The System of Awarding Degrees in Higher Education of Iran and United Kingdom: A Descriptive-Comparative Study With Focusing on the Internationalization of Health Education

Masoomeh Shahsavari[1], Fatemeh Karami Robati[1], Atefeh Ahmadi[2,3], Vahid Yazdi-Feyzabadi[4], Bagher Amirheidari[5], Aliakbar Haghdoost[6]

[1] *Clinical Research Development Unit, Afzalipour Hospital, Kerman University of Medical Sciences, Kerman, Iran*

[2] *Nursing Research Center, Kerman University of Medical Sciences, Kerman, Iran*

[3] *Department of Counselling in Midwifery, Faculty of Nursing and Midwifery, Kerman University of Medical Sciences, Kerman, Iran*

[4] *Health Services Management Research Center, Institute for Futures Studies in Health, Kerman University of Medical Sciences, Kerman, Iran*

[5] *Faculty of Pharmacy, Kerman University of Medical Sciences, Kerman, Iran*

[6] *Department of Epidemiology and Biostatistics, School of Public Health, Kerman University of Medical Sciences, Kerman, Iran*

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Abstract- The main indicators of higher education (HE) internationalization in the field of awarding degrees are the international development of disciplines and interdisciplinary sciences, new educational and learning methods, new and updated curricula, and their correct ways of sharing. This study aimed to examine the system of awarding degrees in health HE of Iran and the United Kingdom. This descriptive-comparative study focused on the field of medical sciences and its related disciplines. The vital information about the variables was collected by visiting the official websites of the UK universities and related or joint organizations. The related information to the Kerman University of Medical Sciences as a sample of Iran medical universities was obtained from the university's Farabar system. All data extraction steps were performed manually. There were differences in the mechanism of setting up a new discipline and the process of students' admission, diversity of degrees' titles and curriculums, stability of disciplines over the time, creativity in creating competition between different disciplines, the reason for establishing a discipline and the requirements for certification and awarding of degrees in health sciences disciplines in Iran and the United Kingdom were described. Propelling of medical education in the health sciences area towards standard awarding degree systems can be responsible for the requirements of internationalization of higher education.

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Introduction

Over the past decades, the international activities of universities have been dramatically expanded in terms of activity volume, subject scope, and complexity. This change has accelerated in the 21st century due to the globalization approach and unquestionable role of universities in capacity building for the development of economic trends and commercialization (1). Higher education (HE) also be considered as a commercial product in this regard (2). Concerning this, the development of international cooperation between universities and HE institutes is the main axis of this evolution. Therefore, HE supports scientific, educational, and cultural exchanges between nations and cultures by the approach of removing the geographical distance between knowledge and technology, and it also can be considered as the main source of short-term and long-term income in different countries (3). This transformational mechanism requires the adoption of

Corresponding Author: A. Ahmadi
Department of Counselling in Midwifery, Faculty of Nursing and Midwifery, Kerman University of Medical Sciences, Kerman, Iran
Tel: +98 9133979580, Fax: +98 3431325219, E-mail address: atefeahmadi59@gmail.com

policies and actions by universities and HE institutes, which are recognized as the concept of internationalization, and, in fact, it is one of the main priorities of pioneer universities in the world (2,4).

One of the most important indicators in the field of HE internationalization is the international development of disciplines and interdisciplinary sciences, new educational and learning methods, new and updated curricula, and their sharing (5,6), which, while improving the quality of knowledge, skills, creativity and entrepreneurship in graduates, will provide wealth creation and social welfare development tailored to the needs of domestic and international markets (7,8).

Along with internationalization in higher education, the field of medical sciences and health has also undergone tremendous changes. People's growing demands for health, innovation in health complex technologies, epidemiological and demographic transitions and the need for a variety of knowledge and skills in a multidisciplinary approach and a team for providing health services has faced health systems a serious challenge (9,10). This issue requires a change in the field of health sciences education in order to strengthen the flexibility and accountability of health systems in a dependent world (9). The Edinburgh Declaration emphasizes medical education for better health services, and it contains advises such as the development of educational positions, emphasis on active teaching methods, integration of knowledge and clinical skills, emphasis on prevention, emphasis on recruiting qualified students and multi-disciplinary and team education (11). In addition, health sciences should be changed globally given the changing circumstances of health needs of different societies, as well as economic, cultural and even political conditions (12). Changing and growing needs of countries on the one hand, and the advancement of knowledge and technology along with innovation and modification of methods in the world medical education on the other hand, require that our country's medical education programs be tailored to these changes (13). Evidence shows that the general medical education program in Iran does not have a desirable condition compared with the medical schools of the Australian, American, European, Asian, and African continents in terms of Ludwigshafen indicators, which include the status of integration in the primary medical education curriculum, the curriculum model and framework, prevailing educational methods and the role, position and type of graduates' degree (14). Thus, it is necessary to review the HE system in the field of health sciences in order to respond to the diverse needs of the population.

