

# *MA TESOL dissertations in a changing global landscape: a case from Iran*

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**MA TESOL dissertations in a changing global landscape: a case from Iran**

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**Abstract**

This paper has investigated the way the dissertation writing component of MA TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) programmes in Iran has changed over the past decade in relation to globalization. The data, collected from 40 questionnaires completed by Iranian academic staff teaching these programmes, suggest that while change in the content and curriculum has been minimal, some major shifts are observed in the functions MA dissertations serve. The most fundamental change reported is that dissertations are now seen in this local context as an opportunity to respond to the global trend of *publish or perish*. The analysis of the data demonstrates a complex picture of how global trends, national higher education policies and regulations and the local initiatives interact with one another to turn MA dissertations into a source of research publications.

Key words: MA dissertation; academic writing; academic literacies; socio-politics of publishing

**Introduction**

Masters dissertations and PhD theses have been important components of postgraduate education around the world. Although in some countries dissertations<sup>1</sup> are disappearing from masters programmes (Hasrati & Tavakoli, 2015), dissertations are still important components of such programmes in Iran. MA programmes in Teaching English to

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, we use 'dissertation' for masters programmes and 'thesis' for PhD programmes.

Speakers of Other Languages are no exception. The dissertation is often believed to be the postgraduates' first serious encounter with research (Hasrati, 2013) and an important platform to learn about a scholarly area of enquiry, develop some research skills, and practice academic writing within a particular discourse community. Even a PhD thesis is often regarded as "a stepping stone into a PhD career ... not a noble prize" (Mullins & Kiley, 2002, p. 386). These traditional assumptions on the importance of masters dissertation writing, however, have sometimes undergone substantial changes, which we assume are at least partly due to the effects of globalization. The direction of these changes in Iran has been drastically different from that in most Anglophone countries. While the MA dissertation seems to be losing its traditional status in most Anglophone countries, it has been elevated in Iran. We argue that we can appreciate this radical shift of focus in opposite directions by contextualizing this phenomenon within a globalized context. Therefore, a brief introduction to globalization theories is in order.

### **Dissertation writing**

Before discussing the importance of dissertation writing, we present a brief introduction to the role of dissertations in MA TESOL programmes. Providing a brief history of MA TESOL/TEFL programmes in Iran, Tavakoli and Hasrati (2015) argued that the structure of such programmes has not changed since 1970s when they were first introduced in Iran. While the programme typically takes two year to complete, the dissertation component comprises 4 out of the 32 credit units allocated to the programme, and is completed in the last semester of the study over a period of six months. The dissertation, consisting of a research study and writing it up, has been a compulsory component of the MAs for the past five decades<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> This is called *pajoohehsh-mehvar* (research centred)

However, a new non-dissertation track<sup>3</sup> has recently been introduced in which students would take more taught courses instead of conducting a study and writing a dissertation.

Previous research on dissertation writing has investigated the role of supervisors and advisors on successful completion of the dissertation (Belcher, 1994; Belcher & Hirvela, 2005; Dong, 1996; Ohashi, Ohashi, & Paltridge, 2008), textual and rhetorical features (Hyland, 2003; 2004; Petric, 2007; Samraj, 2008; 2013), assessment of theses and dissertations (Morley et al., 2002, Hasrati, 2013) and supervisory models. Dysthe (2002), for example, studied masters dissertation writing cultures of three departments in a Norwegian university and identified three supervision models: the teaching model, the partnership models and the apprenticeship model.

Other studies have looked into various factors that affect dissertation writing. Lindsay (2015) in a case study on factors that help or hinder PhD students to write up their theses, identified four categories: (1) institutional/environmental; (2) supervisory; (3) non-psychological / individual; and (4) intrinsic/ psychological. For instance, motivation and organisation were among intrinsic/psychological factors that enabled PhD candidates to finish writing up their theses while lack of these psychological factors negatively affected this process.

Research has also indicated the role of funding and sociopolitical factors that affect academic literacy (Canagarajah, 1996; Casanave, 2003; Lillis & Curry, 2010; Hasrati, 2013). Jenkins et al (1993) reported how some engineering supervisors in their study wrote parts of their students' dissertations because they were frustrated with the slow process of dissertation writing by their students whom they paid on research contracts.

