

# *MA TEFL programmes in Iran: change in a globalised era*

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# **MA TEFL Programmes in Iran: Change in a Globalised Era**

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## **Introduction**

This chapter is a modest attempt to investigate how MA TEFL programmes in Iran are changing in a globalised world. Our previous research in this area (Hasrati & Tavakoli, in print; Tavakoli & Hasrati, in preparation) has shown how MAs in English Language Teaching programmes are developing in Anglophone countries, but little or no research has been conducted to study changes in MA TEFL programmes in Iran. In what follows, we will first introduce MA TEFL programmes in Iran, before presenting and discussing different definitions of globalisation. We will then explain how we collected the data for this study and report our findings, making comparisons with the other contexts when appropriate. We will conclude by elaborating on possible extensions of this study in similar contexts.

MA programmes in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) in Iran are among the most popular postgraduate programmes in the country. This popularity can be defined in the light of the international value of English as a lingua franca and Iranians' in-depth understanding of the importance of teaching and learning English in the current times. The number of students in these programmes has exponentially increased in the past two decades from around 50 in 1994, when one of the authors had just started their MA TEFL studies, to more than 1200 in 2014 in public

universities, as indicated by the Postgraduate Admission Guideline published by the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology (2014). A similar pattern of growth for such programmes is also witnessed in the private sector. In line with what is happening in other countries, this trend can be observed in other postgraduate programmes, indicating a 'massification' (Tight, 2004; Morely et al., 2002) in Higher Education (HE) in Iran. We argue that although the 'massification' in Iranian HE is potentially influenced by the challenges associated with globalisation and the responses to those challenges, it has characteristics that are specific to the local context of HE in Iran. In the next section, we will provide an overview of globalisation theories by drawing on the relevant literature in this area.

### **Defining Globalisation**

While there is common consent among scholars about that globalisation is a complex and multifaceted concept, there is little agreement about which definition is most encompassing. One of the most cited definitions of globalisation was proposed by Giddens: 'the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa' (1990: 64). This definition, however, does not capture the multifaceted and dynamic nature of globalisation. Other scholars have broken down globalisation into its various aspects. Porter and Vidovich (2000) argue that globalisation comprises economic, cultural, and political aspects. Beck (2012: 135) argues that "While we commonly attribute a singular, unitary status to globalisation, mostly the economic, it is complex, multidimensional, and fluid, leading us to consider globalisation/s in its plurality". Holtman (2005: 14) suggests that globalisation should be considered in all its dimensions including economic,

technological, and cultural aspects. We would like to highlight the inevitability of the need to reformulate these definitions. Given its dynamic and interactive nature, any synchronic and static definition of globalisation would seem limited and insufficient to capture the evolving nature of globalisation, particularly its interaction with a range of other factors including the characteristics and needs of the local contexts.

Our reading of the literature suggests that the economic aspect of globalisation is the leading factor in this process, creating a context for a 'commercial turn' (Hasrati & Tavakoli, in print) in Higher Education. This is characterised by redefining the role of universities, from social institutions in which academics pursue and produce knowledge to centres that train professionals 'to join labour markets' (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2012: 720) and to act as 'major agents of economic growth' (Tarar, 2006: 5080). This 'commercial turn' is rooted in neoliberalist ideas that "call for an opening of national borders for the purpose of increased commodity and capital exchange [and privatising] virtually every process or service that can possibly be turned over to private capital" (Torres and Rhoads 2006: 8).

We assume that neoliberalist ideas and globalisation may take on new shapes in the Higher Education of different countries as they interact with differing local and contextual factors. In western, mostly Anglophone, countries several provisions have been made to establish offshore university campuses in developing countries (Wilkins & Huisman, 2012), a process referred to as multinationalisation (Altbach, 2004: 6). In addition, a great majority of Anglophone universities have expanded their programmes to attract more overseas students not only as a source of income but to promote an international academic and research environment. Although based on a different rationale, similar initiatives have been adopted in the Iranian context. For instance, Higher Education in Iran has expanded in the past two decades to

accommodate a larger number of students at home, which we assume is partly due to a policy to keep students at home. In addition, similar to the establishment of offshore campuses of Anglophone universities, some Iranian universities have opened new campuses that admit fee paying students without having to take the national university entrance examination. The Kish Island Campus of the University of Tehran was one of the first such universities in Iran. Nevertheless, it seems that this trend has been affected by wider political issues. For instance, the few off-shore campuses of Iranian universities established in the 2000s in a number of foreign countries, e.g. Azad University Oxford Branch, were forced to closure or a minimized activity when the new waves of U.S. led sanctions (Resolution 1803 in March 2008) came into effect.

