Peer-Reviewed Article

What Merit Does a University Degree Have? Perception of Students in Tehran, Iran

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1. Introduction

Iran has witnessed a significant growth in the number of students opting for higher education since the establishment of the Islamic Republic. The gross enrollment ratio in tertiary education increased from 4.5% (male: 6.0%, female: 2.9%) in 1978 to 73% (male: 78.9%, female: 67.0%) in 2015, the highest increment in Iran's history (Word Bank[1,2]). As a result, Iran has achieved what Trow calls "universal access"[1] to higher education (Trow 2007: 244). However, the realization of "universal access" brought a new challenge called "qualification inflation"[2] (Dore 1976: 75). The labor market has been unable to fully absorb the growing number of university graduates, resulting in an increase in "graduate unemployment" (IRNA Sept. 6, 2015; Mehrnews May 15, 2017). The shortage of jobs suitable for university graduates has further created the problem of "over-qualification/over-education", i.e., the workers' level of education is higher than that required for their job (Habibi 2015; Mohseni-cheraghlou 2017).

Degree inflation, the high unemployment rate among the educated, and over-education are not merely limited to Iran but can also be observed in developed and developing countries (Delaney et al. 2020; Krafft et al. 2021). This could discourage people from pursuing degrees and lead to a lower tertiary enrollment ratio. Iran has indeed observed a decline in the gross enrollment ratio in tertiary education since 2016 (World Bank[1,2]).[3]

Nevertheless, hope and enthusiasm still prevail among Iranians about obtaining a degree. To understand how people perceive the value of university degree, studies in different countries that clarify not everyone pursues a degree to secure a job are suggestive and a similar trend could be confirmed in Iran. (Bowen 1996; Amano 1983: 44; Jansen 2006: 478)[4]. However,

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1 Martin Trow contends that when a country's tertiary enrollment ratio exceeds 50 percent, its higher education enters the "universal" phase. His model suggests that Iran entered the "universal" phase in 2012.

2 According to Ronald Dore, qualification inflation occurs as the school system is growing more quickly than the number of job openings in the modern economy.

3 In 2020, the gross tertiary enrollment ratio was 58.2% (males 59.2%, females 57.2%).

4 Ikuo Amano argued that higher education has "chii keisei kinou" (status formation function) and "chii hyouji kinou (status signaling function)." W. Jansen stated that "A degree gives status as being 'cultured.'"

perceptions of the merit of obtaining a degree may not be the same by gender, level of education, field of study, and university. So, how do Iranian students perceive the benefits of a degree and why do they want one? No study clarifies this point.

To fill this gap and to better understand how Iranian students perceive the merit of obtaining a university degree, this paper analyzes the survey data of the students studying at government universities affiliated with the Ministry of Sciences, Research and Technology (MSRT) in Tehran conducted by the authors.

The survey was designed to see how students perceive the merit of earning a university degree in economic, social, individual, and family dimensions. It further analyzes how the respondents' gender (male and female), education level (Bachelor's and Master's), field of study (Humanities, Sciences, Engineering, and Arts), and universities (twelve government universities affiliated with MSRT in Tehran[5]) influence their perception of a university degree using the chi-square test.

2. Survey and Analysis Overview

The survey was conducted from February to April 2019 through a questionnaire developed in Persian.[6] Subjects comprised 290,196 students enrolled in daily and second term courses[7] for bachelor's and master's programs at twelve government universities affiliated with MSRT in Tehran in 1397-98/2018-2019. The sample size of 400 was calculated using Cochran's sampling method. To maintain a proportionate sample size for each university, a final number of 559 individuals were considered for this study. Pre-trained student surveyors were dispatched to twelve government universities. They asked respondents to fill out a questionnaire. When distributing questionnaires, gender ratio, education level, and field of study were taken into consideration, and 559 responses were collected.

The questionnaire consisted of two sections: questions to gauge the attributes of the respondents and those pertaining to their perception of a university degree. Attributes of the respondents comprised the respondent's gender, education level, the name of the university, field of study, major, the applicant's rank of choice at the time of the entrance examination for the university or department in which the respondent is enrolled, the educational level of the parents, and the respondent's employment and marital status.

The questions on the perception of a university degree consisted of 33 questions. A five-point Likert scale (Very much, Much, Don't know, Little, Very little) was used to determine the extent of the respondents' believe that the degree they plan to obtain will positively affect their economic, social, individual, and family status.

An initial and overall analysis of this survey will be published in Persian.[8] Whereas, this paper focused on 21 questions and attempted to conduct an in-depth investigation to analyze them. Using the SPSS software, the distribution of responses was examined to observe overall trends, followed by a chi-square test to determine whether there were differences by gender, level of education, field of study, and

5 Twelve government universities include the University of Tehran, Shahid Beheshti University, K. N. Toosi University of Technology, The Sharif University of Technology, Alzahra University, Tarbiat Modares University, Amirkabir University of Technology, Iran University of Science and Technology, Allameh Tabataba'i University, Kharazmi University, and Shahid Rajaee Teacher Training University.

6 The questionnaires were reviewed by three Iranian scholars in the field, and the authors complied with all ethical considerations and standards when writing and conducting the research. The pilot study was conducted with 40 respondents, and the validity of the questionnaire was confirmed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient.

7 Students enrolled in the daily course get scholarships and are not required to pay tuition, while students enrolled in second-term courses must pay tuition.

8 The Persian paper, which analyzed overall trends for 33 questions, is currently under review.

university. Considering that the fields of study offered at the twelve universities surveyed are not identical, differences among the universities were examined by the field of study. Therefore, the inter-university comparison was conducted for nine, eleven, ten and seven universities offering courses in Humanities, Sciences, Engineering, and Arts, respectively.

3. Respondents' Attributes

Of the 559 respondents, 266 were undergraduates (121 males and 145 females), with 6.6% of males and 11.7% of females married. Of the undergraduate students, 16.2% of the total respondents were working. Additionally, 68.6% of undergraduate students' fathers had an undergraduate degree or higher (25.2% of them had a graduate degree), and 57.6% of their mothers had an undergraduate degree or higher (16.7% of them had a graduate degree).