In the Iranian context, researching MA dissertations is a relatively new research focus. While there are several studies investigating dissertations in other disciplines, e.g.

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<sup>3</sup> This is called *amoozesh-mehvar* (teaching centred)

information technology or medical sciences, we have identified only few studies that are relevant to our work. Feizy and Gramipour (2011), for example, examining the criteria and assessment for marking MA degree dissertations, conclude that MA dissertations are classified as pass, minor corrections and major corrections, with the top category potentially suitable for publication. Closely linked to our work is Sadeghi and Shirzad-Khajepasha's (2015) study that took an analytic approach to identifying Iranian MA TEFL/TESOL students' problems in dissertation writing. The results of Sadeghi and Shirzad-Khajepasha's (2015) study identifies language and style as well as issues with content and methodology of the dissertations as key problems in dissertation writing. These findings of Sadeghi et al. (2015) are germane to our study as they highlight some of the key challenges supervisors face when supervising MA TESOL dissertations. Hasrati (2013) found that 'publication of research findings' seems to be a key factor motivating students to complete their dissertation and an underlying assumption for the institutions to keep dissertation as a compulsory component on their curricula.

We contextualize this study within the broader framework of the 'academic literacies' tradition (Lea & Street, 1998). Similar to calls for EAP (English for Academic Purposes) researchers to pay attention to non-linguistics aspects of academic discourse communities (e.g. Hyland & Hamp-Lyons, 2002), the academic literacies approach does not detach literacy from the social context in which it occurs, but the importance of power-infused relations at various levels in academia and disciplinary epistemological orientations are emphasized. As we will later see, publication of the MA dissertation can best be understood when we juxtapose it with institutional policies and power hierarchies in universities at the local level, affected by push for more publication at the global level.

### **Globalization and glocalization**

Giddens defines globalization as ‘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, p. 64). Porter and Vidovich (2000) expand this definition by highlighting various aspects of globalization including economic, cultural and political dimensions. Beck (2012, p. 135) makes a similar argument by calling for an understanding of globalization 'in its plurality', and Holtman (2005, p. 14) draws attention to economic, technological and cultural aspects of globalization. The establishment of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 1995 (Porter & Vidovich, 2000) and the introduction of the common European currency, Euro, among most European countries are good examples of economic globalization as these are intended to facilitate economic activities across national borders. Cultural globalization often denotes integration of cultures, which has received both negative and positive reactions. Many countries are concerned about the loss of local cultures in favour of the spread of the American culture, a process referred to as 'McDonaldization' (Hayes & Wynyard, 2002; Altbach, 2004). Likewise, there have been widespread concerns regarding the spread of extremist ideologies from terrorist groups—mostly based in the Middle East—to western countries. For instance, we can refer to such threats felt by the USA and its allies that led to the international war on terrorism in the wake of the 9/11 attacks (Torres & Rhoads, 2006, p. 9) and more recently the emergence of extremist groups such as ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) who actively recruit members and militants in western countries using modern technologies afforded in our globalized world. Political globalization refers to two processes that seem contradictory: the breaking up of larger countries into smaller ones, and the unification of countries in economic and political treaties, respectively referred to as centrifugal and centripetal processes (Porter & Vidovich, 2000, p. 452).

From among these various aspects of globalization, it seems that economic factors are leading. The impact on Higher Education has been a 'commercial turn' (Hasrati & Tavakoli,

2015) characterised by redefining the role of universities from social institutions where academics engage in knowledge production to international hubs that train professionals to join labour markets (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2012, p. 720) and to act as 'major agents of economic growth' (Tarar, 2006, p. 5080). This 'commercial turn' has its roots in neoliberal beliefs that call for '[privatizing] virtually every process or service that can possibly be turned over to private capital' (Torres & Rhoads, 2006, p. 8).

Robertson (2012) argues that 'globalization' has come to be associated with 'homogenising' global forces that devour local cultures, histories, and identities, which he refers to as 'mythology about globalization' (p. 191). This interpretation, he explains, was not intended by many of those who initially theorised globalization, and he offers the term 'glocalization' to incorporate and highlight the 'heterogenising' aspects of globalization.