Along with the implementation of the Health Promotion Plan in Iran, the plans for the development and innovation of medical sciences education have been developed as a part of this development in the form of various packages, and it creates a clear roadmap to the country's medical sciences universities. The international development of medical sciences education has been considered particularly as one of the main axes of these programs in this regard (15). Studying the experiences of other countries regarding the characteristics of HE system in the field of health and medical sciences can improve the performance and accountability of health system to the health needs of the population and different regions, and it also can create a proportion between the supply and demand needs in the health system in order to make evolution in different diagnostic, therapeutic and biomedical technologies and the development of knowledge-based economy in this field.

Identifying the mechanisms, structure, and content of academic disciplines and awarding academic degrees' mechanisms in pioneer universities can provide a preliminary base for the development of networking for knowledge and technology exchanges and intercultural interactions (6). In addition, identifying these features can help to coordinate and adapt to increasing environmental changes in societies. Countries can use one another's experiences in this regard to develop an international HE system to make a more responsive and entrepreneurial system, and at the same time, to create wealth and welfare through international inter-university interactions. Therefore, considering the worldwide importance of internationalization, there is a great emphasis from high-level documents on the necessity of this issue in medical education in Iran. The connection between the HE systems in medical sciences with the aim of achieving the goals of entrepreneurial and social-economic welfare generating universities, comparative studies are necessary in order to identify these differences and similarities between the selected countries. For this purpose, the present study aimed to compare and adapt the details of the system of awarding degrees of HE in the field of health sciences in Iran and the United Kingdom.

Materials and Methods

This descriptive-comparative study has been conducted to investigate and identify the characteristics of academic degrees' management in Iran, Cambridge, and Oxford University. The main focus of the study was on the field of medical sciences and its related disciplines.

The selection of the United Kingdom was due to the issue that it is one of the countries associated with the internationalization mission to Kerman as the main pole of the country's eighth region. It is worth noting that this study is a part of a larger project aimed at a comparative study of the internationalization experiences of medical science education at universities of Ireland, United Kingdom, Cyprus, Greece and Pakistan. Establishing a disciplinary in Kerman University of Medical Sciences does not have any difference with other Medical Science Universities in Iran. Therefore, in this study, "Kerman University of Medical Sciences" was chosen as an example of the entire Iran's universities.

In this study, based on three criteria, Cambridge and Oxford Universities were selected as the prestigious universities of United Kingdom in order to compare with Kerman University of Medical Sciences. These criteria were: having a top rank among the world's universities in terms of Times Higher Education World University Rankings, having the highest level of admission and recruiting foreign students according to the key indicator of internationalization, having a wide range of academic levels and disciplines, which are related to medical sciences. The Times Higher Education Ranking System is one of the most famous international ranking systems for universities, which considers 13 functional indicators in order to accomplish comprehensive and balanced comparisons. These indicators are divided into five groups: education, research, citations, industrial income and international reputation (16).

The main variables studied in this study were: a) the mechanism for establishing a new discipline in the HE system, b) the educational levels, their characteristics and the number of medical sciences students and entry requirements, c) the number and the variety of disciplines (common and non-common disciplines). The vital information about these variables was gathered through the official websites of the UK universities. Information related to Kerman University of Medical Sciences was also obtained from the university's Farabar system.

An information form was made proportional to the main variables, and the information of each variable was extracted from the related websites through the removal of unnecessary and unrelated information in each studied university.

The information of this form was prepared as comparative tables in relation to each variable, and the main similarities and differences of each variable in the studied universities were extracted. All data extraction steps were accomplished manually.