On the other hand, there were 292 students enrolled in a master's program (145 males and 147 females), with 34.0% of males and 38.8% of females married. 40.4% of the students enrolled in a master's program were working, 58.2% of their fathers with an undergraduate degree or higher (16.0% of them have a graduate degree), and 51.4% of their mothers had an undergraduate degree or higher (11.0% of them have a graduate degree). What is noteworthy is the high level of education of the respondent's parents. Assuming that the respondent's parents are in their late 40s, they received higher education most likely in the 1990s. Since the gross enrollment ratio for tertiary school in 1996 was 21.3% for males and 13.0% for females (World Bank[1,2]), obviously, the respondent's parents' education level was far above the average.

Table 1 shows the gender, level of education, and field of study of the respondents by university.

Table 1. Gender, level of education, and field of study by university (%)

Name of university	Gender			Level of education			Field of study[9]				
	Female	Male	Total (N)	Under-graduate	Master	Total (N)	Human-ities	Basic Sciences	Engin-eering	Arts	Total (N)
Tehran	49.2	50.8	100.0(120)	47.5	52.5	100.0(120)	49.2	8.3	34.2	8.3	100.0(120)
Beheshti	50.0	50.0	100.0(54)	50.0	50.0	100.0(54)	51.9	18.5	24.1	5.5	100.0(54)
K.N.Toosi	50.0	50.0	100.0(24)	45.8	54.2	100.0(24)	0	16.7	83.3	0	100.0(24)
Sharif	48.9	51.1	100.0(45)	51.1	48.9	100.0(45)	13.3	15.6	71.1	0	100.0(45)
Alzahra*	100.0	0	100.0(41)	70.7	29.3	100.0(41)	42.5	20.0	12.5	25.0	100.0(40)
Tarbiat Modares**	52.5	47.5	100.0(40)	0	100.0	100.0(39)	25.00	32.5	32.5	10.0	100.0(40)
Amirkabir	45.8	54.2	100.0(48)	60.4	39.6	100.0(48)	0	14.6	85.4	0	100.0(48)
Science and Technology	47.5	52.5	100.0(40)	30.0	70.0	100.0(40)	10.0	10.0	75.0	5.0	100.0(40)
Allamah	47.2	52.8	100.0(53)	52.8	47.2	100.0(53)	90.6	9.4	0	0	100.0(53)
Kharazmi	48.9	51.1	100.0(47)	53.2	46.8	100.0(47)	57.4	17.0	19.1	6.4	100.0(47)
Rajaee	42.4	57.6	100.0(33)	48.5	51.5	100.0(33)	12.1	33.3	54.6	0	100.0(33)
Arts	50.0	50.0	100.0(14)	64.3	35.7	100.0(14)	0	0	0	100.0	100.0(14)
Total (N)	52.2 (292)	47.8 (267)	100.0 (559)	47.7 (266)	52.3 (292)	100.0 (558)	36.3 (203)	15.6 (87)	39.7 (222)	8.4 (46)	100.0 (558)

* Alzahra is a women's university. ** Tarbiat Modares is a graduate university.

9 The classification of the field of study follows the classification adopted by the government's official statistics on higher education in Iran. Humanities encompass social sciences.

4. Overall Trend

Figure 1 shows the students' responses to the questions about their perception of university degrees. The survey included 33 questions, of which we analyzed 21 in this paper. The lead sentence of vertical items of Figure 1 is "to what extent do you think the degree you are pursuing will help you to...?"[10]

Respondents are asked to select from very little, little, don't know, much, or very much. We included