Meyer explains that glocalization means local social actors assert their local identities within global models (2000, p. 245). In other words, global forces function as benchmarks to redefine local realities, identities, and institutions. Satyavrata (2004, p. 211) defines 'glocalization' as 'the effective assimilation of globalization forces within the framework of local traditions, aspirations and interests' (Also see Pan, 2010, p. 320). For instance, 'education for all' is a global value that is being used as a benchmark to define educational systems across various countries. One of the aims of the current study is to explore the extent to which the Iranian context of HE lends itself to the existing definitions of 'glocalization'. An important corollary is that the same global phenomena might trigger different local responses across countries. As we will later see in this paper, economic aspects of globalization have had different, and to some extent opposing, effects on Higher Education in Iran and English speaking countries.

## **Globalization in the Iranian Higher Education**



In line with Holtman (2005), one can observe the influence of the three aspects of globalization, i.e. economic, cultural and political, in the Iranian HE. The economic aspect of globalization in the Iranian Higher Education, similar to that in Anglophone countries, has led to the expansion of HE institutions and an increase in student intakes specifically at postgraduate levels (Tavakoli & Hasrati, 2015). However, while the expansion of HE in Anglophone countries is often motivated by budget cuts that have led universities to turn to overseas students' tuition fees as a major source of revenue, the expansion of HE in Iran seems to aim at encouraging Iranian students to study in Iranian universities so that the money can be invested at home (Financial Tribune, 2015). This has led to two main streams of student intakes: those who compete and do not have to pay tuition fees once accepted to a programme, and those who can afford the tuition fees and enter the same programmes without taking the highly competitive entrance examinations.

The cultural aspect of globalization seems to have been effective in the expansion of the Iranian HE as well (Jahanbegloo, 2004). A main objective of the Iranian HE has been to disseminate knowledge amongst the nation in general (Hasrati & Tavakoli, 2015). In recent years, the Iranian HE has expanded and student intakes have increased to keep as many students in domestic universities as possible. This seems to be influenced by perceived threats of the McDonaldization process (Hayes & Wynyard, 2002; Altbach, 2004), aiming to persuade domestic students to study at Iranian institutions so as to screen out the cultural influences of studying in overseas institutions (Jahanbegloo, 2004). This is clearly motivated by a policy to overcome 'cultural raid', a popular phrase used frequently in the post Islamic-revolution discourse to refer to the effects of cultural aspects of globalization.

The Iranian HE has also been heavily influenced by political issues (Tavakoli & Hasrati, 2015). One of the key objectives of the Iranian Islamic Revolution in 1979 was 'independence' from both the Western powers and the then Communist Bloc. One way to

achieve this was 'scientific independence' which was then materialized in the expansion of HE in order to train academics and professionals needed in different technical, research, and educational sectors. In addition, HE is also considered as a significant symbol of pride and a platform for the nation's scientific ambitions. For instance, one of the priority areas set by the Fifth Five-Year Development Plan of the country is to achieve the second place in the region in science and technology ([http://legal.iums.ac.ir/uploads/ghanune\\_barname\\_panjom.pdf](http://legal.iums.ac.ir/uploads/ghanune_barname_panjom.pdf)).

Another important aspect of globalization proposed by Holtman (2005) is the rapid pace of development in technological advancements over the past decades. New technologies have made it possible for prospective students to contact HE institutions to apply for admission to various programmes, to enroll in distance study modules and MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses), and to access knowledge available to them from around the globe. New technologies have also made it possible for university staff to share their knowledge with students and colleagues around the world and to disseminate their research findings through online submissions and open access publishing.

Our previous research has shown that quality improvement in MA TESOL programmes has been minimal, and such programmes have not been modified to recruit international students. However, it seems that institutional policies have mainly aimed for an increase in the number of entrants to these programmes and a faster graduation process over the past years (Tavakoli & Hasrati, 2015).

