

Distance Education in Asia and the Pacific:

## THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN

*Hassan Zohoor*

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The demand for post-secondary education in the Islamic Republic of Iran has been increasing because of the growth of the population, linked to economic and social developments.

Considering the rapid expansion of the school systems, the population growth, and the achievement of economic and social developments, the higher education system has had to be expanded. To maintain a quality delivery system, new universities have been established.

In 1986, all the medical and sciences universities separated from the conventional universities which had been operated under the Ministry of Culture and Higher Education. These universities have since been administered under the new Ministry of Health, Treatment, and Medical Education. The other universities, as before, have been administered under the Ministry of Culture and Higher Education.

In recent years, the number of higher education institutes and universities has been considerably increased. All Iranian people, as well as the government and private organizations, have always been extremely concerned about the development of the higher education systems in the country. In 1990, the total number of universities including all state and private non-profit universities rose to sixty, and there were seventy-three higher education institutes also in operation that year.

In 1971, a correspondence school was established at Abooreihane Birooni University and then expanded to two schools. In 1977, Azad University of Iran was founded on a distance education system. In 1980, all the scientific activities of the distance education system in Iran ceased operation, and the remaining students were distributed among the non-distance universities and higher education institutes.

In 1987, Payame Noor University (PNU), the only specialized distance education system in the Islamic Republic of Iran, was established. In 1990, this University enrolled more students than any other state university in the country. It is the pioneer for the distance education system after the Islamic Revolution. It provides programs leading to Bachelor degrees.

In spite of the serious efforts that were made between 1983 and 1990, the rate of admission at state universities and higher education institutes, excluding distance education and teacher-training programs, has been about 7% of the total applicants. This figure increases to about 10% when teacher-training institutes admission is included, and rises to about 13% when distance education admission is also included.

The rate of national admission, for all state and private non-profit universities, rose to about 25% of the total applicants who sat for the National Entrance Examination in 1990. It should be noted that the theology post-secondary schools admission is not included in the figures.

In 1990, the total number of students in the higher education system, including all state and non-profit universities and institutes, rose to about 645,000 students. As a result, there were roughly 1100 students in every 100,000 of the population. On the other hand, over 452,000 students of the total 7.4 million population aged eighteen to twenty-four were

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enrolled at the existing universities and institutes. In other words, there were 6100 students in every 100,000 of population in this age group.

### **NATIONAL CONTEXT FOR DISTANCE EDUCATION**

Since the economy and social development are both accelerated by cultural promotion, the essential role of providing instruction to qualified applicants is undeniable. To represent the enormous increase in the demand for post-secondary education in the country, new universities have had to be established. Considering that the establishment of a quality face to face teaching system is more expensive than the distance teaching system, from the perspective of the economy, expanding the latter was preferred.

Despite the steps that the government took in the past decade, the net annual population growth rate has just begun to decrease from 3.8%. However, the population of the Islamic Republic of Iran exceeded 57,000,000 in 1990.

The medium of instruction at the Payame Noor University is Persian Language. The English Language is the only foreign language which is now used in the distance teaching system.

The face to face education system and the distance education system are the two predominant higher education systems in the country. State as well as non-profit universities and institutes and teacher-training centres are based on the face to face education system. Payame Noor University is the only university which is based on the distance education system. The traditional education systems of theology schools is not included in these categories.

The mass media and telephone systems in Iran are efficient, but the telephone is not generally available in rural areas. Since the efficiency of the postal service is very high, the Payame Noor University mostly uses this system for distributing its instructional materials among its study centres. The mass media are also used by the university, but not as major media of instruction.

### **HISTORY AND BACKGROUND**

Establishing a distance education system has had a serious effect on the promotion of cultural and scientific qualification in the society. It creates opportunity for working people, housewives, and people who live in outlying areas to continue their education, it helps to overcome the problems of staff shortage, and finally it is a more cost-efficient system compared with the face to face system. The Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution approved the legal status of distance education in the country.