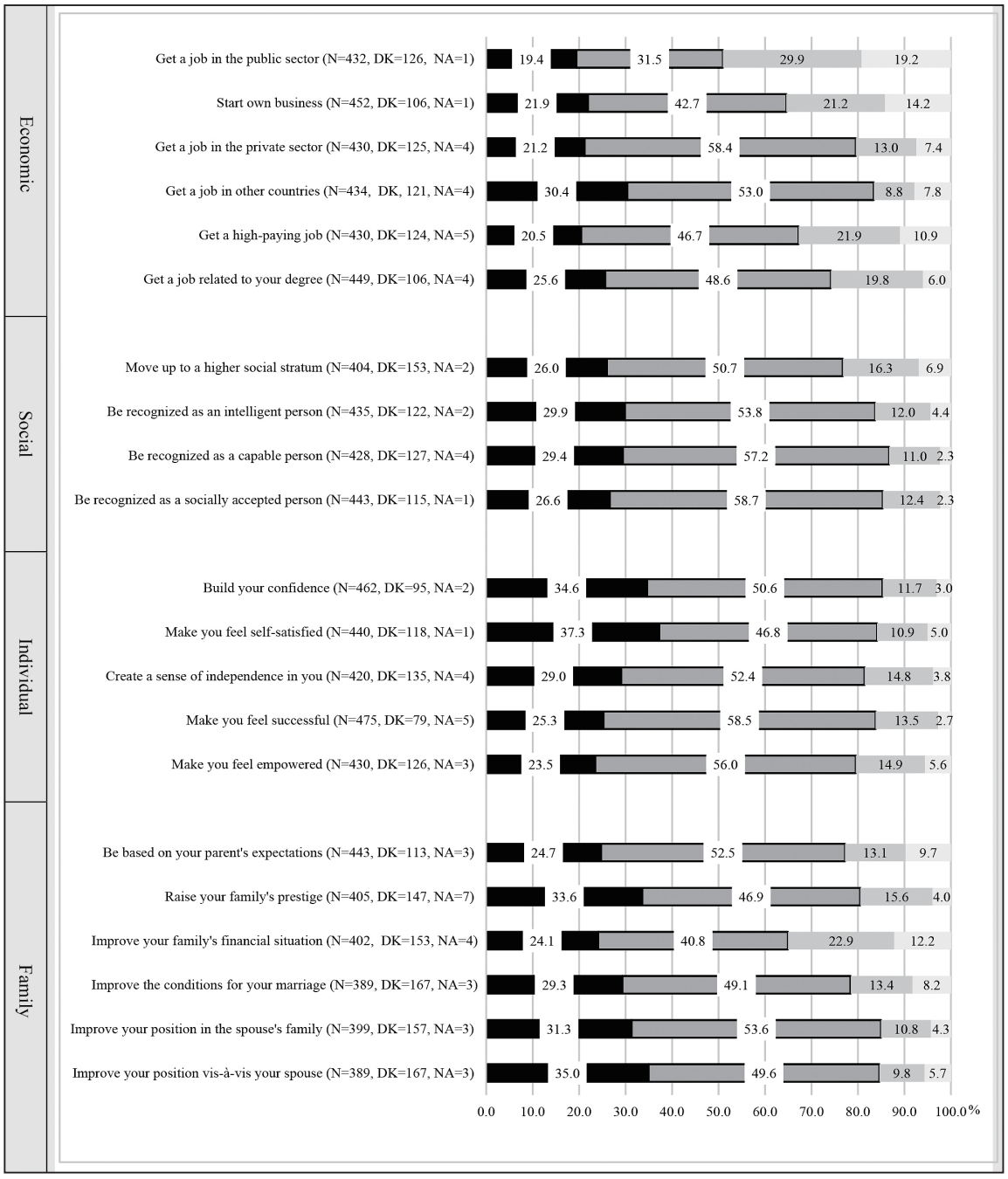

Figure 1. Students' perception of universty degree

[10]However, the lead statement for "Be based on your parent's expectations" is "To what extent do you think the degree you are pursuing will."

'don't know' as an option to reduce the psychological burden on respondents, but when tabulating the results, responses that selected "don't know (DK)" were treated as missing values along with no response (NA). On the other hand, responses that selected 'very little, little, much, or very much were treated as valid responses (N). N, DK, and NA for each question are shown in Figure 1.

The overall trend of the perception of a university degree was examined based on Figure 1. The questions wherein the percentage of "very much" and "much" exceeded 80% of the total valid responses were the lowest in the economic dimension and the most common in the questions related to society and individuals. Many respondents believed that obtaining a degree increases the social evaluation of an individual's abilities with them being dubbed as "a capable person" (86.6%), "a socially accepted person" (85.3%), and "an intelligent person" (83.7%). Results reveal that many respondents believed that the social evaluation of their personal abilities will increase by obtaining a university degree.

The questions about individuals indicated that they felt an enhancement in their self-esteem by obtaining a degree; they responded with phrases like "build confidence" (85.2%), "self-satisfied" (84.1%), "feel successful" (83.8%), and "a sense of independence" (81.4%). Among these, fewer respondents chose DK for "feel successful" and "confidence." This implies that most of the respondents perceived getting a degree from government universities in Tehran as a "success," and they considered its benefits in building "confidence."

Contrarily, the economic and social benefits of earning a degree were rated moderate; for instance, "get a high-paying job" (67.2%), "move up to a higher social stratum" (76.7%), and "improve your family's financial situation" (64.9%) were all rated below 80%.

The high educational level of the respondents' parents can be attributed to the parents' eagerness for the respondents to obtain a degree. For example, in "raise your family's prestige" (80.5%), the percentages of "very much" and "much" in the valid responses exceed 80%, indicating that many respondents consider obtaining a degree as a matter of family honor.

The percentages of "very much" and "much" in the valid responses exceeded for options like "improve your position in the spouse's family" (84.9%) and "improve your position vis-à-vis your spouse" (84.6%). This indicates that many respondents believe that obtaining a degree will strengthen their position in their relationship with their spouse or spouse's family. However, it is also important to note that many of the respondents chose DK for these two questions: 84.6% of those who responded with DK for "improve your position in your spouse's family," and 86.1% of those who responded with DK in the "vis-à-vis your spouse" were unmarried, suggesting that many of them withheld their judgment due to inexperience.

We then compared responses to the 21 questions by gender, level of education, field of study, and universities using the Chi-square test (see Appendix for test results). The gender aspect did not yield any differences for all questions. The result deserves attention as women's gross enrolment ratio is as high as men's; yet, as of 2019, (World Bank[1,2]) the labor force participation rate for men is 70.4% while that for women is only 17% (World Bank[3,4]). Additionally, the unemployment rate of educated women is much higher than that of men (Financial Tribune September 16, 2023; IMF 2018). Therefore, it is puzzling that despite the large differences in employment between men and women, no statistical difference in perception of the merit of having a degree is observed. One possible reason could be the differences in what men and women expect from a university degree. The traditional view of gender-based division of labor, in which women engage in housework and childcare at home while men work outside, persists in Iran, although it is weakening, particularly in urban areas. There is also a tendency to view women's labor as complementary. In addition, there is a sense that women should only work in workplaces that are considered

culturally appropriate for women. Therefore, women's moderate rating for the economic benefit of having a degree is because their main purpose of pursuing higher education is not necessarily to find a job. On the other hand, employment is important for men who are breadwinners; nevertheless, they may not have given a high rating to the economic benefit of having a degree because of their understanding of the lack of suitable jobs for university graduates.

No statistical difference could be confirmed in the level of education for all questions. This result contradicts the MSRT report, which states that the employment opportunity increases as one's level of degree increases (MSRT 2020). This may be related to the fact that the respondents are still students and are not sure what level of degree they are ultimately pursuing.

In the field of study, differences were found in two questions on economic and family dimensions. In the inter-university comparison, the differences are more pronounced in Engineering. Further discussion of the distribution of responses and statistical differences between groups will be presented and discussed below.