### **Research Aims and Questions**

This study can best be categorized as a combination of exploratory and triangulation mixed method designs (Ivankova & Creswell, 2009). We started this study by looking into changes in MA TESOL programmes in the UK in Phase 1 of the study (Hasrati & Tavakoli, 2015) and expanded that to include four other Anglophone countries in Phase 2 (Hasrati & Tavakoli,

Forthcoming). We then conducted Phase 3 of this project by asking pretty much similar questions in the Iranian context (Hasrati & Tavakoli, 2015). During the course of the project we came across a 'rich point' (Agar, 1996, p. 32) on the role of dissertations across these countries and collected more qualitative and quantitative data in Iran to further investigate this issue within this context. Given that our interest in MA dissertation writing was motivated by some qualitative data in Phases 1, 2 and 3, which we then investigated by more questionnaire data in the current paper, the study can be categorized as 'exploratory mixed method'; in addition, as our questionnaire included both closed and open-ended questions, the study is simultaneously 'triangulation design mixed method' (Ivankova & Creswell, 2009). The following questions were formulated to guide the study:

1. In what ways (if any) are MA TESOL dissertations changing (in Iran)?
2. What are the staff views about the importance of writing a dissertation?
3. In what ways do the participants interpret these changes (if any) in the light of globalization?

### *Procedure*

The data come from 40 questionnaires completed by academic staff teaching MA TESOL in Iranian universities, eliciting both qualitative and quantitative data. The questionnaire (Appendix 1), which is a modification of one used in a previous study (Hasrati & Tavakoli, 2015), consisted of three sections. Section 1 consisted of Likert Scale questions, whereas Section 2 consisted of open ended questions that elicited qualitative data. Section 3 asked about the experience of the participants in teaching and supervising in MA TESOL programmes, but as the quantitative analysis did not yield any significant difference between the high and low experience participants in their responses, we will not elaborate on

experience. The project was subject to careful ethical considerations: participants' consent was sought, their anonymity and confidentiality were carefully observed, and the participants were provided with the right to withdraw from the study at any stage of the research.

### *Data analysis*

To answer research questions 1 and 2, we used a number of statistical analyses. Questions 1 to 4 in Section 1 of the questionnaire were first recoded into two categories so as to make them ready for a binomial analysis. These questions came with five choices ranging from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'. The data for this subsection was recoded as follows: those selecting 'strongly agree' and 'agree' were put in one group, and those who had ticked 'strongly disagree' and 'disagree' in a second group. We preferred the binomial to the chi-square test because the binomial is an exact test while the chi-square is only an approximation. In addition, using the binomial is generally preferable when dealing with small numbers of questionnaires. The results from the binomial analysis showed that there were statistically significant differences in responses to these questions, i.e. there was a statistically significant difference between the number of participants in the *agree* group and the *disagree* group. When a significant difference is reported in our analysis, a discussion of what it means will follow.

Item 5 investigated the participants' views on the importance of the MA TESOL dissertations. Each question in this item had four possible responses: 'very important', 'important', 'somewhat important', and 'not important'. The answers to these questions were meant to rank various aspects of MA dissertations from the point of view of the same participant and were statistically considered as related samples; therefore, we used the Friedman Test to explore any significant differences. A significant difference emerging from this analysis implies that a statistically larger number of the participants chose one of the four possible options.

Finally in Section 2 of the questionnaire, four open ended questions were included to collect qualitative data to triangulate our findings in the quantitative analysis. The qualitative data in the questionnaire was analyzed through thematic analysis (Creswell, 2007). We then clustered the codes to identify the main themes emerging from the data. We reviewed and refined these themes until we felt they represented the participants' views. Finally, we pulled the analyses together and matched the themes with the research questions. During the process, we discussed any point of disagreement and resolved complications. In the following section, we will first report the results of the quantitative analyses. We will then use the results of the qualitative analysis to triangulate our quantitative findings.

### *Results of quantitative data analysis: The significance of dissertations*

Table 1 below shows the findings of the study in relation to the importance of writing an MA dissertation. Contrary to a recent introduction of non-dissertation track MA programmes in some Iranian universities, a significant number of the participants believed that dissertations are necessary components in MA programmes ( $p < 0.05$ ; exact binomial = 0.000; 84.2%) to help students learn disciplinary world views ( $p < 0.05$ ; exact binomial = 0.001; 69.2%), understand disciplinary writing conventions ( $p < 0.05$ ; exact binomial = 0.000; 82.5%), and get familiar with research ( $p < 0.05$ ; exact binomial = 0.001; 84.4%).