Results

This section describes the variables in each of the studied universities:

The mechanism of establishing a new academic discipline in HE

As the results of Table 1 show, in Iran, the decision to establish a new academic discipline is the responsibility of the Supreme Council for Planning (SCP) and its subcommittees. Universities can apply for establishing a new academic discipline based on their interests. If universities meet the criteria for establishing a new discipline, the SCP will agree with its creation, and then that academic discipline will be established. In universities of medical sciences, the Council for the Development of Medical and Health Sciences Universities also adopts criteria for the establishment of basic medical sciences disciplines in master and doctoral degrees. Nevertheless, the United Kingdom's education system at an advanced educational level is central and the board of trustees. Before establishing a discipline, universities consider students' interests, and they also take into account the working conditions of each discipline after graduating; and consequently, they establish new academic disciplines based on the mentioned issues.

Educational degrees, their characteristics and the number of medical sciences students, and entry conditions

The education period consists of a set of coordinated, coherent, and interdependent courses for a discipline, which is provided to a student within a specific system and in a given period of time in order to eventually lead to receiving one of the common academic degrees.

Education, in all Iran's universities, is based on the credit system. In the credit system, the value of each course is measured by the number of its unit, and the student's admittance or non-admittance in a course is limited only to that course. Theoretical, practical/laboratory, internship/workshop units are taught based on the plan, which was approved by SCP. The portion of units is variable based on the disciplines (theoretical, practical, and skillful). All universities of medical sciences are required to implement the curriculum approved by the SCP. All universities of medical sciences with certification boards or without it and affiliated organizations to the MOHME will be allowed to present new courses instead of optional ones.

Table 1. The mechanism of establishing a new discipline in the HE of Iran and the UK (see the appendix)

University's name	Academic decision-making authorities	National decision-making authorities	Centralized/Decentralized	The cause of establishing a disciplinary	Non-academic partners (stakeholder)	Trustee of the medical sciences field
Kerman University of Medical Sciences	University's broad of trustees	1. Educational deputy 2. High Council for Planning 3. Expand Council	Centralized	Student-centered	--	Ministry of Health and Medical Education
Oxford University	--	--	Decentralized	Market-centered	1. NHS Trust 2. Biomedical Research 3. NIH OxCam 4. JENNER 5. AHSN 6. Wellcome Trust (WT) 7. Pirbright Institute 8. Scripps	1. Ministry of Health and Medical Education 2. Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology
Cambridge University	--	--	Decentralized	Market-centered	1. Animal Health Trust 2. Babraham Institute 3. Cambridge Crystallographic Data Centre 4. European Bioinformatics Institute 5. Hamilton Kerr Institute 6. MRC Laboratory of Molecular Biology 7. National Institute of Agricultural Botany 8. Wellcome Trust Sanger Institute	1. Ministry of Health and Medical Education 2. Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology

The HE system in the United Kingdom, like most European Union countries, is based on bachelor, master, and doctoral degrees (LMD: License, Master, and Doctoral). The basis of awarding a degree based on this common system is the number of studied semesters and passing units from the beginning of the HE period. This educational system has been established in order to unify the education system in Europe and other areas in the world. The accomplished reformation is based on the formation of three main levels, which are bachelor, master, and doctoral degrees (10).

This European academic new atmosphere facility the relocation of students, professors, and researchers in Europe and beyond, and it also increases the ability of student attraction in the European countries worldwide (10). An international assessment of academic degrees and training courses in the European Union is done based on the common courses, which is called "The European credit transfer and accumulation system (ECTS)." The passing units for the students who want to continue their education in several European HE institutions are able to store or transfer. Each HE institute applied its own criteria for admitting students based on students' academic background and requested discipline. This issue will lead to continuity of the uniform development and quality assurance of training level. Accordingly, each 25-30 hours of a theoretical course of practical work is considered as one credit, and in this criterion, the concept of the score is categorized into five categories: A (10% superior), B (next 25%), C (next 30%), D (next 25% next) and E (next 10%).

The medical HE system in Iran is divided into eight different levels: Associate degree, Bachelor's degree (continuous/discontinuous), Master's degree, Doctor of Medicine, Residency, Fellowship, Subspecialist Training, and MPH, while in the United Kingdom, there are five degrees, which are undergraduate, postgraduate, doctoral, graduate diploma and Certificate/Award.

The total number of students in Kerman University of medical sciences were 32 associate degree students, 2884 continuous bachelor, 398 discontinuous bachelors, 1357 discontinuous master, 4179 MD, 433 Ph.D., 58 Ph.D. by research, 118 residency, 855 clinical residency, 10 subspecialists, 1fellowship, and 47 MPH students.

