

# Role of Information Technology in denial of education: An underground university perspective

Tony Omid Assadi  
Whitireia Polytechnic  
Tony.assadi@whitireia.ac.nz

Brenda Lloyd  
Whitireia Polytechnic  
Brenda.lloyd@whitireia.ac.nz

## ABSTRACT

This study describes the background of the denial of education of the Bahá'í youth in Iran and explores the role of Information Technology (IT) to provide access to higher education for a minority community, excluded from university. Baha'i Institute for Higher Education (BIHE), also known as the underground university in Iran, "founded in 1987 in response to the Iranian government's continuing campaign to deny Bahá'ís access to higher education" (BIHE, 2015). This research will use qualitative approach using semi structured interviews and surveys. The aim of this poster is to help initiate discussions and collaborations with others in the research community.

**Keywords:** Denial of education, Online Learning, BIHE, Underground University, Access to university facilities and services denied, Human rights

## 1. INTRODUCTION

"The Baha'i community, Iran's largest non-Muslim religious minority has faced ongoing systematic religious persecution since its founding in Persia in 1844." (Clarcken, 2009) After the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, the extent of the persecution was increased. The persecution ranged from execution and imprisonment, followed by imposing economic, social and cultural constraints aimed to stop the development and functioning of Baha'is as a community.

These included mass withdrawal of Baha'is from their jobs in all government owned companies and universities, depriving them of their livelihood by destroying their homes and businesses, raiding properties to destroy books, publications and any item with any cultural significance, and forbid them from obtaining higher education and attending universities.

"In the late 1980s, Baha'is sought to mitigate the effects of the ban on attending university, making informal arrangements to provide education for their young people, using the volunteer services of Baha'i professors who had been dismissed from their jobs immediately following the Islamic Revolution. This undertaking evolved and began being referred to as the Baha'i Institute for Higher Education (BIHE).

It offers correspondence courses and classes in private homes throughout the country" (Vahedi, 2011). BIHE now offers over 30 Programmes using a unique online and offline learning model with combined faculty and administrative staff and volunteers of approximately 700 members worldwide.

Qualifications offered by BIHE ranges from undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in "Accounting, Business Administration Music, Plant Production Technology, Civil Construction, Computer Science, Psychology, Social Sciences, English Literature and Linguistics, Mathematics, Persian Literature, Civil Engineering, Applied Chemistry, Medical Sciences, and Pharmaceutical Sciences." (BIHE, 2015)

This study aims to explore the role of Information Technology (IT) as an enabler to remove barriers to access education. In particular, this study plans to survey BIHE students and graduates to gain better understanding of how IT can help provide effective access to education in an environment where a minority community is deprived of accessing higher education. Sample questions that this study plans to find the answer to are:

- How do BIHE students access online courses?
- What are efficacies of online systems use by BIHE students for their study?
- What are critical success factors for BIHE students?
- What are security concerns for BIHE students to access online courses?
- What are impacts of BIHE qualifications on its graduates?
- What do BIHE students do after graduation?

## 2. BACKGROUND

Baha'is in Iran don't have the right to public sector employment. Their children are subject to continuous harassment and discrimination by teachers and other students at primary and high schools because of their religion. They are also banned from enrolling at a university to obtain higher education.

After the Islamic Revolution in Iran Baha'is were denied access to higher education and banned from attending universities. They are not able to enrol at university, the registration form of all universities in Iran requires each potential student to identify

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**BACKGROUND**  
The Bahá'í community, Iran's largest non-Muslim religious minority has faced ongoing systematic religious persecution since its founding in Persia in 1844. (Clarcken, 2009)  
The persecutions ranged from execution and imprisonment, followed by imposing economic, social and cultural constraints aimed to stop the development and functioning of Bahá'ís as a community.  
After the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, the extent of the persecution was increased. These include mass withdrawal of Bahá'ís from their jobs in all government owned companies and universities, depriving them of their livelihood by destroying their homes and businesses, raiding properties to destroy books, publications and any item with any cultural significance, and forbid them from obtaining higher education or attending universities.  
In the late 1980s, Bahá'ís sought to mitigate the effects of the ban on attending university, making informal arrangements to provide education for their young people, using the volunteer services of Bahá'í professors who had been dismissed from their jobs immediately following the Islamic Revolution. This undertaking evolved and began being referred to as the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education (BIHE). It offers correspondence courses and classes in private homes throughout the country" (Vahedi, 2011)

**METHODS**  
Semi-structured, face to face and phone interviews will be used to collect data for the study. The background of BIHE, University reading outside Iran. An interview sheet is designed and will be used as a guide for interviews. A convenience sample will be used. Interview participants will be contacted by telephone and email and asked whether they would be willing to take part.