**Insert Table 1 here.**

Regarding the importance of different aspects of dissertation writing, Question 5 yielded interesting results. The data indicate a significant difference in participants' ranking of objectives for writing a dissertation [ $\chi^2 (8, N=38) = 59.182, p < 0.05$ ].

**Insert table 2 here.**

We can observe that 'developing skills in research methodology', 'developing knowledge in a disciplinary area' and 'publishing the findings' are assumed to be the top objectives for writing an MA TESOL dissertation for the participants, while researching an original topic' and 'becoming a professional teacher' are the least important. It is interesting to note that in a previous study on UK MA TESOL programmes (Hasrati & Tavakoli, 2015), the UK participants were similar to the Iranians in ranking 'developing skills in research methodology' and 'developing knowledge in a disciplinary area' as top priorities for writing a dissertation. However, while the Iranian participants attached a high degree of importance to 'publishing the findings', this was considered the least important objective for writing an MA TESOL dissertation in the UK. This implies that although some features in these MAs are comparable to those in countries like the UK, others are more nuanced and context specific. This point will further be discussed below.

### *Results of qualitative data analysis: Dissertations a new socio-political understanding*

The analysis of the qualitative data suggests that the functions dissertations serve on a master's degree have changed over the years. Before discussing this change, it is worth noting that in a large number of Iranian universities offering MA TESOL, dissertation marks are capped if students have not published their MA dissertation study in a peer-reviewed journal. The change in the purpose of dissertation component is influenced by the Higher Education policies that introduce new regulations to encourage faculty's research-based publications. Like many other academic contexts in the globe, publishing in peer-reviewed journals nationally and internationally has become a requirement for most academic jobs and for promotion purposes in Iranian universities (this point was frequently mentioned in the qualitative data). The publishing requirement, a novel and unprecedented policy in this

context, has encouraged the faculty to search for solutions and initiatives that promote publication opportunities. In addition to such locally-introduced regulations, the data suggested that the broader global academic community, i.e. western universities and research institutions, is in charge of defining and prescribing what research and scholarship are; this, in turn, influences the decisions the faculty make and the initiatives they develop in their local contexts.

In terms of how quality of TESOL programs gets defined, we have learned from the inner circle (e.g. Britain, Canada and Australia) that we should publish; however, like many other countries, especially those around us (geographically), we choose to publish in low-ranking journals because that's easy to do, i.e. a local re-appropriation of international standards. (Participant-11)

One way to interpret the change in the functions of dissertations is to consider the different agents that are interacting with one another to create and promote this change. There are at least three groups of agents in action: a) global research institutions set the standards for research and publications; b) local government/higher education policies re-interpret the standards and dictate them locally to their faculty; and c) the faculty appropriate the policies and turn them to practical applications and initiatives, i.e. co-authoring with students and publishing the MA dissertations in the form of research articles. The pressure exerted on staff to publish is then transferred from the faculty to the graduate students, forcing them to become 'ghost-writers' of the faculty. This situation is often exacerbated by heavy workloads of faculty:

[MA students] have become their ghost writers ... there is more oppression exercised by lecturers and experienced by students. Also, lecturers themselves are oppressed by the dominant [academic] structure in Iran which imposes its own agenda on them and they have to obey ... students [are taken as hostages] because they have got to publish or the lecturers simply don't let them go (Participant-13).

While it is assumed that in principle both the faculty and students benefit from collaborative publications, the publications are compulsory requirements for faculty for employment and promotion purposes. From a community of practice perspective (Lave & Wenger, 1991), the opportunity of joint publications is crucial in the process of gaining full membership of the academic community and it seems essential in preparing students for their future careers. However, a large majority of MA students, in Iran and in many other contexts, would not pursue to a PhD or apply for a research post for which research publications are useful if not necessary. In addition, the compulsory assessment regulation for MA dissertations, i.e. top marks cannot be granted if the dissertation has not been published, imposes new challenges and predicaments to the staff-student relationship during the supervision and publication processes. The less than voluntary collaborative nature of this relationship, the unbalanced power relationship between faculty and students (Bernstein, 1977; Wong, 2016) and the complex decisions involved in claiming authorship and scholarship of the publication are some of the issues that leave the relationship open to abuse.

