

<http://doi.org/10.22133/ijtcs.2025.503144.1196>

Cultural Knowledge Integration in Tourism Higher Education

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Article Info

Received:

2024-12-29

Accepted:

2025-02-22

Keywords:

Cultural knowledge

Sustainable development goals

Tourism higher education

Thematic indicators for culture

Iran

Abstract

Cultural knowledge education, which includes an understanding of both tangible and intangible cultural elements, behavioral patterns, and social processes within a specific community or group, is considered essential for promoting sustainable tourism development. Tourism higher education plays a crucial role in harnessing this knowledge. However, the integration of cultural knowledge within tourism curricula has not been extensively explored in academic research. This paper, focusing on tourism higher education in Iran, seeks to examine how different components of cultural knowledge are integrated into the curricula of undergraduate, graduate, and PhD programs. Using a qualitative design, the study analyzes the curricula of these programs through documentary research. Initially, courses relevant to cultural knowledge were identified through keyword searches, followed by a qualitative content analysis of course content to pinpoint the cultural knowledge components. The results indicate that cultural knowledge is more prominently incorporated at the undergraduate level than in the postgraduate programs. Furthermore, the distribution of cultural knowledge across graduate and PhD programs is unbalanced, especially when compared to the undergraduate curriculum. Given that these postgraduate programs aim to prepare future mid-to-senior-level managers and researchers in tourism, this imbalance highlights a significant gap. Therefore, revising the curricula to better integrate diverse cultural knowledge components is a critical priority for advancing sustainable tourism development in the country.

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How to Cite:

Ranjbar Motalegh, F. (2024). Cultural Knowledge Integration in Tourism Higher Education. *International Journal of Tourism, Culture and Spirituality*, 7(2), 159-174.

Introduction

Tourism is a multifaceted socio-cultural and economic phenomenon that has emerged as one of the world's largest and fastest-growing industries in recent years. Its significant contributions to economic growth, job creation, entrepreneurial opportunities, the enhancement of host communities' living standards, and, ultimately, the improvement of their quality of life have positioned tourism as a vital instrument for community development (Ranjbar Motalegh et al., 2021).

The importance of tourism has been further underscored by its capacity to advance the objectives of sustainable development, particularly the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set forth by the United Nations. For instance, tourism potentially plays a crucial role in advancing SDG 11, which focuses on creating inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable cities and human settlements. With the implementation of well-formulated policies, tourism holds the potential to play a pivotal role in promoting equity, conserving biodiversity, safeguarding natural and cultural heritage, fostering sustainable economic growth, and creating inclusive societies (UNWTO, 2017). Culture emerges as a critical domain where tourism significantly drives the sustainable development of communities. The recognition of culture as a critical component of sustainable development is supported by various studies that highlight its role in fostering social cohesion and enhancing community identity, which are vital for sustainable practices (Bervar & Trnavčević, 2019; Perry et al., 2019).

Culture is significant not only as an independent tourism resource but also as an integral element embedded within various subsystems of tourism. Consequently, the preservation and promotion of culture are not merely important objectives in sustainable tourism development but also serve as enablers for achieving numerous sustainable tourism goals. These include fostering mutual understanding and peace, promoting social inclusion, advancing participatory and inclusive tourism management approaches to achieve the active involvement of diverse stakeholders, including local communities, marginalized groups, and tourists themselves, in decision-making processes related to tourism development and management. Therefore, cultural knowledge education is recognized as a key instrument for achieving sustainable development (UNESCO, 2019). The emphasis on experiential learning in tourism curricula, as discussed by Jamal et al., highlights the importance of developing technical, analytical, and multicultural skills necessary for sustainable tourism practices (Jamal et al., 2011).

Cultural knowledge encompasses an understanding and awareness of the values, beliefs, customs, traditions, languages, behaviors, and familiarity with the social processes and practices that define a particular group or community. It helps individuals gain a deeper

understanding of their own social and cultural world, as well as that of others (Lareau, 2015). Education spans a broad spectrum, including primary, secondary, and higher education, as well as technical and vocational training. In the field of tourism, higher education holds particular significance. The global and interconnected nature of tourism requires professionals to not only understand cultural diversity but also apply this knowledge effectively in their practices. The capacity of undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral programs in tourism to raise awareness and strengthen the skills required by society (Arasteh & Amiri, 2012) has made higher education a critical platform for leveraging cultural knowledge as a tool. For instance, emphasizing topics related to cultural diversity in tourism curricula and teaching the values of local communities can reinforce the concept of global citizenship while fostering understanding and respect for the local values of host societies. Through such an approach, tourism higher education equips students with the tools to navigate cultural complexities and contribute to more inclusive and respectful tourism practices.

