

## Assessment in Education in Iran

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### Abstract

The present paper explains the educational assessment system in Iran. To begin with we will present a background to the system of education and then we will explain its structure and governance. The last section will consider aspects of the educational assessment system in Iran.

### Background: The Education system in Iran

The history of the establishment of modern western-style of education centres in Iran (Persia) dates back to 1851 with the establishment of Darolfonoon – which was founded as a result of efforts of the royal vizier Amir Kabir, that were aimed at training and teaching Iranian experts in many fields of science and technology. After the 1979 revolution, the most important change was the Islamization of the education system. All students were segregated by gender. In 1980, the Cultural Revolution Committee was formed to oversee the institution of Islamic values in education (Derry, 2000). Teaching materials based on Islam were introduced into the primary grades within six months of the revolution. The education system in Iran continues a process of philosophical transition that began with the revolution in 1979. Since the inception of Islamization, the government attempted to establish a balance between the desire for cultural and spiritual independence from the West, and the desire to succeed as a modern nation in competition with the West. In the 1990s, economic demands and labour force necessities created some changes in the attitudes and goals of the fundamentalist administration (Salehi- Isfahan, 2000). Both former presidents, Rafsanjani and Khatami, began to stress the need for expertise in the workforce, cultural awareness of western ideas, and a revitalized concept of modern Islam. This change was most evident in their attitudes toward women. While still encouraged to perform traditional roles in the family and to be subject to severe restrictions concerning dress and movement, women were also encouraged to pursue education and professional development (Mehran, 1999).

In 1998, the freshman class in Iranian universities contain more women than men. Between 1987 and 1994, the ratio of female students to total students in the educational system, as a whole, rose from 38 to 45.8 percent. Women's literacy has also shown significant improvement, rising from 25.5 percent in 1976 to 72.4 percent in 1996—largely due to the concentration on women's education in the society. The role of women in education is a key indicator of the tenuous balance the regime has attempted to strike between the maintenance of fundamentalist values and the pursuit of knowledge—both ideals inherent in the Shi'a faith. At present, more than 60 percent of university students are girls (FardaNews, 2011). One of the problems with women's education in Iran, however, is that while the educational opportunities for women have increased, their opportunities to work outside the home remain limited.

The most impressive achievement of the Islamic Regime has been its Literacy Movement Organization. Though estimates vary, literacy in Iran rose from roughly 45 percent before the revolution to roughly 80 percent by 1996. Between the ages of 10 and 24, that percentage rises to roughly 93 percent. Considering the youthfulness of the population, this statistic holds great promise for the future (Sedgwick, 2000). Iran has also made improvements in overall enrolments in education

institutions since the revolution. In 1991, the number of students enrolled in primary education was 9.1 million, and by 1996, enrolment in primary schools was almost universal. Enrolment at secondary schools and upper secondary schools had risen from prerevolutionary figures of 62 percent and 27 percent to 99 percent and 50 percent. Also, despite the initial effects of the revolution in driving down university enrolments, the number of students in postsecondary education from 1978 to 1995 rose from 175,000 to 1.2 million—though that figure decreases to roughly 600,000 for exclusively academic disciplines (IRPHE, 2005).

The education system of the IRI has faced significant challenges resulting in part from the split goal of education as both a search for knowledge and as a device for the propagation of fundamental beliefs. An emphasis on tradition and commitment may encourage cultural stability, but it can also be a major inhibitor to innovation and development. Teaching techniques in Iran, for example, have remained somewhat stagnant. This reality, coupled with the lack of employment opportunities for many educated Iranians, has resulted in a restive youth population and emigration of some of the best minds in the country (Torbat, 2002). The Ministry of Education also admits to a teaching shortage, particularly in secondary education, caused by a lack of interest in the profession. Other indications of liberalization in the educational system included a slight opening of opportunities for students to study abroad and the reinstatement of a private school system. By the year 2010, enrolment in private schools rose from 5 percent to 10 percent. The future of education in Iran is difficult to assess because the country continues to undergo cultural changes, although the Ministry's stated commitment to decentralization is promising.