In 1971, a Correspondence School, founded on the correspondence teaching system, was established at Abooreihane Birooni University. After a while, the Correspondence School expanded to two independent schools, the School of Sciences and the School of Humanities and Social Sciences. In 1976, several new regional study centres, or regional colleges, had been established. The Schools had fifty-six full-time faculty members, in five fields of study, Banking, Economics and Rural Cooperation, Persian Language, Post Services, and Primary School Education. These disciplines had 418, 985, 877, 189, and 706 students respectively. The total accumulated number of graduates as of 1980 was 1779 at the Associated Certificate level and 1305 at the Bachelor of Science level. The major media and methods used in

correspondence teaching at the Abooreihane Birooni University was self-instructional course materials; journals and books, as references; weekend face-to-face teaching, at regional colleges; summer face-to-face teaching (intensive courses), at a central organization; audio cassettes; counselling by telephone; counselling via post services; monthly examinations; and final examinations, at a central organization.

In 1980, all scientific activities of the mentioned schools were ceased. After 1980, the remaining 3175 students were distributed among the conventional universities.

In 1977, Azad University of Iran, founded as a distance education facility, was established. The University offered scientific activities in three fields of study, Teacher Training (Physics- Chemistry, Physics-Mathematics, Biology-Geology), Health Sciences, and Educational Sciences (Environmental, Iranian History). In the development of the University, two other fields of study, Rural Civil and Technicians (Electronics, Technical Chemistry), were anticipated. This University had 145 full-time faculty members, and 1400 students at the Bachelor level, at fourteen study centres.

The major media and methods used in distance education at the Azad University of Iran was self-instructional course materials; self-instructional references; radio; television; face-to-face counselling; practical work; students gathering, if necessary; take-home assignments; and final examinations, at study centres. In 1980, all scientific activities of the Azad University of Iran ended with no graduates. After closure, students were distributed among the conventional universities.

In 1987, Payame Noor University was established. In the 1988-1989 academic year, the University provided about 10,000 student seats in four disciplines, Chemistry, Educational Sciences, Mathematics, and Persian Language. In this academic year, over 8,000 students were enrolled at the University and were served by twenty-nine study centres. The next year, over 10,000 student seats were provided by the University in six fields of study, including the two new disciplines, Biology and Geology, and over 16,000 students were enrolled. In the second year of admission, the University had thirty active study centres.

In the academic year 1990-91, five new disciplines, Accounting, Applied Physics, Geography, Public Management, and Social Sciences, were established. In this academic year, over 24,000 student seats in eleven disciplines were provided. As a result, in 1990-91 over 32,000 students were enrolled at the Payame Noor University, served by forty-three active study centres in various areas in the country. It may be useful to mention that all students are admitted through a competitive National Entrance Examination. Applicants must have a High School Diploma and gain a minimum required grade on the Exam. It is obvious from the figures that the total number of enrollment at the University is fewer than the total number of available seats. There are two major reasons for this phenomena. Students must gain a minimum required grade on the competitive National Entrance Examination, and some of the applicants may not pass. In addition, some of the students, for various reasons, leave the University and do not continue their education.

At present, about one-third of the University students are female and two-thirds are male, and about 61% of the students are government employees.

In order to hold a Bachelor of Science or Bachelor of Arts degree, students must pass 142 to 146 credit hours (depending on the field of study) with a grade point average of at least twelve out of twenty. The minimum passing grade for each course is ten out of twenty. The students may register for 5 to 20 credit hours per semester (17 weeks). The maximum

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duration of study is five years for Associate and ten years for Bachelor degrees.

The University has 185 full-time academic staff members, 641 full-time support staff, and 1655 part-time academic staff. In the academic year 1990-91, 156 different subjects were offered at the Payame Noor University. Most of these subjects utilized self-instructional learning materials.

For the academic year 1991-92, the University will provide over 28,000 student seats in fourteen disciplines, Accounting, Applied Physics Biology, Chemistry, Educational Sciences, English Language, Geography, Geology, Islamic Theology, Mathematics, Persian Language, Psychology, Public Management, and Social Sciences (three new fields of study, English Languages, Islamic Theology, and Psychology, have been added to the previous disciplines). In 1991-92, Payame Noor University will have sixty-two active study centres in various areas of the country.