### **Iranian context**

The rapid growth in the number of universities and colleges in Iran in the 1980s and 1990s, although strongly motivated by the Islamic Revolution and the desire to spread knowledge among the nation, should to some extent be attributed to globalisation processes that foresaw education as an essential requirement for the economic growth of the nation. The growth in HE since 1980s around the world has been associated with a number of key shifts in HE policy and strategy setting including privatisation of education, introduction of tuition fees as a source of revenue in certain institutions, preoccupation with an efficiency model of education, and the reduction of education products to the concept of commodities (Hayes & Wynyard, 2002; Manicas, 2007). While a careful examination of the recent history of HE in Iran is an undeniably interesting and a necessary research focus, it goes beyond the scope of the current paper. Our analysis of the existing evidence

suggests that the Iranian context of HE shares many of the above-mentioned shifts with its global counterparts.

To provide a brief history of the first MA TEFL programmes in Iran, it is necessary to look at the earliest formal teaching qualifications that were available to English language teachers in Iran. While teacher training universities and colleges had been offering general teaching qualifications for a number of years, it was the Teachers' Training University in Tehran that first offered a course entitled "Teaching English as a Foreign Language" in the 1960s. This was an intensive one year-program with an embedded practicum component, which upon successful completion allowed graduates to teach at high schools. The course entry requirements included having a BA in English language and/or literature and passing the entrance exam<sup>1</sup>. The graduates from this course then received a one-month summer course training from the British Council in Iran to enhance their teaching methodology knowledge and skills. In 1973, University of Tehran was the first university to offer an MA in TEFL in Iran. The course was designed for teachers who were planning to move to HE or seeking promotion in their existing jobs. The candidates, fewer than 10 in the first intakes, were selected through a university entrance exam, which included a test of vocabulary, language use and reading comprehension as well as an oral interview. The programme was a two-year course (four semesters in total) that included modules on linguistics, phonology, education, vocabulary building, methodology and French (as a foreign language). It also included a practicum that required students to teach and/or observe English classes at state high schools. The course was predominantly taught by Iranian linguists and applied linguists. Interestingly, the first

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<sup>1</sup> In the absence of any published research on the History of MA TEFL programmes in Iran, we are referring to our personal communication with some of the founders of such programmes.

graduates of this course became outstanding scholars and leading academics in TEFL and/or Applied Linguistics in Iran in the decades to come. After the Islamic Revolution, the Supreme Cultural Revolution made efforts to develop the existing MA programmes to be comparable to their global counterparts. The MA in TEFL was not an exception. The course structure and credit system offered on these MAs in 2014 still follow, to a great extent, the model established in 1973.

## **Methodology**

The data reported in this chapter is part of a larger-scale project on the MA TEFL in Iran, coming from 23 completed questionnaires and two interviews collected in September and October 2014 from academic members of staff teaching MA TEFL in different universities in Iran. The questionnaire data were initially collected through convenience sampling, but it then turned into a snowball sampling when some of the participants distributed the questionnaire among their colleagues. Although we sent the questionnaire to more than 30 participants from 18 different universities we received a low response rate of 35%. With the effects of snowball sampling, it is difficult to say how many universities are represented in this data. To respect the participants' privacy and anonymity, we did not ask for any personal information including the name or type of the institutions they worked at. The interviews were conducted over the phone with two very experienced professors who had been identified as key founders of MA TEFL programmes in Iran.

The questionnaire, which is a modification from our previous research (Hasrati & Tavakoli; in print; Tavakoli & Hasrati, in preparation), consisted of both quantitative Likert scale questions and qualitative open-ended questions. In this article, we will draw only on qualitative data collected in the study as it would provide a more in-



depth insight into our colleagues' understanding of globalisation, and of their views about how globalisation has impacted MA TEFL programmes in Iran.

We put the following four open-ended questions to the participants:

1. In your opinion, do you think MA TEFL programs are changing or have changed over the past 10-15 years? If yes, how?
2. What do you think are the causes of these changes, if any?
3. How do you define globalisation?
4. How has globalisation affected TEFL programmes in Iran?

These questions generated a range of various responses, which we then categorised based on open thematic coding (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 2000; 2005). This means that we assigned a code to each section of the responses based on their content. For instance, a recurring theme in the responses was reference to turning MA dissertations into publications, which we categorised as 'publishing issues'. In further analysis of the data, we developed subcategories. For instance, replies earlier categorised as 'publishing issues' were further subcategorised into themes including 'push from supervisors on MA students to publish' and 'credentialing incentives for supervisors to publish'.