### **Structure and governance**

Education in Iran is still highly centralized and divided into various levels. K-12 education and higher education is supervised by the Ministry of Education and higher education in general falls under the supervision of the Ministry of Science and Technology. Primary school (Dabestan) starts at the age of 6 for a period of 5 years. Middle school, also known as the guidance cycle (Rahnamayi), is from the sixth to the eighth grade. High school (Dabirestan), for which the last four years is not mandatory, is divided between theoretical, vocational/technical and manual and each programme has its own specialties. There are both free public schools and private schools in Iran at all levels, from elementary school through to university (Menashri, 1992). The Ministry of Education is in charge of educational planning, financing, administration, curriculum, and textbook development. Teacher training, grading, and examinations are also the responsibilities of the Ministry. At the university level, however, every student attending a public higher education institution is required to serve the government for a number of years, typically equivalent to those spent at the university, or to pay this off at a very low rate (typically a few hundred dollars). The academic year starts in September through to June, with two semesters. Students attend classes from Saturday to Thursday. Teacher Training Centres in Iran are responsible for training teachers for primary, guidance cycle, and gifted children's schools (Shorish, 1988).

These centres offer two-year programmes leading to an associate degree (Fogh-Diploma). Students entering Teacher Training Centres, have High school diplomas. A national entrance examination is required for admission. In order to teach 9-12 grades, in theory, a bachelor's degree is required; however due to a shortage of teachers in Iran, schools have been compelled to use teaching staff with other educational backgrounds. Universities, institutes of technology, medical schools and community colleges, provide the higher education. The requirement for entry into higher education is to have a High school diploma, and finally to pass the state University's entrance exam (Konkooor). Higher education is acknowledged through the awarding of different levels of diplomas: Fogh-e-Diplom or Kārdāni after 2 years of higher education, Kārshenāsi (also known under the name

“license”) is delivered after 4 years of higher education (Bachelor's degree). Kārshenāsi-ye Arshad is delivered after 2 more years of study (Master's degree). After which, another exam allows the candidates to pursue a doctorate programme (PhD).

### Pre-university education in Iran

The precollege educational system in the Islamic Republic of Iran has not changed significantly since Pahlavi's rule and is modelled after the French system. It consists of one year of pre-primary education at age 5, five years of primary education (from age 6 to 11), three years of lower secondary, or guidance school (from age 11 to 14), and four years of secondary school (from age 14 to 18). Students who wish to enrol in a university have to pass the National Entrance Examination. At all levels, the language of instruction is Farsi. In accordance with Article 30 of the IRI constitution, education up to the age 11 is both free and compulsory. The official length of the academic year for pre-primary to lower secondary levels is 10 months, but the official starting date is subject to change. Traditionally, it has run from September to June. Most universities operate on a similar time frame. The grading system at all levels of education is based on a 20-point scale, with an A being worth four points and an F worth zero points. To graduate, a C average in all courses is required.

**Table 1: Level of education and its duration in Iran**

Age	Level of education (Persian)	Duration	Remarks
5-6	Pre-primary/Kindergarten	1 year	Optional
	Elementary education/Dabestan	5 years	Free and compulsory
6-11	Lower-secondary/Rahnamayi	3 years	Mandatory (6-8th grade)
11-14	Upper-secondary/Dabirestan	4 years	NOT mandatory
15-18	Higher education		
18-22		2 to 4 years	optional

### Pre-primary education

Pre-primary education is a one-year period in which five-year-old children are prepared for primary school. In the Islamic Republic of Iran, the main goals of pre-primary education are:

- To contribute to the physical, mental, emotional, and social growth in young children based on religious and ethical principles;
- To develop the abilities and talents of students in order to prepare them for future studies;
- To promote the Persian language, particularly in the provinces, which have different native languages;
- To prepare children for social relationships and cooperation; and
- To help families with low incomes by creating a safe educational atmosphere in which to train their young children.