**CONCLUSIONS**  
As this is the beginning of a larger piece of research, the aim of this poster is to provide background information and encourage discussion and feedback.  
Due to the sensitivity of this subject area very little research has been published. Having it open to a great deal of further research. The ultimate goal of this study is to develop a model which may be applied to any other minority group who are denied education in any country.

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**PARTICIPANTS**  
It is anticipated that up to 20 to 30 BIHE graduates will be interviewed, selected from a population of 200 graduates. Non-participant observation sampling (Fisher, 1950) will be used in the study to help gain context and will help ensure the research questions to be answered and how best the study objectives.

**"They're arresting them because they found alternatives to the rights they were denied"**  
The Iran government continuously filters and blocks BIHE University's sites and online resources. They continuously storm homes of students and BIHE staff to destroy books, teaching resources, computers, ICT devices and tools used for teaching and learning. They also attack homes that are used to run BIHE classes. Students, teachers and hosts are detained and their families are persecuted.

**"They (Bahá'ís) can't be doctors, lawyers, university professors or scientists"**  
Iran: A country, not a world by Amnesty International (2014)

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their religion in a compulsory section that must be completed. University administration and management are instructed by government officials to automatically decline any application from students that have identified their religion as Baha'i.

Despite tragic circumstances for Baha'is in Iran, they "pursue non-adversarial approach towards what they face, with constructive resilience against struggles forced upon them under conditions of violent oppression." (Karlberg, 2010) One of these constructive resilience is for Baha'i youth to participate in BIHE (Baha'i Institute for Higher Education) also known as the underground university in Iran.

At the start of BIHE the number of volunteers and teachers for this University were limited. The BIHE was initially operated completely by correspondence and it relied on the state post system. It was later forced to setup its own private mailing system when government officials started seizing postal communication materials for BIHE. As a result, students were also forced to come from all over the country to Tehran (Capital of Iran) to attend block courses and to have direct communication with their teachers. This was a major challenge for BIHE considering that location and class timetables needed to alter regularly to keep them confidential from government officials. "Although termed underground here, reflecting its need to keep its activities relatively secret, the Iranian government has always known of its existence, and in fact has carried out raids and confiscations of university teaching tools over the years. It has likely been the international condemnation repeatedly directed at these acts that has prevented a complete clampdown on the school's activities." (Ghadirian, 2008)

With the advancement of Technology BIHE make more use of delivering classes online. Access to internet also provided opportunity for BIHE to have more volunteer teachers outside Iran to help deliver courses online. BIHE now operates with teachers and volunteers from all over the world who want to help with the situation for Baha'is in Iran. There is also an established affiliated global faculty (AGF) comprised of hundreds of accredited professors from universities outside Iran who assist BIHE as researchers, teachers and consultants from some of the most respected universities worldwide. Offering online courses by BIHE has not been without challenges. The Iran government continuously filters the BIHE University's sites. People in Iran and Baha'i students can't open the BIHE course website or sites that contains information about Baha'i religion. Students use VPN to access course material but government officials continuously filter and block access to websites and resources used by BIHE.

Despite all the sacrifices and hard work, Government officials continue to persecute Baha'is. They continuously storm homes of students and BIHE staff in Iran to destroy books, teaching resources, computers, ICT devices and tools used for teaching and learning. They also attack homes that are used to run BIHE classes. Students, teachers and hosts are detained and their families are prosecuted.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

Semi-structured, face to face and phone interviews will be used to collect data for this study with graduates of BIHE University residing outside Iran. An interview sheet is designed and will be used as a guide for interviews. A convenience sample will be used. Potential participants will be contacted by telephone and email and asked whether they would be willing to take part.

### 4. FINDINGS

This research is currently in a Literature review and data collection phase. It is anticipated that up to 25 to 30 graduates will be interviewed, selected from a population of 300 graduates. Non-probability purposive sampling (Patton, 1990) will be used in this study to help select cases that will best enable the research questions to be answered and thus meet the study objectives. As this is the beginning of a larger piece of research, the aim of this poster is to provide background information and encourage discussion and feedback.

### 5. CONCLUSION

Due to the sensitivity of this subject area very little research has been published leaving it open to a great deal of further research. The ultimate goal of this study is to develop a model which may be applied to any other minority group who are denied education in any country.

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