In total, we identified 9 core categories in the qualitative data in the procedure outlined above, indicating a range of assumptions about changes in TEFL programmes in the country. In what follows, we will describe these changes as perceived by the participants. We will refer to the participants by a capital P followed by a number, e.g. P-23.

## **Results**

In this section, we will pull together the nine core categories under three headings, namely *changes from below*; *quality or quantity: which one to promote in HE*; and *publish or perish*. We would like to emphasize that we align ourselves with a constructivist qualitative paradigm (Charmaz, 2000, 2005; Schwandt, 2000) which argues that realities are constructed as a result of the interaction between the researcher and data. In other words, we do not claim that our findings reflect objective realities, but they are our interpretations of the data we have collected.

### **Changes from below**

In order to maintain standards and assure quality, the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology (MSRT) has assigned special committees to discuss and set curricula for all programmes offered in universities across the country, called The Supreme Council of Curriculum Planning (SCCP)<sup>2</sup>. The MA in TEFL programmes offered in public and private universities are no exception, and a curriculum has been in force that has not changed greatly in the past three decades. This curriculum includes the title of various courses and their contents that should be delivered in MA TEFL programmes, but no specific textbooks are suggested. The curriculum includes mandatory and optional courses, and universities can choose from optional courses based on the expertise of their academic staff. The curriculum includes 28 unit credits, each comprising 17 hours of instruction, and the writing of a dissertation worth 4 unit credits.

Though change has not come from the MSRT to revise this curriculum, the younger generation of academic staff joining TEFL departments have been implementing

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<sup>2</sup> In Iran the council is known as 'Showraye Alie Barnameh Rizi'

changes such as introducing new approaches, tasks, and projects. For instance, the formal curriculum for the course entitled 'Research Methods in Teaching Foreign Languages' specifically recommends the scientific method and quantitative analysis as the methodological techniques to be covered in the course, as stated in the curriculum approved by the SCCP. However, some staff, often the younger generation of academics, have been introducing new perspectives, e.g. qualitative methodology, as an equally legitimate approach to enquiry:

The books and papers we introduce as part of the course requirements are quite new, not because of the TEFL programs, but due to the teachers' self – devised MA program. Once I taught quantitative research paradigms, and now I am teaching the qualitative and mixed method paradigms in response to the western tendencies and currents coming into Iran. All the tendencies are not native-born. They are western (P-16).

As the above quotation indicated, these changes are not often in response to local issues, but they may reflect the "winds ... blowing in the intellectual zeitgeist" (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995: 3) of western countries. Although this seems to indicate a one way direction of change from centre to periphery (Canagarajah, 1996; 2002), other qualitative data in our study suggest that some participants were tailoring these changes to fit their local context. For instance, the global drive for production of knowledge has led to institutional policies forcing academics to produce more publications, which in turn has resulted in a redefinition of the MA dissertation as a piece of research with publishable outcomes. We will further discuss this in the section entitled *Publish or Perish*.

### **Quantity or quality: which to promote in HE?**

Another important change is a sharp increase in the number of students in MA TEFL programmes. As mentioned before, admission into these programmes has significantly hiked in the past 25 years from around 50 in 1990 to more than 1200 in 2014 in public universities. This expansion, we argue, is triggered by two factors. The first is the general international trend in expansion of Higher Education, a process we referred to above as 'massification of Higher Education' (Tight, 2004). This process is most probably caused by the privatisation of HE and budget cuts that have led universities across the globe to rely on students as a major source of revenue (Hasrati & Tavakoli, in print). The other factor seems to be the increasing possibility for Iranian students to go to foreign countries to pursue a higher degree, a direct consequence of globalisation. While this is not the most pragmatic choice for the majority of the students, the MSRT has made provisions for Iranian students to be admitted to equivalent programmes offered in Iranian universities, a process that has led to an increase in intakes.

The participants' views were divided on the quality of these programmes, with some suggesting that quality has improved while others claiming it seems to be lagging behind the increase in admissions to some departments. For instance, some participants suggested that the need for student generated revenues has resulted in universities lowering admission requirements:

Things have definitely changed a lot over the past years since there is now a lot of MA admissions in Iran under different names like PARDISE POOLI and

SHABANE <sup>3</sup>in state universities, which has resulted in Azad University getting into a competition with state universities to admit as many students as possible at any cost without considering their qualifications. The final corollary of this competition is that you can see too many unqualified students studying at MA (P-15).

