

## The Motivation of International Mobility of Iranian Students in Portugal: Challenges and Limitations in Academia

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### Abstract

This study investigated the possible causes behind the significant growth of the number of Iranians in Portugal. By considering the published reports, it was found that a major part of the Iranians residing in Portugal are students or working in academic fields. A question that arises is why the number of Iranian students at higher educational levels or later academic activities is increasing in Portugal. To investigate this, a survey was disseminated between the Iranians resident in Portugal. The results showed that beside the available scholarships, the immigration policies are one of the main reasons in choosing Portugal. Investments in the educational system in Portugal and incentives for receiving foreign students are additional reasons that have increased the number of Iranians immigrating to Portugal. It was also found that the advanced levels of facilities, living expenses, etc. are other important factors that influence the number of foreign students, especially the Iranians in Portugal.

**Author Keywords.** Educational System, Iranian, Immigration, International Mobility, Academia, Portugal.

**Type:** Research Article

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### 1. Introduction

During the last two decades, professionals and highly skilled individuals have comprised a sizable part of international migration known as “brain drain” mostly from developing nations to developed countries (Ryazantsev, Afzali, and Rostovskaya 2020). Migration in a recent decade is more related to social, economic, political and cultural phenomenon. Migration occurs between a source and a destination. In general, it can be said that the main cause of all migrations is the failure of communities in satisfying the needs and aspirations of their citizens in a broad range (Ryazantsev, Afzali, and Rostovskaya 2020).

In a globalized world, international education and mobility plays an important role, and this industry is growing rapidly. Therefore, the increase in the number of international students, employers for qualified professionals, and international mobility in higher education is an

important phenomenon for students and higher education institutions (Haase, Franco, and Pedro 2020). According to the recent study (Ghazinejad and Khani Ushani 2018), the most important issue in students' tendency to emigrate from the country is their feeling of inability or limited ability to achieve their goals. This condition increases desires which are against existing mental patterns and habits to leave the country (Ghazinejad and Khani Ushani 2018). Higher education and international mobility have significantly escalated more than the total international migration in the last decades (Nafari, Arab, and Ghaffari 2017). Based on previous statistics it can be stated that providing opportunities to study abroad are increasingly valued, and entering into the new professional, social, cultural, and personal experiences would provide a new opportunity in the life of the individual. This increases the adaptation and confidence of individuals in new and unfamiliar environments which causes wellbeing (Haase, Franco, and Pedro 2020). The globalization of the higher education industry created big competition between universities and institutions for education and training (Mazzarol, Norman Soutar, and Sim Yaw Seng 2003). Considering all benefits of international mobility and the education of individuals, also, this system in each country is considered as an important part of higher education and training (Dall'Alba and Sidhu 2013).

Previous studies including the ones mentioned above, addressed factors that are rather difficult to identify the special perspectives, and also, universities are willing to know if incoming students are satisfied with the provided services or not. One of the main questions is to know the key factors that international students consider to choose universities to continue their academic life. However, universities use to gauge the satisfaction with the university experience among international students and how this impacts the experience of students in the international institution as evaluated in institution-specific surveys (Haase, Franco, and Pedro 2020). Growing awareness of students and the fact that they have become more discriminating and demanding in their choice of destination for educational mobility become more important. The degree from top-ranking universities gives a lot of benefits to highly educated students in choosing their future (Zijlstra 2020). This led researchers to investigate what perspectives and expectations of international students consider on their choices (Nafari, Arab, and Ghaffari 2017).

Iran is one of the countries that has faced a large number of immigrants in the recent decades (Torbat 2009). Iranians emigrate from Iran for different purposes e.g., residential opportunities, and also as a way to study, access to more resources in academic institutions, as well as to gain more job opportunities in developed countries such as Canada, Australia, the United States, and Europe to achieve more peace and a better quality of life (Ryazantsev, Afzali, and Rostovskaya 2020). This kind of immigration is also to gain a better understanding of the international education market in Iran, and it is imperative that international higher education providers be cognizant of why and how a growing number of Iranian students are choosing to study outside of their home country and what factors influence their choices (Ghazinejad and Khani Ushani 2018). It is necessary and constructive to identify the key determinants of the mobility of Iranian international students in the development and implementation of higher education policies to attract and retain these students in Iran (Beine, Noël, and Ragot 2014).