The University of Cambridge, in 2017, had 1741 undergraduate students, 703 Ph.D., 1 MRes+PhD, 90 MPhil, and 34 MSc students. The total number of students in MD, MV, and PGCert were unclear.

In 2017, Oxford University had 2061 undergraduate students and 1604 postgraduate students, 1390 students of whom were studying research disciplines, and 214 students of whom were studying educational disciplines.

Table 2. Educational levels, characteristics, and entry conditions in Iran and UK

Name	Academic level	Level description	Period duration	Entry conditions[1]		Graduation conditions (Awarding degree)
				General	Special	
Kerman University of Medical Sciences	Associate	1.64-68 units 2. Evaluation based on the level of presence and class activity, the accomplishment of educational activities, and the results of mid-term and final exams 3. Professor is the source of student evaluation in each course	Maximum 3 years	1. Admission to entrance exam 2. Having a physical and mental health 3. Authorized to study in accordance with current laws and regulations of the country and to have general conditions of entry into higher education	1. Having a certificate of the end of high school (old system) / pre-university course (new system) 2. Providing service obligation in accordance with the laws of free education/ payment of tuition based on the tariffs and regulations of relevant authorities.	
	Bachelor (Continuous/ discontinuous)	Continuous: 130 units Discontinuous: 65 units	Continuous: Up to 6 years (daily students) and up to 7 years (night students) Discontinuous: Up to 3 years (daily students) and up to 3.5 years (night students)	Similar to entry conditions of associate degree	Having an associate degree to enter to discontinuous bachelor degree	
	Discontinuous master	1. By considering thesis units based on the disciplines, at least 78 units and a maximum of 32 units 2. The number of thesis units for all disciplines is based on the plan of the High Council for planning, and it changes between 4-10 units	3 years	Similar to entry conditions of associate degree	1. Having a bachelor degree/higher degree in accordance with the required discipline 2. Not studying simultaneously at the same university/other universities or educational/research institutes	
	General doctorate		10 years	Similar to entry conditions of associate degree	Similar to entry conditions of associate degree	
	Professional doctorate (Ph.D.)	A coordinated collection of educational and research activities	4.5 years	Similar to the 2nd and 3rd terms of admission to associate	1. Having the certificate of master's degree/ general medical doctoral/higher degree in accordance with the required discipline 2. Success in the English language test 3. Admission to the special test for entering PhD 4. Not studying simultaneously at the same university/other universities or educational/research institutes	
	Ph.D. by research	Full-time education		Having general conditions to enter higher education	1. Having no legal prohibition of continuing education in terms of conscription 2. Having the certificate of the general doctorate (medicine, dentistry, and pharmacy)/professional doctorate of veterinary, professional doctorate of laboratory sciences, and master's degree 3.having at least two original research papers published in valid scientific and research journals, which were indexed in ISI /PubMed indexes as the first author/responsible 4.Not studying simultaneously at the specialized doctorate/clinical specialty (certificate or specialized certificate) or higher courses in all educational and research institutes of the country 5.Success in the English language test 6.Success in the interview	

Cont. table 2

	Residency	The residency of clinical specialty disciplines after successfully passing the residency exam (M.D)		1. The confirmation of general qualification in accordance with the rules of the High Council for Cultural Revolution 2. Having the certificate of conscription end/ exemption	1. Having the certificate of general doctorate 2. The maximum age of admission to this course (40 years up to the end of September of related academic- year) 3. Having no professional maim[2] based on the discipline 4. Not studying simultaneously at one of the medical specialty disciplines, Ph.D./Not having the residency degree 5. Admission in the residency exam	
	Sub-specialty			1. The confirmation of general qualification in accordance with the rules of the High Council for Cultural Revolution	1. Admission to residency exam 2. Having the specialty certificate of prerequisite discipline/ the certificate of its acceptance from universities/centers approved the by Ministry of Health and Medical Education 3. The maximum age of admission to this course is 45 years for formal faculty members, and for other participants is 42 years up to the end of September of next academic year) 4. Having no professional maim based on the discipline 5. Not studying simultaneously at one of the medical sub-specialty disciplines, fellowships, and PhD	
	Fellowship	A medical clinical specialty supplementary course		Having the certificate of conscription end/ exemption	1. Admission to fellowship exam 2. Having the specialty certificate of prerequisite discipline/the certificate of its acceptance from universities/centers approved the by Ministry of Health and Medical Education 3. The maximum age of admission to this course is 45 years for formal faculty members, and for other participants is 42 years up to the end of September of next academic year) 4. Having no professional maim based on the discipline 5. Not studying simultaneously at one of the medical sub-specialty disciplines, fellowships, and PhD	
	MPH	A course of public health management for the empowerment of family physicians		1. The confirmation of general qualification in accordance with the rules of the High Council for Cultural Revolution 2. Having the certificate of conscription end/ exemption 3. Three years of work experience as a family physician 4. Passing at least 30 hours of in-service training courses approved by the health deputy in the field of family physician management and service packages	1.Having the certificate of general doctorate 2.Not studying at one of the medical specialty disciplines and PhD at the time of enrollment and during studying	Qualified applicants with the degree of general medicine and passing the relevant educational units and admission to the formative and final exams can receive the certificate which is equivalent of a master degree in this discipline
Oxford University	Undergraduate	1. The first to third year consists of educational courses and lectures, evaluation 2. About 6 lectures, 1 or 2 courses, and a practical class, research project, writing a library thesis, and conducting independent researches 3.9th semester: approximately two revision lectures or education, final exams 4. Awarding a bachelor degree in all undergraduate degrees	3 years (9 semesters)			