5. University Degree and Economic Benefit

The questions in the economic dimension asked whether respondents thought their degree would positively affect their ability to find a job or earn a higher income. "Get a job in other countries" (83.4%) obtained the largest percentage of "very much" and "much" in all responses. Respondents' strong awareness of the need of having a degree in overseas employment must be related to Iran's economic and socio-cultural situation. A year before this survey was conducted, the U.S. Trump administration withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)[11] and resumed economic sanctions against Iran. As a result, foreign companies that had been operating in Iran withdrew from the country, exports of oil, Iran's main source of revenue, plummeted, and the Iranian economy has severely damaged (Khosravi and Jafari 2020). The rapid deterioration of Iran's economy has made people pessimistic about the country's future and accelerated the exodus of highly educated Iranians (Azadi et al. 2020: 7-8; Mahmoudi April 22, 2021). Socio-culturally, the setback of the JCPOA was a disappointment for the highly educated, who had anticipated that increased international exchanges would bring about a more open, liberal and rewarding working environment. In short, the setback of the JCPOA has made working abroad a viable option for many educated people. However, differences in responses to "get a job in other countries" can be observed in the field of study. Table 2 shows the distribution of the responses.

The proportion of respondents who chose "very

Table 2. Get a job in other countries by field of study (%)

Field of study	Very little	Little	Much	Very much	Total (N)
Humanities	11.7	14.5	53.8	20.0	100.0(145)
Sciences	3.0	7.6	45.5	43.9	100.0(66)
Engineering	6.5	5.4	53.0	35.1	100.0(185)
Art	7.9	5.2	63.1	23.7	100.0(38)
Average	7.8	8.8	53.0	30.4	100.0(434)

χ^2=26.139, *df*=9, *P* <.01

[11] It is the 2015-agreement on Iran's nuclear program between China, France, Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Iran. It aims to restrict Iran's nuclear program in exchange for lifting sanctions.

much" or "much" is highest in Sciences (89.4%) followed by Engineering (88.1%), Arts (86.8%) and Humanities (73.8%). This result may be related to fact that students majoring in Sciences and Engineering are more likely to find employment abroad than students majoring Humanities. (Azadi et al. 2020:8).

Since the differences among universities were observed in Engineering, the distribution of responses for "get a job in other countries" is shown in Table 3. The response rate of "very much" and "much" was 100% in Beheshti, Sharif and Tarbiat Modares. On the other hand, Kharazmi (42.9%) and Science and Technology (29.2%) marked high percentage of "very little" and "little". Sharif University of Technology, whose response rate of "very much" and "much" was 100%, is known for its high brain drain rate of graduates (Tabnak November 24, 2015). Further research is needed; however, it can be inferred that the visibility of the universities abroad and the overseas activities of its graduates may have influenced the respondents' perceptions.

For "start own business", the percentage of respondents who answered "very much" or "much" was not large (64.6%); however, because statistical differences were observed in the field of study as shown in the Appendix, the distribution of responses is shown in Table 4.

Table 4 shows that respondents who answered "very much" or "much" was highest in the Arts (78.8%) and lowest in the Humanities (59.8%). This may reflect the fact that Arts majors are more likely to freelance.

Additionally, "get a job related to your degree" was confirmed by the differences between universities in Engineering, and the distribution of responses is shown in Table 5.

Table 5 shows that a difference of over 40 points

Table 3. Get a job in other countries by university, Case of Engineering (%)

Name of university	Very little	Little	Much	Very much	Total (N)
Tehran	3.1	3.1	53.1	40.7	100.0(32)
Beheshti	0.0	0.0	70.0	30.0	100.0 (10)
K.N.Toosi	6.7	13.3	46.7	33.3	100.0(15)
Sharif	0.0	0.0	60.7	39.3	100.0(28)
Alzahra	0.0	20.0	40.0	40.0	100.0(5)
Tarbiat Modares	0.0	0.0	40.0	60.0	100.0(10)
Amirkabir	1.0	4.0	20.0	13.0	100.0(38)
Science and Technology	25.0	4.2	62.5	8.3	100.0(24)
Kharazmi	42.8	0.0	28.6	28.6	100.0(7)
Rajaee	0.0	6.2	43.8	50.0	100.0(16)
Average	6.5	5.4	53.0	35.1	100.0(185)

χ^2= 53.0017, *df*=27, *P* <.01

Table 4. Start own business by field of study (%)

Field of study	Very little	Little	Much	Very much	Total (N)
Humanities	17.6	22.6	40.3	19.5	100.0(159)
Sciences	8.1	28.4	52.7	10.8	100.0 (66)
Engineering	15.0	18.3	39.8	26.9	100.0(185)
Art	6.1	15.1	48.5	30.3	100.0(38)
Average	14.2	21.2	42.7	21.9	100.0(434)

χ^2=18.482, *df*=9, *P* <.05

can be observed between the universities with the highest and lowest values. Accordingly, the majors of 184 respondents were checked to see the differences between the universities. The results showed that there were no significant differences in majors between respondents who selected "very much" or "much" and "very little" or "little". For example, 30 of the respondents majored in Electrical Engineering, of which 22 chose "very much" or "much" and eight marked "very little" or "little." Similarly, of the 24 respondents who majored in Civil Engineering, 17 chose "very much" or "much" and seven chose "very little" or "little". Accordingly, it is difficult to read a clear difference by major between the groups that chose "very much" or "much" and "very little" or "little".

Statistical differences between universities in Humanities for "get a job in the private sector" were identified. The distribution of responses is shown in Table 6.

Among the nine universities offering Humanities, the average of "very much" and "much" in the valid responses was 73.4%, and all the universities except one were above the average. To explore the characteristics of the respondents who chose "very little" or "little" (26.6%), the major of 154 respondents were identified. The results showed that most of the respondents who selected "very much"

Table 5. Get a job related to your degree by universities, Case of Engineering (%)

Name of university	Very little	Little	Much	Very much	Total (N)
Tehran	8.8	29.4	47.1	14.7	100.0(34)
Beheshti	0	11.1	55.6	33.3	100.0(9)
K.N.Toosi	10.0	15.0	60.0	15.0	100.0(20)
Sharif	3.6	0	67.8	28.6	100.0(28)
Alzahra	0	0	50.0	50.0	100.0(4)
Tarbiat Modares	0	50.0	40.0	10.0	100.0(10)
Amirkabir	15.6	28.1	43.8	12.5	100.0(32)
Science and Technology	3.7	11.1	66.7	18.5	100.0(27)
Kharazmi	20.0	20.0	40.0	20.0	100.0(5)
Rajaee	0	0	33.3	66.7	100.0(15)
Average	7.1	17.4	52.7	22.8	100.0(184)