There is a growing body of literature on tourism higher education and its role in sustainable development (Boyle et al., 2015; Hales & Jennings, 2017; McGrath et al., 2020; Septyandi & Prawira, 2022; Lucia et al., 2021). A comprehensive review of sustainable tourism curricula highlights the importance of instilling values related to sustainability within the educational framework (Septyandi & Prawira, 2022). Güneş et al. (2012) argued that the integration of environmental considerations into the curriculum is becoming a standard practice, reflecting a global trend towards sustainability in tourism education. Slocum et al. (2019) stated that how sustainability is presented and taught plays a crucial role in maximizing its potential, since learning occurs as a result of integrating various components of sustainability into the core content of different courses within tourism curricula, rather than as a specific subject (Berjozkina & Melanthiou, 2021). Consequently, the transformation of higher education in tourism and the integration of knowledge related to cultural, economic, and environmental dimensions into curricula have become an essential requirement in recent years (Dredge et al., 2012). However, there remain significant gaps in understanding how knowledge related to the various dimensions of sustainable development are integrated across tourism curricula. While much attention has been given to the inclusion of sustainability concepts, less research has focused on how these different components are woven into the core content of courses (Nordén, 2024) at various levels of tourism education. Specifically, there is a lack of comprehensive studies on the integration of cultural knowledge within tourism curricula, which remains an underexplored area despite its essential role in fostering a more holistic and responsible tourism industry. This paper focuses on tourism higher education in Iran and investigates the integration

of cultural knowledge within tourism higher education. Specifically, it examines how various components of cultural knowledge are embedded within the curricula of undergraduate, graduate, and PhD programs in tourism. It addresses the call by Mínguez et al. (2021) for research into alternative teaching methods aimed at advancing sustainable tourism. By examining how various components of cultural knowledge are integrated within tourism higher education curricula, this paper seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of culture's role in transmitting values, preserving local cultural knowledge and skills, and fostering empowerment through education, ultimately supporting the sustainable development of tourism.

Cultural Knowledge

Culture is one of the most controversial concepts in the field of anthropology, with no consensus on its definition. While some define culture as a historical system of both explicit and implicit patterns of life that are shared among all or a specific group of members within a society at a given point in time (Kluckhohn & Kelly, 1945), others, emphasizing behavioral aspects, conceptualize it as a collection of behavioral patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions, and all intellectual and practical achievements of humanity that are socially transmitted and define the characteristics of a destination's population (Goeldner & Ritchie, 2009). In another definition, Brent Taylor (1871) views culture as a complex set of knowledge, beliefs, arts, morals, laws, customs, and other abilities and habits acquired by individuals as members of society (as cited in Welsch & Vivanco, 2020). Two key elements in this definition are the acquisitive and shared nature of culture.

The challenges in translating these definitions into practice have led to the development of alternative conceptualizations of culture, which often emphasize its cognitive aspects. In this perspective, culture is viewed as a system of organizing phenomena, behaviors, and emotions in the minds of individuals within a society, serving as frameworks for understanding, communication, and interpretation. From a cognitive standpoint, culture is conceptualized as a form of information that can be created, transmitted, and stored. In this context, culture becomes a fundamental element in tourism. Tourists, through their interactions with local communities, are exposed to behaviors, customs, and various artifacts, all of which convey cultural information—specifically, the knowledge, beliefs, skills, and values that have been acquired by hosts and shared over time (Dong & Chick, 2016).

Consequently, culture is considered a dependent variable shaped by tourism development, as tourism can influence and modify cultural practices, traditions, and ways of life (Yayla et al., 2021; Terkenli & Georgoula, 2021). At the same time, culture functions as an independent variable that influences the success and sustainability of tourism development by shaping tourist experiences, expectations, and the overall impact of tourism on host communities (Wang & Dong, 2022). In the

context of tourism education, this dual role of culture as both an independent and dependent variable is crucial. Tourism curricula must equip students to understand how tourism impacts cultural systems, as a dependent variable, and how cultural knowledge can be utilized to enhance sustainable tourism practices, as an independent variable (Almeida García et al., 2016; Ruhanen et al., 2018). By integrating cultural knowledge across different levels of tourism education, students gain the ability to critically assess both the transformative effects of tourism on culture and the potential of culture to drive sustainable tourism outcomes.