The curriculum at this level is standardized by the use of two teaching manuals titled *Content and Methods of Instruction in Pre-Primary Centers, Volumes I and II*. These demonstrate appropriate behavioural and pedagogical techniques as well as a general curriculum focusing on basic life skills, natural sciences, hygiene, literacy, history, and religious history and practice.

### **Primary education**

Elementary education in Iran is divided into two types of Primary and lower secondary, or guidance schools. Primary school (Dabestan) starts at the age of 6 with a duration of 5 years. The primary level is a five-year programme that includes the study of Qur'an, Persian composition, dictation, Persian reading comprehension, social studies, arts, hygiene and natural sciences, mathematics, and physical education. A special emphasis at this level is given to reading comprehension. In grade one, half of the 24 allotted teaching hours are set aside for this discipline. The main objectives of primary education are:

- to create a favourable atmosphere for the purification and moral enhancement of students;
- to develop the students' physical strength;
- to enable the students to read, write, and upgrade their calculating skills, and to provide the necessary training in proper social behaviour; and
- to provide instruction in individual hygiene and to provide the necessary advice on how to behave at home as well as in society.

All subjects must be passed in order for students to pass on to the guidance cycle. Textbooks are standardized and must be prepared and approved by the Ministry of Education.

### **Lower secondary education**

The lower secondary or guidance cycle (doreh-e rahnamaii) is a three-year programme in which the emphasis changes from teaching general knowledge to an effort to helping a student discover an area of specialization. Goals of the guidance cycle include:

- To develop the student's moral and intellectual abilities;
- To increase the student's experiences and general knowledge;
- To helping students to continue the habits of discipline and scientific imagination that have been taught in elementary school; and
- To diagnose individual preferences and talents in students so that they may be directed towards suitable studies and professions.

At this level, the subjects of history, geography, Arabic, vocational training, foreign languages, and defence preparation are added to the curriculum. Mathematics and natural sciences are given a larger portion of the 24 allotted teaching hours—four to five hours—although Persian language and literature remains the focus of instruction. In the area of religious training, religious minority groups are given their own special subjects. Students who successfully pass a regional examination conducted at the end of the cycle receive a Certificate of General Education/General Certificate of Guidance Education.

### **Secondary education**

Depending on their tested aptitudes and potential, at this point, students may choose to pursue one of the two possible courses of study, i.e. the theoretical branch, or the technical and vocational education (TVE) stream. The theoretical branch comprises general academic disciplines such as mathematics, physics, empirical sciences, human sciences, and economics. Students in this curriculum must take 63 units of general study and an additional 36 units in one field of specialization. After completing this track, they take the national examinations and, if successful, are awarded the Diplom-Motevaseteh making them eligible for university entry. The vocational and technical branch (TVE), Kar-Denesh (knowledge-skill branch), and the integrated associate degree in the technical and vocational stream involves undertaking the technical/vocational track of Iranian secondary education (Kakia, 1999). The vocational and technical branch students take applied sciences courses designed to train them in the

agricultural trades. Here, they can acquire a trade certificate. The Kar-Denesh track develops semiskilled and skilled workers, foremen, and supervisors who can acquire second-degree skill certificates. The integrated associate degree is a five-year course following lower secondary education designed to develop highly skilled technicians. In 1986, the Ministry of Education listed 30 fields of study in the TVE system and over 400 in the Kar-Denesh.