Along these lines, some immigration scholars and policy makers believe that adaption practices in the arrival of destination countries are interrelated to political, professional, and economic factors and historical mentality (Karimi and Bucerius 2018). In this situation, institutions play an important role in increasing social variance experienced by international students during their migration journey (Karimi and Bucerius 2018). One of the reasons for

increasing international mobility from Iran is the ineffective higher education system and unfavorable universities' conditions (Ryazantsev, Afzali, and Rostovskaya 2020). Although the number of universities is expanded and entrance examinations are difficult, which discourage students to stay and governments are still unable to meet the needs of applicants who wish to enter free of charge public universities (Ryazantsev, Afzali, and Rostovskaya 2020). Also, lack of curriculum and social environment, weak research environment, weak faculty members and staff in some universities, lack of freedom of expression, restrictive policies and suppression of ideologies of professors and academics increase the dissatisfaction. Moreover, another additional fact which is a factor of frustration and enhancement of the motivation in international mobility is the migration of skilled staff and professors (Ryazantsev, Afzali, and Rostovskaya 2020).

As a matter of fact, in the last few years, the number of international students in Portuguese universities has shown a significant growth. On the other hand, there is no research and information about international mobility growth from Iranians in Portugal which as a new topic attracts attention to investigate further about the reasons. A recent study among Brazilian students resided in Portugal (Reis et al. 2021) reported that some of the main reasons for international mobility are historical and cultural facts, such as the former colonial status, close cultures and the language similarities also combination of economic, and social forces at the home country will effectively "push" students abroad, while the choice of the host country depends on distinct "pull" factors. Another important reason for migration to Portugal reported by other nations, is due to the urban violence. Portugal is one of the safest countries in the world. In addition, universities in Portugal are among the best in the rankings. However, little is still known about the factors related to immigration and especially the reasons that Iranian students apply to study in Portuguese Universities.

The aim of the current research is to study the perceived impacts and benefits for universities and students through questionnaires with Iranian immigrants in professional and higher education institutions and research institutes. The current study seeks to identify the factors influencing Iranian international students' decision-making process regarding the choice of study in Portugal. Also, to better understand and to identify the key choice factors considered by Iranian students and prioritize them according to their relative importance to immigrate to Portugal and enroll in Portuguese Universities. To capture the criteria that characterize the host higher education institutions, a broad set of variables were investigated. The motivation of Iranian immigrants in different areas is the topic of interest which contributes to the improvement of their academic life and reflects in their academic achievement.

## **2. Methods**

### **2.1. Participants**

For this study, sixty-four participants were recruited from Iranian students who immigrated to Portugal between 2010-2021. Participants were voluntarily recruited from available samples among an approximately 1200 Iranian population living in Portugal in 2021 according to Portuguese Immigration and Borders Service (SEF). For demographic information of participants see Table 1 and Table 2. This experiment was conducted in compliance with the rules of the Declaration of Helsinki (World Medical Association 2013), and participants were asked to read and sign the consent form. The experiment questionnaire was made and filled out using Google Form.

In this questionnaire participants indicated the priority of choosing Portuguese Universities on their personal list was based on the first (21.31%), second (25%) and the third or above third

(54.69) choice of the study application. Participants also indicated the duration that they lived in Portugal until the date of current study was conducted (see Figure 1). Participants also indicated the place of their residency, Coimbra (6%), Braga (8%), Algarve (3%), Aveiro (6%), Lisboa (11%), Porto (63%) and others (3%), respectively. The distribution of the current educational level of participants is shown in Figure 2.

