

Attracting and Retaining International Students in Iranian Universities: Pathology, Prerequisites and Requirements

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ABSTRACT

Today, attracting international students, beyond its imported currency, is a determining factor in achieving the strategic aims of countries. In this sense, the internationalization of universities can be a route to Iran's ascension in the world power cycle. With this consideration, the current article has a comprehensive look at the issue of attracting and retaining international students. In this order, the first part of the research is devoted to the context and situation of Iran in attracting and retaining international students, by explanatory and interpretative methods. By considering current problems and challenges facing this issue, along with the pathology of the existing situation, it has been explained and the material and immaterial prerequisites and requirements of attracting and retaining international students at macro and micro levels, in the second part, in such a manner that it has been prescribed necessary structures and infrastructures of attracting and retaining international students in material, immaterial and legal aspects. Finally, by considering the mentioned situation, challenges, prerequisites, and requirements, some strategies have been presented for attracting and retaining international students at both macro and micro levels, by inference from the content of the research. Adopting appropriate policy-making related to preparing the mentioned prerequisites and requirements can be a problem solver, at both fundamental and functional levels. Also, it can improve the situation and procedure of attracting and educating international students, quantitatively and qualitatively, by preserving and promoting the international credit of Iranian universities. The approach of this article is critical, in the analysis of existing situations, and is creative in strategizing.

Keywords: Attracting international students, Cultural tolerance, Immaterial requirements, Material requirements, Instruction language.



Introduction

By considering this matter that universities only possess a kind of internal legal personality, they can not breach the borders of their state sovereignty. Nevertheless, the quality of scientific policy-making in respective states determines the extent of the university activities at the global level. Today, it has been possible for non-western states to act in competition with the leading Western universities. In this context, many non-western countries promote their condition in the international student market. This policy has been successful in East and Southeast Asian countries. Based on this experience, the states in our neighborhood, including Turkey, Pakistan, India, and some countries on the southern shores of the Persian Gulf, are following this procedure.

Based on offered data by The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) with a 60% increase in international students compared to the years between 2015-2020, these students will reach more than 8 million people in the world in 2025 (Hughes, 2019). Regarding Iran, the plan of recruiting international students in the "20-year vision document" that will expire at the end of 2025, is increasing the rate of international students to 1.8 percent of the whole student population (Erudera, 2021). Considering the mentioned context, these questions will arise how is the situation of Iran in attracting international students? What are the prerequisites and requirements for attracting and retaining international students in Iran?

In this field, the internal research literature is little and poor in Iran and the advantage of current research is that using the achievements of English works to fill the void of Iranian research and provide an indigenous model of prerequisites and requirements for attracting and retaining international students in Iran, according to the social and historical context. Comprehensiveness and originality of current research have been achieved by relying on the syntactic method and interviews with academic experts and executives in Iran. In response to the research question, it is claimed that "despite the small portion of Iran in the international students market and the lack of qualitative diversity of the recruited students, in case of providing material and spiritual infrastructure and strategizing according to the domestic and international situation of Iran, it can be realized achieving a proportionate portion of international students, compared to the whole population of students studying in Iran".

Methodology

The method of this research is a synthesis of descriptive, explanatory, interpretive, and prescriptive methods. The applied data have been gathered from written sources and unstructured and open interviews with academic experts, international affairs executives, and some Iranian and non-Iranian international students. Typically, this research is both fundamental and practical.

Findings

The main content of this research has been written in two parts, as follows:

1. Context and situation of attracting international students in Iran: scrutinizing the quantitative and qualitative situation of international students in Iran provides the possibility of realistic policy-making on prerequisites and requirements of this matter. The situation of international students contains both legal and realistic contexts for attracting and retaining international students in Iran. In this part, the geographic distribution of countries of origin of international students, and the distribution of majors that international students choose as their academic field in Iran have been analyzed.

2. Challenges, prerequisites, and requirements of attracting international students in Iran: in this part, prerequisites and requirements of attracting international students have been explained and prescribed at both the macro level, including the internal and global situation of Iran, and micro level, means the situation of Iranian universities. In this context, the infrastructure for attracting and retaining international students is divided into three categories:

- Spiritual infrastructure, including prerequisites and requirements of promoting individual cultural tolerance and coexistence with aliens;
- Material infrastructure: guaranteeing the fulfillment of the living and security needs of foreign students by the government;
- Legal infrastructure: here the problem of legal prohibition of education in non-Persian language, the matter of teaching in Persian and the difficulty of learning in Persian for foreign students, the gaps in the labor law about foreign students' work,

absence of advanced visa and residence law in Iran and finally, lack of legal codes on marketing of international students have been interpreted.

Conclusion

Providing a realistic strategic vision for attracting international students depends on qualitative policy-making for realizing the prerequisites and requirements, and material, spiritual, and legal infrastructure of this matter. Assuming the above conditions are met, strategizing to attract and retain international students is seen as realistic. Considering these assumptions, strategies for attracting and retaining international students in Iran at national and international levels can be offered as below:

1. National level Strategies:

- Preparation of a comprehensive national vision document on cross-border academic and scientific activities;
- Promoting a culture of tolerance towards aliens;
- Recruiting international students based on the qualitative and merit criteria;
- Assuming the availability of economic infrastructure in Iran, Labor Law and visa policy should be revised to include incentive policies for attracting and employing international students.

2. International level strategies:

- Based on the relative advantage, regarding the students of developed countries, Iran should focus on the fields in which Iran has a relative advantage, such as some fields of humanities and social sciences;
- Regarding the students of undeveloped countries, what should be focused on in policymaking is offering financial support and active scientific and public diplomacy to attract poor but talented students.

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