### **Higher education**

The tradition of university education in Iran dates back to the early centuries of Islam. By the 20th century, however, the system had become antiquated and was remodelled along French lines. The country's 16 universities were closed after the 1979 revolution and were then reopened gradually between 1982 and 1983 under Islamic supervision. While universities were closed, the Cultural Revolution Committee investigated professors and teachers and dismissed those who were believers in Marxism, liberalism, and other "imperialistic" ideologies (Mehran, 1989). The universities reopened with Islamic curricula. In 1997, all higher-level institutions had 40,477 teachers and enrolled 579,070 students and at present there are more than 3 million students at different state and non-state universities. The University of Tehran (founded in 1934) has 10 faculties, including a department of Islamic theology. Currently, Iran has 54 state operated universities, and 42 state medical schools. These are the top choice for students in national entrance exams, and have the largest and most prestigious programmes. There are 289 major private universities operating as well. In addition, there are over 40,000 students engaged in Masters Programmes and 20,000 students in PhD programmes. In all these schools, except for private universities such as the Islamic Azad University system, tuition fees, accommodation and board are mostly paid for by the government. The universities themselves largely operate on state budgets. There are also institutes like Payame Noor University offering remote or online degrees.

### **Teacher training programme**

As is the case in most countries, primary school teachers are trained in different institutions from secondary teachers. Primary and guidance school (similar to general lower secondary school) teachers are trained in two-year Teacher Training Centres, where they obtain something similar to an American associate degree. Secondary school teachers must pass the National University Entrance Examination and follow a four-year course leading to a bachelor's degree. The most important aspect of any teacher is to be the kind of morally and ethically oriented person that children can emulate. Most students attending Teacher Training Centres have completed upper secondary school, but some are admitted with lesser qualifications. In order to teach at the upper secondary level, a university degree is required. Teachers are trained in universities and higher institutes. There are many teacher-training colleges in Iran.

### **The national curriculum**

The educational system of Iran is highly centralized, and the education programmes in the schools are uniform. The programmes throughout the country look much the same as programmes in Tehran. The major difference is that in Tehran there are more facilities and a wider number of schools designed to provide education at a single level, such as pre-primary schools, high schools and pre-university schools. However, all schools are managed within a single system with no differences observed in the programmes of these schools. Since the 1979 Islamic revolution, all the educational materials used in schools have been changed or updated to make sure that there is no conflict with the laws of Islam (Ram, 2000). The revolutionary government recognized that the long-term consequences of the revolution depended on the transformation of the present school children by creating a new set of values. The old system's values and institutions were to be fundamentally altered.

One of the first measures adopted by the government after the Revolution was the de-secularization of the public school system. This was a three-pronged programme that involved purging courses and textbooks believed to slander Islam and substituting approved courses on religion; purging teachers to ensure that only those who understood the true meaning of Islam (i.e., were not secular) remained in the schools; and regulating the behaviour and dress of students.

The grading system of Iran is important to understand. It is based on a 0-20 point scale. The pupils must score at least a 10 to be promoted. The scale is roughly equivalent to the American A, B, C, D scales as follows:

- A = 17-20
- B = 14-16.9
- C = 12-13.9
- D = 10-11.9
- F = below 10

According to Article 15 of the Constitution, the official language and script of Iran, the lingua franca of its people, is Persian. Official documents, correspondence, and texts, as well as textbooks, must be in this language and script. Clearly, Farsi is the national language and is closely associated with being Iranian. In the centralized system of education, the curriculum is everywhere the same. In Iran, teachers are required to follow a curriculum as outlined by the Ministry of Education. Of course, they are encouraged to choose the most appropriate instructional practices (Kikia, 2009). New initiatives are under way in Iran to develop interactive and participatory learning in the schools, but teachers are expected to cover the content entirely without any opportunity to deviate from the approved curriculum. In addition, the system of examinations and all kinds of assessments are powerful reasons for teachers to follow the curriculum as provided to them. The curriculum requires children to engage in religious teaching, and some religious minorities are able to participate in their own religious instruction.