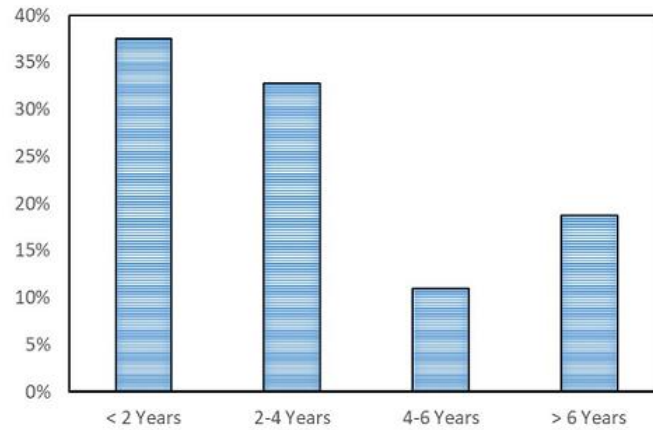


Figure 1: The duration of residency in Portugal

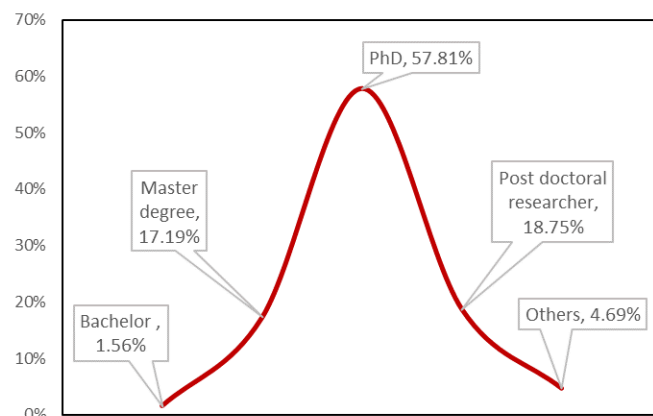


Figure 2: The distribution of the current educational level of participants

## 2.2. Self-report questionnaire

We created a self-report questionnaire to investigate the factors related to the immigration of Iranians to study in Portugal. This questionnaire contains 18 questions about the fundamental factors related to the immigration to Portugal considering both the study and residential aspects. A part of the questionnaire was also related to their experience during their study in Portugal.

Age	Number	Percentage
18-25	2	3.13
26-35	37	57.81
36-45	23	35.94
Over 45	2	3.13

Table 1: Age differences of participants

Gender	Number	Percentage
Male	49	76.56
Female	15	23.44

Table 2: Gender distributions of participants

### **2.3. Qualitative findings**

To investigate our hypothesis and to answer research questions related to the international mobility of Iranian immigrants studying at Universities in Portugal, qualitative analysis was used.

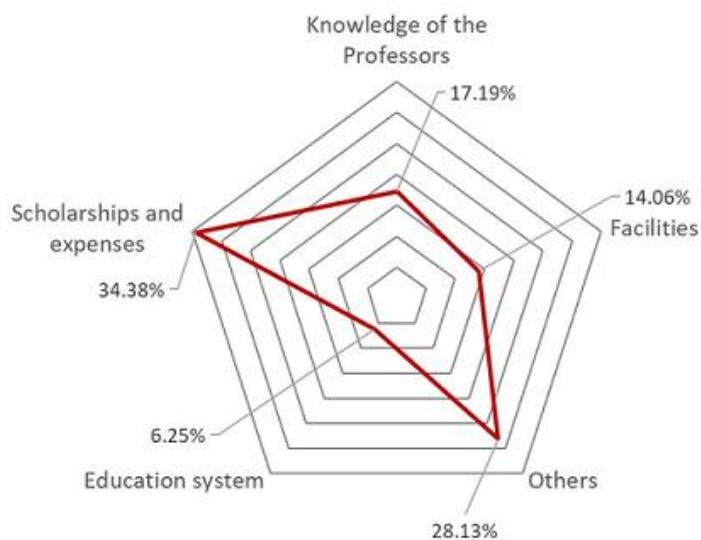
### **3. Findings and Discussion**

This research aimed to determine the factors affecting the academic related migration of Iranian students to Portugal. Nowadays, contrary to the ancient history of migration, biological motivation (biological and finding food or shelter) is not as important as other factors. Another study (Zijlstra 2020) related to the Iranian immigrants showed the overwhelming majority of the Iranians intended to move stepwise from Turkey, in the course of 5-years to Europe. Although, attending different universities significantly affect the directions of their trajectories, overall (Zijlstra 2020), which is in line with our study that shows the interest of Iranian students to Europe. Ryazantsev, Afzali, and Rostovskaya (2020) revealed lack of facilities, political and economic relations are making talents, resources and human capitals to leave their home country. Therefore, internal factors along with the international factors have encouraged the highly skilled and educated Iranians to leave and choose universities in Portugal. High facilities, instruments, laboratories, bureaucracy, and high life quality are the main factors encouraging individuals to leave their home country (Ryazantsev, Afzali, and Rostovskaya 2020), which our results confirmed the same factors like accessing more sources, meeting professional, high life quality that impacted decision making about immigration.