Cont. table 2

Cambridge University	Postgraduate	This level usually presents as educational/research	1 year (full-time students) 2 years (part-time students)		
	Doctoral	1. It is a research-level 2. Students should present thesis	3-4 years (full-time students) 6-8 years (part-time students)		
	Diploma	Similar to Cambridge University			
	Undergraduate	1. Dividing this level into "sections." 2. The period of each section is ½ years 3. Reciving a number of papers (subjects, topics) in each section 4. Some of the papers are compulsory, and some of them are optional 5. Awarding a bachelor degree in all undergraduate degrees 6. All undergraduate degrees=full-time educational courses 7. The compulsory presence of all students typically for the full period of their educational course in Cambridge University (expect one year abroad, which is a part of their educational course) 8. There are some summary evaluations for the papers that were conducted at the end of each section, which together determine the result of each section 9. Each sector of the educational course is independent and receives a separate result 10.Lack of implementation of a credit system, as a result of the absence of average results of section for the final results 11.Failure to specify a general class (first, 2.1 etc) with a degree certificate 12.Issued a scientific copy to accompany the certificate containing titles and scores received for each article and class received for each section			1.Admission to both sections' exams for graduating with an honor degree 2.Written exams, the main form of a summary evaluation 3.There are usually between 4 to 8 exams for each section 4.In many scientific subjects, evaluation a certain part of practical work 5.Most educational courses have a research project/thesis (surplus/ as an alternative to a written exam) 6.Determining the results of evaluations usually between 4 to 8 weeks after the exams/sending 7.Apart from professional qualification exams in medicine and veterinary, there is usually no opportunities to re-test any kinds of exam
	Postgraduate	This level usually presents as educational/research	1year (full-time students) 2 years (part-time students)		
	Doctoral	1. It is a research-level 2. Students should present thesis	3-4 years (full-time students) 5-7 years (part-time students)		

Cont table 2

Diploma	1. Undergraduate diploma (at the same level as higher education diploma) and advanced diploma (equivalent to graduate diploma) courses 2. Graduate diploma at the same level as bachelor degree, which usually obtained by those who have already earned a degree 3. Postgraduate diploma is a degree at the same level as a postgraduate degree, but it usually requires less period of time for completion, and it will be obtained after an academic degree	1 year (Undergraduate diploma) 1year (Part-time graduate diploma)
Certificate/Award		

The number and variety of disciplines (common and non-common disciplines)

Kerman University of Medical Sciences had 3 associate disciplines, 21 bachelors (15 continuous bachelors and 6 discontinuous bachelors), 35 discontinuous masters, 3 MD, 24 Ph.D., 8 Ph.D. by research, 8 Residency, 19 clinical residencies, 1 subspecialty, 1 fellowship, 7 MPH. Oxford University has 20 departments at the undergraduate, postgraduate, and doctoral levels. It had 4 undergraduate disciplines, 22 postgraduate, 29 doctoral, 7 PGCert, 3 PGDip, and 1 MSc. The University of Cambridge had 3 undergraduate disciplines, 33 doctoral (30 Ph.D., 1 MRes+PhD, 1 MD, and 1 MV), 28 Master's (27 MPhil and 1 MSt), and 2 Certificate/Award (PGCert).