**Table 2: Primary School Schedule**

Grade	Hours per week	Weeks per year	Total number of hours	Course title
1	24	32	768	Spelling, composition, social education, religious teaching, holy Koran, Persian (reading, grammar), physical education, art (drawing, handicraft, calligraphy), science, mathematic
2	24	32	768	
3	28	32	896	
4	28	32	896	
5	28	32	896	

Source: Ministry of Education, 1993

**Table 3: Weekly lesson timetable of lower secondary schools**

Subject matter	6th grade	7th grade	8th grade
1. Persian Language and Literature	5	5	5
2. Mathematic	4	5	5
3. Natural Sciences	2	2	2
4. Religious Education	1	1	1
5. History	1	1	1
6. Geography	2	2	2
7. Arabic Language	1	1	1

8. Social Sciences	2	1	1
9. Arts	3	3	3
10. Technical/vocational education	2	3	3
11. Foreign Language ( English)	1	1	1
12. Military Service Preparation	2	2	2
13. Quran	2	2	2
14. Sport	33	34	34
Total			

Source: Ministry of Education, 1993

Much as in the West, university level studies in Iran are divided into three stages, associate's degree (Kardani) or bachelor's degree (Karshenasi), masters' degree (Karshenasi-arshad), and doctorate. At the undergraduate level, however, there are differences, depending on whether or not the student desires to continue to the graduate level. A student desiring an associate's degree must complete two years of study (67 to 72 credit units). Associate-level curricula include traditional academic disciplines such as medicine, technical engineering, and agriculture. To receive a non-continuous bachelor's degree, a student must then complete another two years of study (65 to 70 credit units). And if a student wishes to continue to the graduate level, they must complete at least 140 credit units and pass another competitive entrance examination. A master's degree in arts and sciences requires two more years of study and other 28 to 32 credits (depending on the programme), including the submission of a thesis and a passing grade on a comprehensive examination. A master's degree in architecture is more rigorous, requiring six-and-a-half years of study (a total of 172 to 182 units).

At the doctoral level, specialized degrees (or professional doctorates) are offered in the areas of medicine, dentistry, pharmacy, and veterinary medicine. These programmes require six years of full-time study (210-290 semester credits). For the medical degree, a student must complete seven semesters of study (121 units), a nine-month externship (95 units), an 18-month internship (68 units), and a doctoral thesis (6 units) for a total of 290 units. After completing this programme, the student may then enrol in a residency programme in different fields (three to five years beyond the doctorate). In order to pursue a doctor of philosophy, or Ph.D., prospective applicants must hold a master's degree or a professional doctorate degree and pass an entrance test set by the individual university, as well as an interview with that university. They must also submit at least two recommendations from former professors. There is no age limitation, except in cases of scholarship (33 years). The Ph.D. must be completed in four-and-a-half years and requires 42 to 50 units. After completing 30 semester units, students must pass a comprehensive examination before continuing to the second phase of the programme, in which they must successfully complete a dissertation and defend it in front of a dissertation committee (Kamyab, 2008). Outside the university system, there are abundant opportunities for postsecondary education, especially in vocational and technical fields. In fact, technical and vocational institutions greatly outnumber universities. Technical institutions offer programmes leading to the Fogh Diplom, or First-Class Technicians Certificate. Such programmes are open to graduates of four-year technical and general secondary schools.

### National curriculum assessment

Because the system of education in Iran is highly centralized, textbooks which are the main medium of instruction across the country are centrally written and used in all schools. Each course at each grade has its own textbook used in every school in Iran. More than a million copies of textbooks are used each year, and there are approximately 1300 different textbooks produced for all levels of schooling. Teachers are instructed to use the textbooks to guide every facet of their instruction. The pupils are supposed to study and understand the textbooks in each course. Finally, testing and evaluation are limited to the contents of each textbook. In other words, the primary vehicle for transmitting the curriculum is the textbook. Textbooks define the content of the examination system in the country. Every year, the national examinations assess performance of pupils in the fifth grade of elementary school, the third grade of guidance or middle school and the fourth grade of high school. The content of these examinations is drawn directly from the textbooks.