χ^2= 52.0247, *df*=27, *P* <.01

Table 6. Get a job in the private sector by university, Case of Humanities (%)

Name of university	Very little	Little	Much	Very much	Total (N)
Tehran	24.5	34.7	28.6	34.7	100.0(49)
Beheshti	4.8	4.8	57.1	33.3	100.0(21)
Sharif	0.0	16.7	50.0	33.3	100.0(6)
Alzahra	6.7	20.0	53.3	20.0	100.0(15)
Tarbiat Modares	0.0	0.0	85.7	14.3	100.0(7)
Science and Technology	0.0	0.0	33.3	66.7	100.0(3)
Allame	2.9	8.6	77.1	8.6	100.0(35)
Kharazmi	0.0	7.1	64.3	28.6	100.0(14)
Rajaee	0.0	0.0	100.0	0.0	100.0(4)
Average	9.7	16.9	54.6	18.8	100.0(154)

χ^2= 55.339, *df*=24, *P* <.001

and "much" were majoring in Social Sciences such as Commerce, Economics, Accounting, Law, or Business Administration. On the other hand, respondents who selected "very little" or "little" were more likely to be majoring in studies with lower demand in labor market, such as Literature, Religious Studies, Archaeology, History, Geography, Education, and Political Science.

Comparing these results with the data collected by MSRT on unemployment as per field of study yields interesting results. Bachelor's in history, followed by Geography and Aerospace Science had the highest unemployment rates among graduates. At the graduate level, Masters in History, Geography and Economics had the highest unemployment rate among all graduates (MSRT 2020; Student News Network April 4, 2021). The data collected by MSRT and the result of this survey are somewhat consistent.

"Find a job in the public sector" had the lowest percentage of "very much" and "much" among all questions. Public sector jobs are the first choice of Iranians because of their high social reputation and job security. However, public sector employment accounted for only 14.7% of the employed population aged 15 and over in 2019. (Statistical Center of Iran 2019-2020: 205). The trend in responses suggests that there is a shared perception that employment in the public sector is a narrow gate to employment.

The fact that the proportion of "very much" and "much" (67.2%) of the valid responses to the question "get a high-paying job" were also small indicates that the expectation of higher income from a degree is moderate. The moderate rating given by respondents can primarily be attributed to the scarcity of suitable jobs for university graduates. Furthermore, this could also stem from the fact that even when jobs are available, they often involve short-term contracts that lack job security (ISNA May 1, 2023).

6. University Degrees and Society

As shown in Figure 1, "very much" and "much" consisted of more than 80% of the valid responses to the questions about "capable," "intelligent," and "socially accepted person." The result indicates that many respondents thought that their degree would increase their social reputation. This result is probably related to the fact that the universities surveyed in this study require a high score in the competitive entrance examination to be admitted, thus students at these universities are seen as high academic achievers.

Contrarily, a lower percentage of respondents selected "very much" and "much" for "move up to a higher social stratum" (76.7%). This indicates that many respondents were unsure whether a degree will lead to an increase in social stratum. This may be related to the fact that fewer respondents selected "very much" or "much" in response to the questions in the economic dimension. In other words, if the acquisition of a degree does not guarantee economic benefits, such as employment and income, it is unlikely that it will lead to a higher social stratum.

No differences were found in field of study on the question about society. However, statistical difference was identified between universities in Engineering for the prompt "be recognized as a socially accepted person." The distribution of responses is shown in Table 7. The percentage of respondents who selected "very much" or "much" was higher than the average of the ten universities (87.4%) in Beheshti (90.0%), Sharif (90.6%), Alzahra (100%), Amirkabir (91.7%), Science and Technology (88.5%) and Rajaee (100%). But to explore the reasons for difference, further research is required.

Table.7. Be recognized as a socially accepted person by University, Case of Engineering (%)

Name of university	Very little	Little	Much	Very much	Total (N)
Tehran	6.3	12.5	68.7	12.5	100.0(32)
Beheshti	0	10.0	60.0	30.0	100.0(10)
K.N.Toosi	11.1	5.6	27.7	55.6	100.0(18)
Sharif	0	9.4	50.0	40.6	100.0(32)
Alzahra	0	0	50.0	50.0	100.0(4)
Tarbiat Modares	0	37.5	50.0	12.5	100.0(8)
Amirkabir	0	8.3	83.4	8.3	100.0(36)
Science and Technology	3.8	7.7	57.7	30.8	100.0(26)
Kharazmi	0	25.0	50.0	25.0	100.0(8)
Rajaee	0	0	41.2	58.8	100.0(17)
Average	2.6	10	58.1	29.3	100.0(191)

χ^2= 49.984, *df*=27, *P* <.01

7. University Degrees and the Individual

The high proposition of "very much" and "much" in the valid responses to the questions about the individual indicated that most respondents believed that obtaining a degree would improve their self-esteem (see Figure 1). Among the 21 questions, "build your confidence" (85.3%) was the only one for which no statistically significant differences were found dependent on gender, educational level, field of study, or university. This means that the respondents equally agree that earning a university degree will enhance their self-confidence. These responses are also not surprising, considering that government universities, particularly prestigious ones in the capital city Tehran, have always been the first choice for Iranians.

"Make you feel self-satisfied" secured the highest percentage of respondents who answered "very much" among the 21 questions, indicating respondents' belief that earning a degree from a government university is a source of satisfaction. Statistics show that those who earned a bachelor's degree from government universities affiliated with MSRT in 2018 accounted for 21.1% of those awarded a bachelor's degree in the same year. Likewise, those who earned a master's degree at government universities affiliated with MSRT in 2018 represented 31.8% of those who obtained a master's degree (Statistical Center of Iran 2018-19: 684-685). In other words, the graduates from government universities are a minority among university graduates.

Among the questions related to individuals, no inter-university differences in Arts were identified. In Engineering, on the other hand, inter-universities differences were confirmed in four questions, including "create a sense of independence" and "feel empowered." As shown in Table 8, the percentage of "very much" and "much" in the total valid responses for "create a sense of independence" in Alzahra (100%), Rajaee (100%), and Sharif (93.1%) are over the average (83.4%) of ten universities.