In the same line of previous studies, the five most important sub-factors were, respectively, scholarships and financial support, education quality and satisfaction, education and living costs, economic and political and migration aspects. The results of current study are consistent with and well supported by previous studies (Nafari, Arab, and Ghaffari 2017). In another study, Asadi et al. (2018) stated the major factors which motivated health care workers to immigrate are the educational system, workplace, research problems, gaining new experiences, socio political limitations and personal factors and desire to have a better life which is in line with our results. Also, Sam et al. (2008) stated that the immigrant paradox refers to a rather positive adaptation outcome among immigrants, which in our studies also showed immigrants personally can adapt themselves more easily with new situations. The results in our study highlighted the important factors that affected leaving Iran to Portugal in the last decade. According to the report of our participants, inefficient structure of the community, high difficulties and low facilities for activity for scientific institutions in the country, inefficient executive laws and restrictions made them leave the country. Furthermore, results showed suitable context and conditions of professional activities in Portugal, administrative procedures and immigration laws, undoubtedly efficient execution in the tendency of Iranian elites to immigrate to Portugal for study.

Based on the statistics, the numbers of professional immigration significantly increased since 2018 and our reports showed the majority of these professionals immigrated in the last 2 years and most of them are men and they settled in Portugal for PhD, research positions and mainly accommodated in the Faculty of Engineering of the University of Porto. This shows that probably the University of Porto and especially the Faculty of Engineering gives a lot of attention to the international mobility and quality outcomes in academia and no other faculties especially social sciences which is probably because of the official language in courses and facilities. Considering all the above arguments, participants were asked to fill out a descriptive query to understand the gap of statistics and actual needs and preferences of

international mobility in Portuguese Universities. According to the outcome, professionals choose Portugal due to fast residence permits, and they are offered the same right as Portuguese which helps immigrants to settle easily in the country. On the other hand, students could greatly benefit from accessing research sources, high quality of education and highly skilled professors, and experiencing the international education system. On the contrary of benefits, there are also recommendations from the professionals about universities like increasing job opportunities after graduation and increasing funding sources. In [Figure 3](#) participants reported some of the strength of Universities in Portugal that motivated them to continue their studies e.g., knowledge of the professors, scholarships and expenses, educational system, facilities etc.



**Figure 3:** The main strengths of the educational system in Portuguese Universities

According to this result, it can be said that the impossibility of employment based on specialization, lack of a work platform based on scientific activities and research, increase the available jobs in the market, high quality of Portuguese language courses and intracultural training, teaching major courses in English Language as a common language for science can be taken into consideration by the universities in Portugal. Participants also mentioned that the low number and high competition of scholarship are a big obstacle for them especially when some crises like Covid-19 pandemic made the economy lower for people globally. Students tend to stay in Portugal and develop their research ideas and industries but more support is needed to encourage them to bring their potential goals before they decide to leave Portugal. Another important concern is the difference in tuition fees between Portuguese Language Speakers and non-Portuguese Language Speakers. This also makes an Iranian talent worry when willing to continue their study in Portugal. More importantly, a good department would be needed to welcome and guide new income students to learn about the country, immigration process, tax identification number and the importance of social security numbers, especially how they can reach out to medical doctors when needed. This report is more important when the new income students can't start their enrollment due to visa issues and couldn't receive this general support in the beginning of each academic year.

Despite the fact that Iranians participating in this study have recently emigrated and faced a broad range of difficulties, participants reported high levels of self-confidence, higher quality of life and life expectancy. In some ways this is due to the educational system and life condition in Portugal, especially very polite people and very friendly culture and this social support again increases their self-confidence. According to the Participants' survey, we concluded that

conditions in Portugal are reported to be good for Iranian immigrants, however, Portugal still needs to improve its educational system in some areas to better support and integrate international students, particularly non-Portuguese Speakers.

#### 4. Conclusion

One of the important supports that needs to be taken into consideration for international mobility is having introductory sessions in universities to make students understand the challenges and life changes in a new situation. Having guidance to the educational system and introductory sessions by universities and academic services would be effective for adaptation of students. In this structure, counseling sessions need to be held by psychologists or international services in the academia to have a better understanding of challenges and difficulties of the professional immigrants. These sessions will help the professionals to understand their individual personality perspectives to identify the issues and help them to cope with difficulties. This sense of understanding can identify the way of adaptation in a new environment. As a result, professionals can strengthen the perspectives and values of life and can choose the right action in their new life situation. A counselling center for international students and in English Language is highly recommended as this could improve their quality of life and receive necessary support to improve their mental health.

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### **Declaration of interest**

Authors of this manuscript have no competing interests to declare.