The data analysis also suggested that dissertation writing is currently perceived as a means towards an end: completing the degree. In addition to the publication opportunity, for many faculty members the dissertation component was seen as another step towards achieving a degree and one step before achieving something that promotes their future careers.



Whatever the purpose of writing the dissertation has initially been about, the key aim is lost. Students write dissertations to get their MA degree. The aim often is not to improve their writing or to broaden their disciplinary knowledge. (Participant 10)

Advancement of technology was suggested as an important player in the change reported by the faculty. The hegemony of the internet, easy access to materials, journals and e-books and the possibility of having contact with the international community of applied linguists through conferences, seminars and webinars were all suggested as factors affecting MA dissertations. The data clearly suggest that while the easy access to the freely available online resources and the possibility of communicating with researchers and scholars around the world have made dissertation writing easier, the technological advancements have generated opportunities for misuse of the resources and for breaking the code of conduct. The following excerpt is a representative of a number of participants' views on the impact of globalization on MA dissertations:

Easy flow of information and exchanging of data regarding curriculum, publications, Internet publications, and getting published through online journals are among the major areas of dissertation writing affected by Globalization (Participant-26).

Finally, some participants had a major concern about the decreasing quality of the MA programmes. First, they argued that the 'massification' of higher education has had a damaging impact on the quality of the MA programmes and on their dissertation component. The excessive number of MA students who are not academically well-prepared to complete a research project or to write a dissertation, and the faculty's heavy workload and hence lack of time to systematically supervise the students and observe the research process affect the

quality of the work put into dissertations. The following are examples from the qualitative data referring to issues linked to ‘massification’ of higher education.

The current educational system may lead to mass production of MA holders who'd claim for high salaries notwithstanding their true talents and individual professional differences (Participant-1).

The quality of instruction is not changing for the better because *these* (referring to a certain university) universities are not concerned with teaching/learning standards.

What counts is attracting more applicants and surviving in the combative battle in the market (Participant -5).

Second, the faculty blamed the lowering quality of the dissertations on students' lack of interest in academic qualities and their focus on certification rather than professionalism that is expected to emerge from the MA degree. Examples of the relevant comments include:

There are not many students who are genuinely keen to publish or to produce publishable quality work (Participant-12).

Whatever the purpose of writing the dissertation has initially been about, the key aim seems to be lost. Students write dissertations, if they write it themselves, to get their MA degree. The aim often is not to improve their writing or to broaden their disciplinary knowledge (Participant-19).

The expanding global policies that demand qualifications and certifications as evidence of professionalism for teachers of English (Barduhn & Johnson, 2009) have stimulated among students a passion for certification and subsequently reluctance towards a professionalism-oriented approach to education. Distinguishing between *sponsored professionalism*, laid out by regulatory authorities to motivate education and professionalism, and *independent professionalism*, inspired by social and personal awareness and interest,

Leung (2009, p. 55) argues that sponsored professionalism alone will not make individuals professional teachers; true professionalism emerges when regulatory authorities promote and develop standards on both kinds of professionalism.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

To sum up, the results of the study suggest that a large number of the faculty participating in the current study believe that dissertations have not changed in terms of curriculum over the past years, although some new research perspectives and methods have been introduced. They perceive dissertation writing primarily as a means towards academic objectives such as 'developing skills in research methodology', 'developing knowledge in a disciplinary area' and 'publishing the findings'. A major change in MA dissertation reported by the participants is that dissertations are now perceived as an opportunity for publication. This finding is in contrast to the results of a previous study in the UK (Hasrati & Tavakoli, 2015) in which publishing the dissertation was neither an objective nor desired. The participants also interpret some of the changes in dissertation writing in the light of globalisation, and highlight the importance of easy access to resources, convenient exchange of materials online, and opportunities to participate in more global academic events. This impact is seen as both positive, i.e. enriching the research process, and negative, i.e. increasing opportunities for plagiarism.