Table 9 shows the distribution of responses for "makes you feel empowered." The percentage of respondents who chose "very much" or "much" in Beheshti (100%), Alzahra (100%), Rajaee (100%), Sharif (96.3%), K.N. Toosi (94.1%) and Science and Technology (92.6%) were high, while those for other universities were lower than the average.

The data on university entrance examinations were examined to probe further into the topic. In Iran, applicants declare their preferred university and department in order of preference when participating in a unified entrance examination called "*Konkur*." The students with the

Table.8. Create a sense of independence in you by university, Case of Engineering (%)

Name of university	Very little	Little	Much	Very much	Total (N)
Tehran	3.1	12.5	71.9	12.5	100.0(32)
Beheshti	0.0	18.2	63.6	18.2	100.0(11)
K.N.Toosi	5.6	11.1	38.9	44.4	100.0(18)
Sharif	0.0	6.9	51.7	41.4	100.0(29)
Alzahra	0.0	0.0	80.0	20.0	100.0(5)
Tarbiat Modares	0.0	30.0	70.0	0.0	100.0(10)
Amirkabir	0.0	27.6	55.2	17.2	100.0(29)
Science and Technology	3.8	11.5	38.5	46.2	100.0(26)
Kharazmi	28.6	14.3	14.3	42.9	100.0(7)
Rajaee	0.0	0.0	50.0	50.0	100.0(14)
Average	2.8	13.8	53.6	29.8	100.0(181)

χ^2=53.013, *df*=27, *P* <.01

Table 9. Makes you feel empowered, Case of Engineering (%)

Name of university	Very little	Little	Much	Very much	Total (N)
Tehran	8.8	26.5	55.9	8.8	100.0(34)
Beheshti	0.0	0.0	70.0	30.0	100.0(10)
K.N.Toosi	0.0	5.9	58.8	35.3	100.0(17)
Sharif	0.0	3.7	51.9	44.4	100.0(27)
Alzahra	0.0	0.0	100.0	0.0	100.0(4)
Tarbiat Modares	18.2	18.2	63.6	0.0	100.0(11)
Amirkabir	3.3	40.0	46.7	10.0	100.0(30)
Science and Technology	7.4	0.0	70.4	22.2	100.0(27)
Kharazmi	14.2	28.6	28.6	28.6	100.0(7)
Rajaee	0.0	0.0	46.7	53.3	100.0(15)
Average	5.0	14.8	56.6	23.6	100.0(182)

χ^2=64.017, *df*=27, *P* <.001

highest scores are assigned to their preferrable university and major of in descending order. The percentages of respondents in each field who were admitted to their first choice were: Humanities (37.4%), Sciences (33.3%), Engineering (47.4%), and Arts (47.8%). Focusing further on Engineering, the above-average percentages for each university were identified as follows: Sharif (68.8%), Alzahra (60.0%), Tehran (51.2%), and Kharazmi (55.6%). However, this data can't validate the relation between admission to the first choice and "sense of independence" and "feeling empowered." Further research is needed to accomplish it.

8. Degree and Family

Responses to questions related to family varied more than responses to questions about society and individuals. Since the statistical difference in the field of study was observed in responses to "be based on your parent's expectations" and "improve your position vis-à-vis your spouse," the distribution of responses is shown in Tables 10 and 11.

Table 10 shows that the percentage of respondents who answered "very much" or "much" exceeded the average of the ten universities (77.2%) for Arts (92.5%) and Engineering (84.0%), while it was lower

than the average for Sciences (72.4%) and Humanities (67.1%). Again, this indicates the fields that parents expect their children to take up.

The distribution of responses in Table 11 indicates that there is not much variation among fields of study; only Engineering (87.1%) exceeds the average (84.6%). This shows that respondents believe that earning a degree does improve their position in relation to their spouse. It may be related to the lower unemployment rate of Engineering degree holders. The data collected by MSRT indicates that bachelor's in Health, Computer Engineering, and Electrical Engineering had the lowest unemployment rate whereas master's in Health, Medical Engineering, and Accounting had the lowest unemployment rates (Student News Network, April 4, 2021).

For the two questions "improve your position in your spouse's family" and "improve your position vis-à-vis your spouse," differences between universities were found only in Engineering. Tables 12 and 13 show the distribution of responses.

Table 12 shows that the percentage of respondents in five universities (Beheshti, K.N.Toosi, Tarbiat Modares, Amirkabir, Kharazmi) who answered "very

Table10. Be based on your parent's expectations by field of study (%)

Field of study	Very little	Little	Much	Very much	Total (N)
Humanities	15.1	17.8	49.3	17.8	100.0(152)
Sciences	5.8	21.8	47.8	24.6	100.0(69)
Engineering	7.7	8.3	55.3	28.7	100.0(181)
Art	5.0	2.5	60.0	32.5	100.0(40)
Average	9.7	13.1	52.5	24.7	100.0(442)

χ^2=26.789, *df*=9, *P* <.01

Table11. Improve your position vis-à-vis your spouse by field of study (%)

Field of study	Very little	Little	Much	Very much	Total (N)
Humanities	4.9	12.2	55.3	27.6	100.0(123)
Sciences	7.8	9.4	54.7	28.1	100.0(64)
Engineering	4.7	8.2	41.5	45.6	100.0(171)
Art	9.7	9.7	61.3	19.3	100.0(31)
Average	5.6	9.8	49.6	35.0	100.0(389)

χ^2=17.712, *df*=9, *P* <.05

Table 12. Improve your position in the spouse's family by university, Case of Engineering (%)

Name of university	Very little	Little	Much	Very much	Total (N)
Tehran	0.0	3.6	71.4	25.0	100.0(28)
Beheshti	15.4	7.7	53.8	23.1	100.0(28)
K.N.Toosi	5.3	10.5	26.3	57.9	100.0(19)
Sharif	0.0	10.0	26.7	63.3	100.0(30)
Alzahra	0.0	0.0	100.0	0.0	100.0(2)
Tarbiat Modares	0.0	27.3	45.4	27.3	100.0(11)
Amirkabir	7.7	15.4	50.0	26.9	100.0(26)
Science and Technology	0.0	0.0	52.0	48.0	100.0(25)
Kharazmi	12.5	12.5	50.0	25.0	100.0(8)
Rajaee	0.0	0.0	58.8	41.2	100.0(17)
Average	3.3	8.4	48.6	39.7	100.0(179)

χ^2= 45.052, *df*=27, *P* <.05

little" or "little" was higher than the average of the ten universities (11.7%). Focusing on "very much," great disparity can be observed between universities. Sharif (63.3%) and K.N. Toosi (57.9%) had the highest percentages of "very much" in the valid responses.