Recently, the Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution has approved that the Payame Noor University can offer out-of-country programs in Persian Language. In these programs, Associate, Bachelor, Master, and Doctoral Degrees may be conferred.

Payame Noor University was established in 1987 and started its scientific activities in the 1988-1989 academic year. In 1987, the University began to write and to produce self-instructional course materials and books. In 1989, the production of video cassettes was started. Since its inception, the University has produced over ninety self-instructional books and more than video cassettes. Recently, the University also began to provide self-instructional software packages.

The main sources of financial support for distance education in the Payame Noor University are the national budget and student tuition fees. For the fiscal year 1990, about half of the annual budget for distance education in the University was allocated by the government, and the other half was provided by tuition charges, donations from private persons and foundations, and sales profits from teaching materials. The total enrollment of students during the academic year 1988-91 is presented in the following table.

TABLE 1: Trends in Enrollment

Academic Year	Total Students	Increased by
1988-89	8118	
1989-90	16493	103%
1990-91	32523	97%

## **LEGAL STATUS OF DISTANCE EDUCATION**

The legal status of distance education in the Islamic Republic of Iran was approved in the 94th (18th November, 1986) and 97th (16th December, 1986) sessions of the Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution. The Fundamental Law of the Payame Noor University (Distance Education) was legalized by adopting some amendments to, and revising the mentioned Status in the 99th (22nd November, 1988) and 100th (29th November, 1988) joint sessions of Commissions 1 and 2 of the Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution. Some of

the articles of that Law are as follows:

Article 1. In order to fulfill distance education system, central organization of the Payame Noor University is established in Tehran and its study centres are established in different cities in the country.

Article 2. The University is a legal body and is an governmental institute affiliated with the Ministry of Culture and Higher Education and as view of administration and financial rules would be run under a special regulations which will be approved by the Board of Trustees.

Article 3. The main bodies of the University are as follows:

- a. Board of Trustees.
- b. Council of the University.
- c. Chancellor of the University.

Article 5. Duties and authorities of the Board of Trustees are as follows:

- a. Adopting the general policy of the University.
- b. Approving the basic rules of the development plans of the University and proposing termination or abolishment of disciplines or units of the University.
- c. Preparing the annual budget of the University and proposing it to the related bodies.
- d. Determining amount of annual tuition and approving the financial, trading, administration, and employment regulations.
- e. Approving the organization chart of the University.
- f. Approving financial activity statements and annual account balance of the University.
- g. Approving the beneficial regulations attributable to products of the University including Payame Noor University Press, Broadcasting Centres, etc.
- h. Accepting or refusing of donations from private persons, bodies, or foundations in monetary and non-monetary forms.
- i. Approving the internal regulations of the University .
- j. Assessment and evaluation of the quality of education.
- k. Putting forth of abolishing of the University to the Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution for approving.

Article 12. The Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting will assign some of the radio and television broadcasting hours to the University teaching programs.

Note: The broadcasting expenses have to be supplied by the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting and the production expenses have to be supplied by the University.

Article 14: The University will award Associate and Bachelor Degrees.

Note: The University graduates may participate in the entrance examinations of the conventional universities and, if accepted, they can continue their education towards higher degrees.

## OVERVIEW OF CURRENT SITUATION

### *Aims and Objectives*

The objectives of the University are as follows:

- Promoting cultural and scientific qualification in the society.
- Offering a chance to people who live in outlying areas and have no other way of improving and continuing their education.

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- Creating opportunity for people with family and work commitments who are not able to continue their studies at the traditional universities.
- Providing instruction to applicants to acquire technical, vocational, professional, and educational qualification.
- Using all possible facilities for the development of higher education in the country.
- Presenting degree-level courses to teachers and as a result solving the problem of staff shortages at bachelor's degree levels in schools.
- Arranging short and long term updating courses and public training to keep people informed of the latest technical and scientific achievements.
- Accelerating economic and social developments by means of cultural promotion.