From the limited data and documents available to us, it is difficult to draw any certain conclusions about the process of massification of Higher Education in Iran. However, we assume that the rapid growth of recruitment on such programmes might have been associated with a less strict quality control process and a limited infrastructure capacity for accommodating this growth. Our data suggest that the insensitivity to quality control is seen by the participants in the light of two outcomes: a) an increase in plagiarism in dissertation writing, and b) a push for an expedited graduation process:

The motto is finish the job on time no matter what the content is. I have heard that those who cannot finish the job soon, they lose points on their thesis.

That's why the students are in a hurry to finish the job as soon as possible. As far as I remember, writing a thesis was not a big deal. Reports say that it is worse than what it was years ago (P. 11).

### **Publish or perish**

An important change in MA TEFL programmes has been a redefinition of the role of MA TEFL dissertations. While the MA dissertation is often regarded as a first practice in conducting a small-scale study and improving academic writing, it seems

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<sup>3</sup> These are two examples of private or fee-paying higher education institutions in Iran. Admissions to such programmes are easier as the payment of high tuition fees makes them less competitive.

that most MA TEFL departments aim for MA dissertations with publishable outcomes:

There is less focus on learning and more focus on the outcome which usually gets defined in terms of scores and the number of publications. Publishing has become such a priority for illegitimate reasons that it is mostly considered a necessary evil or a tool for promotion rather than a means of contribution to knowledge and personal and social development (P. 13).

The reasons for such expectations has been extensively outlined elsewhere (Hasrati, 2013), but we need to mention that the MSRT has set guidelines for credentialing and enumeration for publication by university professors. These guidelines suggest that universities provide financial incentives to university professors for publication. In addition, the points-based system for credentialing asserts publications as a requirement for promotion. These factors have created a culture in which MA dissertations are not merely regarded as learning practices but as professional enterprises that should lead to publications bearing the names of the dissertation supervisor and the student as joint authors. Many departments have agreed on a benchmark for the inclusion of published papers in the overall assessment of the dissertation, e.g. capping the top mark if a publication is not emerging from the dissertation. This means that an MA dissertation's maximum score would be, for instance, 18/20, but if the student has published a paper, usually jointly with the supervisor, the maximum mark would be awarded. This is different from most western educational cultures where there is no formal pressure or bureaucratic requirements on MA or even PhD students to publish their work until after graduation. It is also in sharp contrast with results from our previous research in the

UK, where publishing results of MA dissertations was ranked as the least important aspect of writing an MA dissertation (Hasrati & Tavakoli, in print).

## **Evaluation, reflection and conclusion**

In this chapter we have identified and elaborated on three key aspects of change in MA TEFL programmes in Iran. This list, however, is by no means exhaustive and should best be regarded as a sample of changes in these programmes. Such changes should not be regarded as isolated and independent of each other. On the contrary, we argue that we can only fully appreciate the complexity of the changes in these programmes by looking at interaction among them.

The creation and possibility of rapid, easy connections has enabled academics to access recent publications and programmes across the globe, which in turn has made it possible to incorporate new approaches and theories in these programmes in the absence of curricular changes at the ministerial level. In addition, increased mobility has led to more conference participation by university professors who can keep abreast with new developments in applied linguistics and language teaching. A corollary has been to reduce the gap between some Iranian TEFL departments and their Anglophone counterparts. These, as argued before, are most notably personal variations and changes that are being implemented from below.

Rapid interconnections and mobility have also enabled Iranian students to continue their studies in Anglophone countries and more recently in Malaysia and India<sup>4</sup>. This has led to new policies to increase admission to postgraduate programmes in

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<sup>4</sup> This statement is based on our local knowledge of the Iranian context.

general and MA TEFL programmes in particular to encourage students to stay in the country. In addition, Iranian students in foreign countries can also transfer to Iranian universities (MSRT Student Services, 2014). This maybe a strategy to channel money spent in other countries into the Iranian HE system.

Similarly, new global technologies have made it possible for fee-based journals to reach academics, most notably in developing countries including Iran with a context of credentialing and material incentives for publication, tempting them into speedy publications. This has affected Iranian MA programmes in general and MA TEFL programmes in particular by redefining the role and purpose of writing a Masters dissertation.

It is clear that the three changes in MA TEFL programmes reported in this article, i.e. *changes from below; quality or quantity; and publish or perish*, interact in complex ways, forming a constellation of global and local phenomena, an area that merits further investigation. The changes we have identified in this article will most probably be common to other MA programmes in Iran and even in other developing countries, but more research is needed to investigate this topic and to compare results from studies in similar contexts.

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