Looking at the distribution of responses in Table 13, the number of respondents in five universities who selected "very much" or "much" exceeded the average of ten universities (87.1%). Sharif (75.9%) and K.N.Toosi (57.9) have the highest percentage of respondents who chose "very much."

The distribution of responses shown in Figure 1 and Table 13 indicates that respondents who selected "very much" and "much" for "improve your position in the spouse's family" and "improve your position vis-à-vis your spouse" represent about 85.0% of the valid responses; however, the differences between universities are significant in Engineering.

Furthermore, it should be noted that unmarried respondents responded by imagining the future, while married respondents responded based on their experience with the two questions "improve your position in the spouse's family" and "improve your position vis-à-vis your spouse." Therefore, a chi-square test was performed to confirm the difference between unmarried and married respondents. The results showed that for both questions, the percentage of "very much" and "much" in the valid responses was over 91% for married respondents, about 10 percent higher than for unmarried respondents. This indicates that many married respondents are convinced that their degree will enhance their own position with respect to their spouse's family and spouse.

9. Conclusion

Although the target population of the survey was limited to students at twelve government universities affiliated with MSRT in Tehran, it did yield several significant results. First, respondents generally agree that the degree they are going to earn will enhance their social reputation, self-esteem, and family prestige, and improve their position in the family after marriage. In particular, a significant number of respondents indicated that a degree "makes you feel successful." This suggests that having a degree from a government university is highly valued in Iranian society. Contrarily, respondents are less confident about whether the degree would bring tangible benefits, such as employment or higher social stratum. This may relate to the fact that the number of unemployed university graduates has remained high due to a lack of job opportunities.

The results of this study show that the merit of a degree is not determined solely by its evaluation in the labor market but by other factors like society, individual,

Table13. Provide better position vis-à-vis your spouse, Case of Engineering (%)

Name of university	Very little	Little	Much	Very much	Total (N)
Tehran	7.4	11.1	55.6	25.9	100.0(27)
Beheshti	15.4	7.7	46.2	7.7	100.0(13)
K.N.Toosi	5.3	10.5	26.3	57.9	100.0(19)
Sharif	3.4	0.0	20.7	75.9	100.0(29)
Alzahra	0.0	0.0	100.0	0.0	100.0(2)
Tarbiat Modares	0.0	0.0	71.4	28.6	100.0(7)
Amirkabir	3.7	25.9	37.1	33.3	100.0(27)
Science and Technology	0.0	0.0	47.8	52.2	100.0(23)
Kharazmi	11.1	11.1	55.6	22.2	100.0(9)
Ragaee	0.0	0.0	40.0	60.0	100.0(15)
Average	4.7	8.2	41.5	45.6	100.0(171)

$\chi^2 = 46.853$, $df=27$, $P<.05$

and family. In other words, students seek a university degree not only for employment but also to establish their status and position in society and families.

Second, despite significant differences between men and women in labor participation and unemployment rates, the survey did not identify differences in the perception of university degrees based on gender. Similarly, no statistically significant differences in the perception of university degrees were recognized at the educational level (bachelor's or master's). Although the reasons for this cannot be determined from this survey alone, it is not surprising that many respondents perceive a degree as a requirement rather than a sufficient condition for employment. In other words, whether they can get their desired job or not, they think that having a degree is a must (Haddad and Habibi 2017).

Third, statistical differences among the field of study were identified through four questions. Science and Engineering majors were more likely to experience that their degree helps "get a job in other countries," while Arts majors think their degree will be beneficial to " start own business." Furthermore, parents' expected children to take up Arts, Engineering, Science, and Humanities, in that order. Finally, a degree in Engineering is perceived as the most effective to "improve one's position vis-à-vis one's spouse."

Fourth, inter-universities difference is most frequently identified in Engineering, though the survey cannot determine its cause. Presumably, it is a combination of factors, including academia and the level, marketable skills, employability, and reputation in the labor market.