This means that teachers increasingly rely on the textbooks to define what they teach. In addition, they resort to memorization of the content of books. In order to apply for university admission, a student must possess the Diplom-Motevaseteh, and take the National Entrance Examination. In June of each year, high school graduates in Iran take a stringent, centralized nationwide university entrance exam, called the Konkoor, seeking a place in one of the public universities. The competition is fierce, the exam content is rigorous, and the seats at universities are limited. High marks in the National Entrance Examination does not necessarily guarantee admission into a university, partly because of the limited number of spaces available to a highly educated and youthful population and partly because of preferential treatment given to soldiers and veterans. While there are no statistics available concerning the enrolment numbers for foreign students, they can be admitted providing that they have a visa and hold a Secondary School Leaving Certificate with a minimum average of 62.5 percent for studies leading to a bachelor's degree.

**Table 4: An overview of principles, tools and assessment domains at primary schools in Iran**

Type of educational system	Assessment domains	Assessment tools	Principles
Central leaning toward delegation of power	Concentrate on Cognitive domain	Teacher made tests , standardized tests	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Giving information about pupils educational progress to their parents</li> <li>▪ Providing proper conditions for promoting pupils to higher levels</li> <li>▪ Determining pupils weak points and eliminating them</li> </ul>

### Assessment system

The assessment system in Iran is beset with serious problems. Some researchers believe that the lack of awareness and understanding of the detrimental effects of traditional exams, the severe lack of teachers' specialized knowledge of modern assessment approaches, and the lack of sufficient awareness of global innovations and experiences are of the most important obstacles to the reformation of the assessment system in Iran ( Ahmadi , 2004 ; Ghosgolk , 2005 ). The results of the TIMSS tests from 1995 to 1999 demonstrate that the current assessment system, common in slaves' schools has actually limited the teaching-learning process (Ministry of Education, 2008). Also, some researchers have shown that excessive emphasis in this system on the final score has caused damage to the students' creativity as well as the lack of exposure to higher cognitive skills (Porahmadi, 2008; Kikia & Almasi, 2008). It goes without saying that some factors such as the low salary of teachers

has resulted in them not showing much enthusiasm for participating in new plans of the Ministry of Education, including changing the traditional assessment system and using modern methods.

## Conclusion

In Iranian schools, assessment of educational activities is the teacher's responsibility, undertaken during the active involvement of students in the teaching-learning process. Continuous and formative assessments are common. Continuous assessment is based on pupil's participation in learning activities such as homework completion, class questions and out of class activities. Feedback is given through sending a report card to parents. Exams are conducted in written, oral and hands-on ways based on the type and nature of the subject matter. Written exams are the most common of all the three methods. Pupils' scores are recorded in special books. The passing score is 10 out of 20. Getting the passing score is the minimum requirement for moving on to higher grade levels. At the end of the primary period (fifth grade), exams are designed and administrated nation-wide. During the academic year 2002-2003a qualitative assessment trial project was piloted at some primary schools (Omission of 0-20 band score for 1st, 2nd and 3rd grade pupils). This had been sanctioned by the Supreme Committee of the education system with the aim of effecting fundamental changes in the assessment methods in education. Currently, after three years of piloting, this project has been extended to all the primary schools in the country (Madandar Arani, Farahbakhsh & Kakia, 2011). The emphasis here is on changing quantitative assessments to qualitative ones and replacing summative with formative evaluations (Hasani, 2005). According to this method, weak and strong points of pupils are investigated based on their portfolios as determined from a report of all their abilities, skills and attitudes (Moghanizadeh, 2001). Recent surveys reveal that there has been less exam stress, improved learning, increased parents satisfaction, and less failing with grade repetition. On the down side, teachers, pupils and parents display resistance to change and seem to prefer to stick to the habitual scoring system with too much emphasis on content. There is also the teacher's lack of familiarity with the project involving time-consuming qualitative assessments (Khoshkholgh & Sharifi, 2007). It is obvious that the project is still in a trial phase which is why it was administered in a few schools only to start with. Further investigations by the researchers emphasize the need for a step by step implementation of the project throughout the whole country.

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