barriers and challenges. Only the general policies and strategies, as well as international relations of the university are not stated, which has attracted the attention of the participants (6, 2, 9-10). Overall, the results provided a better understanding of the obstacles to the implementation of the internationalization guidelines given the policy of the country and the Ministry of Health to accelerate the internationalization of universities. Thus, it makes a good guide for international policymakers and university interns to plan for solving problems and advance the goals of the country's higher education.

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