## *Control, Organization, and Management Structure*

Distance education in the country is a national establishment which operates under the Ministry of Culture and Higher Education. In the Payame Noor University, there are three main bodies at the policy making level: the Board of Trustees, the Council of the University, and the Chancellor of the University. The Minister of Culture and Higher Education is the President of the Board of Trustees. The Chancellor of the University, who is also a member of the Board of Trustees, is nominated by the Minister of Culture and Higher Education, approved by the Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution, and appointed by the aforementioned Minister. The Chancellor has four Vice-Chancellors: Vice-Chancellor in Education, Vice-Chancellor in Administration and Financial Affairs, Vice-Chancellor in Research, and Vice-Chancellor in Student's Affairs.

The University has forty-three study centres distributed in various areas of the country. The Dean of the Study Centres is appointed by the Chancellor. The budget is distributed among the study centres through the central organization of the Payame Noor University. New study centres are proposed by the University and approved by the Council of Higher Education Development, under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Culture and Higher Education. The syllabuses of the courses are approved by the Higher Council of Planning, which is affiliated with the Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution. The self-instructional course materials are produced by a team of experts under the supervision of the Bureau of Course Production at the Payame Noor University. The academic standards are set by the Ministry of Culture and Higher Education. When about half of the self-instructional course materials of a new discipline have been prepared, new disciplines are suggested by the University to the Council of Higher Education Development for approval.

Most of the faculty members are adjunct professors who work both in non-distance education institutes and the Payame Noor University, and the rest are full-time academic staff. Most of the laboratories are held in non-distance education institutes, but a few are established at some of the study centres. The University has proposed that new laboratories will be established at the study centres.

The sources of financial support of distance education are the national budget (about 50% of the university budget); students tuition; donations from private persons, agencies, and/or foundations; and sales profits from teaching materials. In 1990, about 2.7% of the total national budget was allocated to higher education. The expenditure per student in the distance education system is about one-third of the expenditure per student in the non-dis-

tance education system. The annual budget for distance education for the fiscal year of 1990 was approximately \$9,210,000 (the competitive \$ rate has been used\*).

\* Note: There are three rates for foreign currencies:

- Administrative rate: \$1 = 65 Rials.
- Competitive rate: \$1 = 600 Rials.
- Floating rate: \$1 = 1350 Rials.

### *Geographical Coverage of the Provision*

The names of the forty-three active study centers, in 1990-91, are Abadeh, Abhar, Ahvaz, Aligoodarz, Alashtar, Ardebil, Ardekan, Bandar Abbas, Behshahr, Birjand, Bojnood, Boroojen, Damghan, Delijan, Esfahan, Fariman, Golpayegan, Gonabad, Gonbade Kavoods, Hamedan, Islamabad, Jahrom, Kerman, Khansar, Khoy, Mashad, Miandoab, Naghadeh, Najafabad, Rasht, Sari, Shahre Kord, Shahreza, Shiraz, Sirjan, Tabriz, Taft, Takestan\*, Talesh, Tehran, Torbate Heidarieh, Oroomieh, and Zahedan

The names of nineteen study centres, which will be established in 1991, are Aran, Behabahan, Bookan, Booshehr, Dezfool, Firoozabad, Ghazvin, Ilam, Kashmar, Malayer, Marand, Nahavand, Ramhormoz, Ramsar, Sabzevar, Saghez, Saveh, Zabol, and Zarrinshahr.

The names of twenty-two study centres, which will be established in 1992 and after that year, are Amol, Azarshahr, Bandare Lengeh, Chabahr, Darab, Eshtehard, Gachsaran, Ghom, Iranshahr, Karaj, Khomein, Malavi, Mamassany, Meshkinshahr, Neiriz, Rafsanjan, Rey, Sanandaj, Semnan, Shazand, Shooshtar, and Vazvan.

### *Instructional System*

The major method of instruction at the Payame Noor University is print study units, written in Persian Language, covering the relevant disciplines. With the cooperation of the educational technologists, illustrators, editors, and designers, the academic staff compile and lay out the self-instructional books, which are produced by the Bureau of Course Production, published by the Payame Noor University Press, and then distributed among the study centres. Students may obtain their books from the pertinent study centres.