Kerman University of Medical Sciences had 115 disciplines in the field of medical sciences. Disciplines are in the field of basic sciences, disciplines in the field of clinical sciences, and disciplines in the field of humanities. Oxford University had 20 Department and disciplines in the field of basic sciences and clinical sciences, respectively. Cambridge University had 56 disciplines in the field of basic sciences and clinical sciences, respectively.

Discussion

The results of this study have shown that the Kerman University of Medical Sciences, as a sample of all Iranian Universities of Medical Sciences, has 115 disciplines in the field of medical sciences, which are presented in Associate degree, Bachelor's degree (continuous/discontinuous), Master's degree, Doctor of Medicine, Residency, Fellowship, Subspecialist Training, and MPH. Each of these degrees has its own specific criteria, and based on these criteria, the courses' periods and units are different. The degree awarded to students at the end of each course is different based on the specified course.

In addition, the results of the study have also shown that Cambridge and Oxford Universities, as two top universities in the United Kingdom, have a wide range of disciplines, which are presented in various educational levels, and at the end of each level, various degrees are awarded to the graduate students. For example, based on the different criteria, MSt, MPhil, and MRes degrees are awarded to graduate students of Master's level.

In Kerman University of Medical Sciences, the variety of disciplines at the master level is more than other levels, while in the United Kingdom's universities (Oxford and Cambridge), doctoral disciplines are more diverse. However, the variety of levels is greater in Oxford and Cambridge Universities. Academic levels ranking in United Kingdom's universities is based on the framework levels (National Qualifications Framework NQF), which has 8 levels: levels 1 to 5 are related to diploma and lower levels and levels 6 to 8 are for postgraduate to doctoral levels, and this ranking does not exist in Iran's universities.

In Iran, it is possible to apply for establishing a new discipline based on the social and academic needs.

According to the high-degree documents, if this request fulfills the criteria, then the SCP will approve the request. In universities of medical sciences, the Council for the Development of Medical and Health Sciences Universities approve the criteria for the establishment of basic medical sciences disciplines in master and doctoral levels. Nevertheless, the United Kingdom's education system in advanced educational level is central and the board of trustees one. Before establishing a discipline,

universities consider students' interests, and they also take into account to the working conditions of each discipline after graduating, and consequently, they establish new academic disciplines based on the mentioned issues. This issue could have positive effects on employment, entrepreneurship, and wealth creation factors.

One of the potential parameters for creating opportunities and expanding scientific and technological exchanges and universities internationalization is the diversity of disciplines, degrees and their levels in top universities. Universities are often introduced to the market and customers with their plans and services. The type of educational programs and their quality will boost the HE market. According to educational pundits, the improvement of educational systems' performance leads to political and economic development, economic competition, and better performance of state institutions, democracy and respect for humans' rights (11). Since academic education is one of the most important factors in each human's life, searching for a top and desirable university and the importance of provided information by ranking systems have been considered by students, families and governments' authorities (12).

In order to strengthen global competition, governments in Europe and Asia have started comprehensive reviews, and they are trying to change their high education system by considering world-level for universities (13). On the one hand, the growing and changing needs of a country, and on the other hand, the improvement of knowledge and technology along with innovation and modification of methods in medical education require that our country's medical education programs also be improved with these changes. A brief overview of review phenomenon in the country shows that up to now, some modifications have been created in the headline and content of some discipline's courses in some universities, which more focus on the modification of courses' educational methods, and up to now, no fundamental and comprehensive review has been done (14). On the other hand, there is no attention to the diversity of academic disciplines, levels, and degrees in other countries' universities. Therefore, it is suggested in order to achieve success in the issue of internationalization in Iran's universities; some plans must be adopted in appropriate with other countries' educational courses for the development and design of disciplines and academic levels.

Among the limitations of this study is that there are no similar studies in the field of assessing the status of different academic disciplines, levels, and degrees in universities.

The present study has described the features of the medical HE system in "Kerman University of Medical Sciences," "Cambridge University," and "Oxford University." The results show that many kinds of disciplines and degrees exist in the Cambridge and Oxford Universities. Therefore, we can resolve the weaknesses and shortcomings of the educational level at Kerman University of Medical Sciences and expand the international relationships of this university by using the experiences of these top universities with a diverse and wealthy educational system. In addition, the results of this study can be used by the medical sciences policy-makers at the level of MOHME.

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