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	Appendix. Pearson's chi-square value, degree of freedom, and P-value by gender, level of education, field of study, and university							
	Questions	Gender	Level of Education	Field of study	University by field of study			
					Humanities	Science	Engineering	Art
Economic	Get a job in the public sector	χ^2=5.843, df=3, N.S.	χ^2=7.137, df=3, N.S.	χ^2=6.507, df=9, N.S.	χ^2=50.876, df=24, P <.01	χ^2=48.663, df=30, P <.05	χ^2=97.5707, df=27, P <.001	χ^2=28.963, df=18, P <.05
	Start own business	χ^2=3.543, df=3, N.S.	χ^2=1.864, df=3, N.S.	χ^2=18.482, df=9, P <.05	χ^2=63.324, df=24, P <.001	χ^2=53.830, df=30, P <.01	χ^2=44.0467, df=27, P <.001	χ^2=22.874, df=18, N.S.
	Get a job in the private sector	χ^2=0.711, df=3, N.S.	χ^2=1.170, df=3, N.S.	χ^2=13.153, df=9, N.S.	χ^2=55.339, df=24, P <.001	χ^2=28.806, df=30, N.S.	χ^2=39.440, df=27, N.S.	χ^2=24.747, df=18, N.S.
	Get a job in other countries	χ^2=3.202, df=3, N.S.	χ^2=1.367, df=3, N.S.	χ^2=26.139, df=9, P <.01	χ^2=35.254, df=24, N.S.	χ^2=29.550, df=30, N.S.	χ^2=53.0017, df=27, P <.01	χ^2=19.017, df=18, N.S.
	Get a high-paying job	χ^2=1.093, df=3, N.S.	χ^2=2.608, df=3, N.S.	χ^2=15.037, df=9, N.S.	χ^2=76.781, df=24, P <.001	χ^2=56.810, df=30, P <.01	χ^2=61.2947, df=27, P <.001	χ^2=19.925, df=18, N.S.
	Get a job related to your degree	χ^2=1.173, df=3, N.S.	χ^2=1.525, df=3, N.S.	χ^2=15.895, df=9, N.S.	χ^2=36.042, df=24, N.S.	χ^2=43.215, df=30, N.S.	χ^2=52.0247, df=27, P <.01	χ^2=16.686, df=18, N.S.
Social	Move up to a higher social stratum	χ^2=3.432, df=3, N.S.	χ^2=1.1977, df=3, N.S.	χ^2=8.319, df=9, N.S.	χ^2=35.865, df=24, N.S.	χ^2=23.804, df=30, N.S.	χ^2=29.526, df=27, N.S.	χ^2=16.853, df=18, N.S.
	Be recognized as an intelligent person	χ^2=0.371, df=3, N.S.	χ^2=2.7347, df=3, N.S.	χ^2=13.570, df=9, N.S.	χ^2=22.998, df=24, N.S.	χ^2=25.608, df=30, N.S.	χ^2=36.481, df=27, N.S.	χ^2=15.380, df=18, N.S.
	Be recognized as a capable person	χ^2=5.616, df=3, N.S.	χ^2=0.9077, df=3, N.S.	χ^2=11.366, df=9, N.S.	χ^2=27.027, df=24, N.S.	χ^2=34.646, df=30, N.S.	χ^2=35.619, df=27, N.S.	χ^2=11.609, df=18, N.S.
	Be recognized as a socially accepted person	χ^2=2.491, df=3, N.S.	χ^2=3.8237, df=3, N.S.	χ^2=4.786, df=9, N.S.	χ^2=27.201, df=24, N.S.	χ^2=20.703, df=30, N.S.	χ^2=49.984, df=27, P <.01	χ^2=16.228, df=18, N.S.
Individual	Build your confidence	χ^2=2.132, df=3, N.S.	χ^2=3.0287, df=3, N.S.	χ^2=8.671, df=9, N.S.	χ^2=20.504, df=24, N.S.	χ^2=41.557, df=30, N.S.	χ^2=30.639, df=27, N.S.	χ^2=11.082, df=18, N.S.
	Make you feel self-satisfied	χ^2=4.466, df=3, N.S.	χ^2=2.4257, df=3, N.S.	χ^2=5.419, df=9, N.S.	χ^2=41.326, df=24, P <.05	χ^2=35.898, df=30, N.S.	χ^2=43.039, df=27, P <.05	χ^2=19.624, df=18, N.S.
	Create a sense of independence in you	χ^2=2.506, df=3, N.S.	χ^2=1.6317, df=3, N.S.	χ^2=11.666, df=9, N.S.	χ^2=34.112, df=24, N.S.	χ^2=37.712, df=30, N.S.	χ^2=53.013, df=27, P <.01	χ^2=13.421, df=18, N.S.
	Make you feel successful	χ^2=4.853, df=3, N.S.	χ^2=0.6577, df=3, N.S.	χ^2=4.656, df=9, N.S.	χ^2=42.296, df=24, P <.05	χ^2=53.600, df=30, P <.01	χ^2=56.225, df=27, P <.01	χ^2=17.864, df=18, N.S.
	Make you feel empowered	χ^2=0.905, df=3, N.S.	χ^2=2.1157, df=3, N.S.	χ^2=4.045, df=9, N.S.	χ^2=33.069, df=24, N.S.	χ^2=39.828, df=30, N.S.	χ^2=64.017, df=27, P <.001	χ^2=18.152, df=18, N.S.
Family	Be based on your parent's expectations	χ^2=1.378, df=3, N.S.	χ^2=1.3027, df=3, N.S.	χ^2=26.789, df=9, P <.01	χ^2=33.877, df=24, N.S.	χ^2=34.171, df=30, N.S.	χ^2=48.200, df=27, N.S.	χ^2=12.984, df=18, N.S.
	Raise your family's prestige	χ^2=2.821, df=3, N.S.	χ^2=2.8827, df=3, N.S.	χ^2=7.348, df=9, N.S.	χ^2=28.150, df=24, N.S.	χ^2=28.754, df=30, N.S.	χ^2=31.908, df=27, N.S.	χ^2=26.091, df=18, N.S.
	Improve your family's financial situation	χ^2=2.955, df=3, N.S.	χ^2=1.0447, df=3, N.S.	χ^2=4.622, df=9, N.S.	χ^2=72.356, df=24, P <.001	χ^2=43.091, df=30, N.S.	χ^2=51.062, df=27, P <.01	χ^2=29.220, df=18, P <.05
	Improve the conditions for your marriage	χ^2=1.246, df=3, N.S.	χ^2=2.9057, df=3, N.S.	χ^2=15.296, df=9, N.S.	χ^2=58.105, df=24, P <.001	χ^2=46.594, df=30, P <.05	χ^2=41.851, df=27, P <.05	χ^2=19.080, df=18, N.S.
	Improve your position in the spouse's family	χ^2=3.148, df=3, N.S.	χ^2=1.4707, df=3, N.S.	χ^2=15.540, df=9, N.S.	χ^2=18.195, df=24, N.S.	χ^2=29.184, df=30, N.S.	χ^2=45.052, df=27, P <.05	χ^2=26.823, df=18, N.S.
	Improve your position vis-à-vis your spouse	χ^2=3.429, df=3, N.S.	χ^2=3.9867, df=3, N.S.	χ^2=17.712, df=9, P < .05	χ^2=25.242, df=24, N.S.	χ^2=42.349, df=30, N.S.	χ^2=46.853, df=27, P <.05	χ^2=26.250, df=18, N.S.

Note: Statistically significant chi-square test results are highlighted. N.S. stands for not significant.