Recently, the University has produced several video cassettes, according to a contract between the Payame Noor University and the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting. These video cassettes are mostly in subject areas such as Chemistry, Mathematics, and Physics.

In 1990, the University began to produce a few self-instructional software packages in subject areas such as basic Computer Science and Mathematics courses. These software packages will be produced according to several contracts between the Payame Noor University and experts in the field of computer science (software).

The major media and methods used in distance education system are self-instructional course materials; printed correspondence texts, and/or books, as references; face-to-face

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\* Note: In the academic year 1990-91, some of the students in Educational Sciences are distributed between Takestan Study Centre and Abhar Study Centre.

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tutoring, at study centres; face-to-face counselling, at study centres; weekend face-to-face teaching, at study centres; television, only in some of the basic courses; video cassettes, only in some of the basic courses; practical work, at study centres or conventional universities; mid-term examinations, projects, and/or take-home assignments; and final examinations, at study centres.

The final grade for each subject is weighted as follows: The written mid-term examinations, projects, and/or take-home assignments are evaluated up to 25%. The written final examination is evaluated at least 75%. Most of the final questions are set by the central organization of the University and distributed among the students through the study centres.

### *Research Activities*

Since Payame Noor University is a new established institute, considerable research activities have not yet been conducted.

Recently, the Vice-Chancellor in Research was appointed, and he organized and devised some programs for development of research at the University. Six academic faculty members are now working on three manuscripts covering the theme of "Face-to-Face Components in Distance Education."

### *Enrollment*

Total enrollment at the Payame Noor University is shown in the following table:

TABLE 2: Payame Noor University Enrollment

Academic Year	Enrollment	Enrollment Ratio in Distance to Non-distance Education
1988-89	8118	8.2%
1989-90	16493	5.6%
1990-91	32523	9.8%

\*Non-profit universities are excluded.

Since 1988, Payame Noor University has had no graduates, therefore, the total accumulated number of graduates as of 1990 is zero.

### *International Affiliation and Cooperation*

Payame Noor University is a member of the Asian Association of Open Universities (AAOU). The University participated in the previous AAOU Annual Conference-1990 in Indonesia, and also intends to participate at the next AAOU Annual Conference-1991 in Sri Lanka.

In May 1990, a meeting with a representative of UNESCO was held at the University. Educational and professional resources which UNESCO could facilitate for the distance education system were discussed.



### *Growth and Expansion*

Since Payame Noor University's inception in 1987, it has enrolled over 32,000 students in eleven disciplines, and has set up forty-three study centres in various locations. In 1991-92, the University will provide over 28,000 seats in fourteen fields of study at sixty-two study centres. By the end of the first five-year National Development Plan (1994), the University will have enrolled over 70,000 students in about eighteen disciplines at over eighty study centres.

### *Problems and Issues*

All students at the Payame Noor University are evaluated by a written final examination, which most take at the central organization of the University at the end of each semester. The examination questions are based on the syllabuses which have been approved by the Higher Council of Planning. Because of this type of assessment and evaluation, the quality of distance education is maintained. As a result, the degrees which are awarded by the University are accepted by the Ministry of Culture and Higher Education.

Considering the rapid expansion of the school system, and the swift population growth, the essentials of the next stage of development of the higher education systems are to maintain quality delivery systems, to provide additional resources, and to respond to the enormous increase in the demand for post-secondary education. These necessities could be met through establishing new universities, research centres, and providing enough faculty staff in the year ahead.

In view of a deficient budget and the shortage of faculty, expanding the distance education system is more affordable compared with the traditional system. Therefore, the distance education system will rapidly expand in this country.

## CONCLUSION

The distance education system in the Islamic Republic of Iran has expanded considerably. This expansion has a vital effect on the development of higher education in the country. Figures illustrating the number of study centres and fields of study, enrollments, enrollment ratio of distance education to non-distance education, the number of students in 100,000 population, and the number of students in the age group eighteen to twenty-four show that the distance education system has been effective in increasing the student population of the country. Finally, the history of distance education, and particularly the development of the Payame Noor University since the time of its inception, has proven that the distance education system can be an effective way to promote cultural and scientific learning in the society, especially for students in outlying areas.

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