Kumaravadivelu (2012, p. 17) criticizes the way non-Anglophone scholars in Applied Linguistics conduct research within frameworks set by Western-based scholars without exploring the usefulness of their works to their local context. He labels this 'retroactive' research and calls for an 'epistemic break' from these 'western-oriented' concepts to promote 'proactive' research by non-Western scholars to tackle context-specific issues of immediate relevance to their local context. We can extend this argument to other disciplines and areas of

research in developing countries in general and to Iran in particular. For instance, Hasrati (2013, p. 170) reports that institutional policies to keep abreast with global trends and to promote quality in Iran's HE have led to research "primarily tailored toward being published rather than toward helping local practice" and was therefore reactively motivated rather than being proactive to solve local problems. The chemistry academic staff in Hasrati's (2013) study conducted research of interest to Western-based academics so that they could be published in journals indexed in the American-based Thompson Reuters ISI indexing system. Some of the same researchers complained that there were various environmental issues in Iran that could have been studied in their laboratories but were passed over because they would not be of interest to Western journal editors. These policies, encouraged by material and credentialing incentives for academic staff, have led to a culture in which PhD and masters dissertations are often directed to joint publication [Also see Atta-ur-Rahman, and Nasim (2004) for a similar policy in neighbouring Pakistan].

We argue that faculty-student research collaboration and/or joint publication is a much more complex phenomenon often shaped by a range of global, local and personal factors. For example, in the USA publishing a joint paper with PhD students is strongly encouraged as collaborative work is perceived as valuable. In some of Croatia's universities publishing a joint paper with a student has recently become a criterion for staff promotion [Also see Flowerdew and Li (2009, p. 160) on publication becoming a requirement for graduation of MA and PhD students in Mainland China]. Although in principle such initiatives are fundamentally supportive of students' apprenticeship (Vygotsky, 1978) and academic appropriation in their community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger 1998), they have led to redefining universities, redefining valid education and training at universities, and redefining the objectives for dissertation writing.

In most Iranian universities, masters degree dissertations are now considered as publishable research rather than as an exercise for inexperienced Masters students to develop a working knowledge of their discipline. This has shifted the existential reality of dissertations, or what we refer to as an 'ontological change' of the Masters degree dissertation. A corollary of this ontological change has been an 'epistemological change' in redefining valid MA programmes and training in Iran. It appears that in many departments, the Masters students are regarded as manpower for academic staff to conduct research and publish. This shift has not been limited to engineering and natural science programmes, but it has also spread to social sciences and humanities departments (Hasrati, 2013; Hasrati & Tavakoli, 2015). This epistemological shift is often reinforced by capping the maximum score for dissertation at a lower level for no publishable outcome of the dissertation. In some departments, Masters Degree students are even not allowed to submit their dissertation if they have not published, which in turn prolongs their graduation. A dissertation that has led to publication or at least presentation in a conference is regarded as a 'valid' dissertation and therefore is worthy of a top mark, while one without is considered a second class dissertation and therefore the full mark will not be awarded. It is interesting to note that before the spread of globalization was felt in Iran, masters dissertations did not receive much attention and were not perceived worthy of publication.

Tavakoli & Hasrati (forthcoming) report that in a number of Anglophone countries, over the past years dissertations have changed in scope and prevalence, and are often replaced by other comparable components. While alternatives to dissertations, e.g. portfolios, reflective projects, or taught track programmes, are welcomed as a major curricular change in other contexts, it seems that Iranian MA TESOL programmes have not changed much since responding to a local need has been their priority. In other words, while the ontological and epistemological changes are in line with global trends of publishing more, change in

curriculum has not occurred. This is a good example of glocalization, i.e. an activity or action that is influenced by global trends but has aimed at meeting the needs of the local context (Hasrati & Tavakoli, 2015).

Two important consequences of the global expansion in HE for the Iranian HE have been the expansion in quantity and quality of programmes offered in universities and other HE institutions. The expansion in quantity has been realized in establishing new universities, an increase in the number of programmes in existing universities especially at postgraduate levels, and a significant increase in the number of entrants:

The number of universities that have postgraduate TESOL programs has significantly increased over the past decade without a considerable development in terms of necessary infrastructures. These days quality is sacrificed for the sake of quantity as both Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology and many university instructors push their students to wrap up their theses and leave the university to make room for fresh students (Participant-33).

The expansion in quality has been translated in conducting research and publication in refereed journals. This, however, has resulted in the use of postgraduate students as manpower to produce publications. This is understandable in a context where faculty are often overworked, teaching an average of 15 hours a week in addition to other administrative and supervisory commitments. In most instances, this has led to an increase in high quality papers published in very good journals, but the relevance of the outcomes of these studies to local needs have been contested (Hasrati, 2013).

Arguing that globalization is more than a set of material and ideological processes or a top-down neoliberal ideology that impacts education and schooling, Tarc (2012, p. 4)

contends that “globalization operates as a conceptual lens or set of interventions, which is significantly impacting academic discourses in education and in other disciplines.” We believe there is a need for more research to examine the extent to which globalization has changed the ‘academic discourses in education’ in various countries. Finally, given the small sample size of the study and our snowballing approach to recruiting the participants, the findings should be interpreted with care. Further research in which a more systematic approach to sampling, e.g. stratified sampling, and a larger number of participants from both faculty and postgraduate students are recruited would shed more light on how the complex relationship between globalization and change in MA TESOL programmes in Iran are understood and interpreted, and what impact these relationships have on academic practice in this context.

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## APPENDIX 1

Dear Colleagues

This questionnaire is part of a research project entitled “Globalisation and MA TEFL in Iran”, approved by the research committee of the Department of English Language and Applied Linguistics at the University of Reading, UK.

We thank you very much for your assistance in advance.

Parvaneh Tavakoli & Mostafa Hasrati

### Section One

Please embolden or **change the color** of your answer.

1. The MA thesis component is not a necessary component in MA programs.

strongly agree	Agree	I am not sure	Disagree	strongly disagree
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2. MA theses are important in helping students learn disciplinary world views.

strongly agree	Agree	I am not sure	Disagree	strongly disagree
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3. MA theses are important in helping students learn disciplinary writing conventions.

strongly agree	Agree	I am not sure	disagree	strongly disagree
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4. The main purpose of writing an MA thesis is to get familiar with research.

strongly agree	Agree	I am not sure	disagree	strongly disagree
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If you have any other comments, please write in the space below.

4. Thinking of MA TEFL students, how do you rate the importance of the following as a main aim of a Master's thesis?

a. Developing skills in research methodology

very important	important	somewhat important	not important
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b. Developing knowledge in a disciplinary area.

very important	important	somewhat important	not important
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c. Contributing to knowledge

very important	important	somewhat important	not important
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d. Learning to write a long piece of academic prose

very important	important	somewhat important	not important
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e. Becoming a professional teacher

very important	important	somewhat important	not important
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f. Researching an original topic

very	important	somewhat	not important
important		important	

g. Becoming a researcher

very	important	somewhat	not important
important		important	

h. Taking a research approach to teaching

very	important	somewhat	not important
important		important	

i. Publishing the findings

very	important	somewhat	not important
important		important	

If you have any other comments, please write in the space below

## Section Two

Please answer the following questions in as much detail as you wish.

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?

### Section Three

Please answer the following questions about your experience on MA Applied Linguistics programs.

1. How many years have you been teaching on MA TEFL programs?
2. How many years have you been supervising MA TEFL theses?
3. How many MA TEFL theses have you supervised?

Table 1: Are MA dissertations important?

Question		SA	A	Not sure	D	SD
1	The MA thesis component is not a necessary component in MA programs	0	7.9	7.9	42.1	42.1
2	MA theses are important in helping students learn disciplinary world views	12.8	56.4	12.8	12.8	5.1
3	MA theses are important in helping students learn disciplinary writing conventions	20	62.5	7.5	10	0
4	The main purpose of writing an MA thesis is to get familiar with research	15.4	59	5.1	17.9	2.6

SA: strongly agree; A: agree; D: disagree; SD: strongly disagree

Table 2: The most important objectives for wiring an MA TESOL dissertation

Most important aims for writing an MA dissertation	Friedman Mean Rank
Q5a. Developing skills in research methodology	6.79
Q5b. Developing knowledge in a disciplinary area	6.28
Q5i. Publishing the findings	5.18
Q5d. Learning to write a long piece of academic prose	5.01
Q5g. Becoming a researcher	4.75
Q5c. Contributing to knowledge	4.68
Q5h. Taking a research approach to teaching	4.55
Q5f. Researching an original topic	4.50
Q5e. Becoming a professional teacher	3.25