Therefore, cultural knowledge is defined as a collection of information, values, beliefs, and behaviors that manifest at three levels: the objective (such as art), the behavioral (such as social roles), and the symbolic (such as religion and beliefs) (Hidalgo, 1993). This type of knowledge is often closely linked to lived experiences, social interactions, and the cultural identity of communities. Therefore, cultural knowledge is considered a valid, dynamic, and living way of understanding the world (Gondwe & Longnecker, 2015).

In the study of cultural knowledge education, Piątkowska (2015) emphasizes the teaching of intercultural communication skills in curricula, particularly in courses related to foreign languages. On the other hand, cultural knowledge education goes beyond the acquisition of knowledge; it involves the acceptance and application of that knowledge by students. Specifically, achieving a shared cultural understanding and then applying it through cultural carriers such as language and art leads to the learning of cultural knowledge (Wan & Chew, 2013). Another key component of cultural knowledge education for sustainable tourism development is the emphasis on cultural diversity and the concept of global citizenship (UNESCO, 2019). Cultural diversity serves as a resource for exchange and innovation, which is directly linked to the concept of global citizenship. Global citizenship involves understanding and accepting cultural, social, and geographical diversity (Opstal et al., 2013). In this context, cultural knowledge education not only contributes to the sustainable management of resources but also facilitates the creation of authentic and meaningful tourism experiences for visitors.

The conceptual framework for this study is built upon the concepts discussed above (Figure 1). Education for cultural sustainable development emphasizes global citizenship education and the appreciation of diverse worldviews. Intercultural awareness education focuses on empowering and building capacity for effective intercultural interactions. By promoting the teaching of multiple languages, this approach further advocates for the value of cultural diversity. Finally, cultural and artistic education encourages students to engage in creative thinking and innovation, fostering the acceptance and creation of cultural expressions.

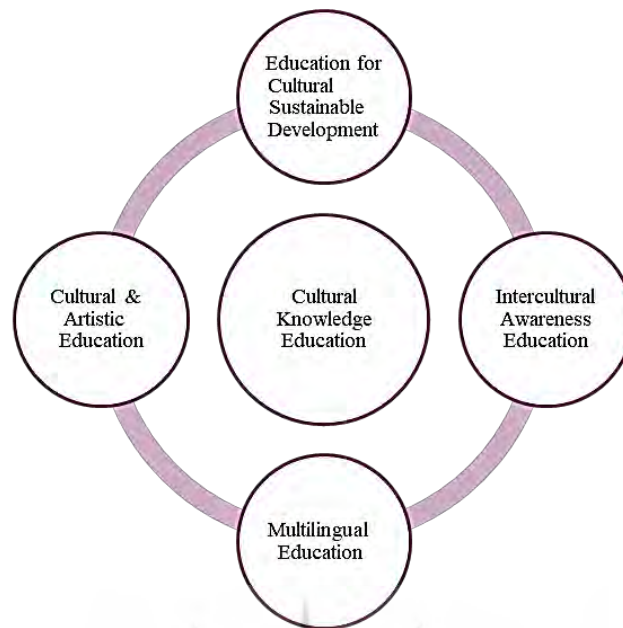


Figure 1. Key Dimensions of Cultural Knowledge Education (Adopted from UNESCO, 2019)

Tourism Higher Education in Iran

Higher education represents the final stage of the educational cycle, typically encompassing three levels: undergraduate, graduate and PhD degree programs. A well-designed curriculum serves as a cornerstone of higher education, outlining courses that reflect the core knowledge of a discipline, the learning objectives for each course, instructional content, and complementary activities such as research, workshops, field trips, and internships (Shahjahan et al., 2021). Tourism higher education, characterized by its interdisciplinary approach, integrates theoretical knowledge with practical skills to meet the dynamic and evolving demands of the tourism industry (Soofi & Daylami, 2022).

The structure of tourism higher education in Iran reflects the country's evolving approach to tourism as a vital sector for economic development. The educational framework for tourism in Iran encompasses various levels, including undergraduate and graduate programs, with a focus on both theoretical knowledge and practical skills essential for the industry (Khodadadi, 2018). Iranian, tourism programs are typically housed within faculties of management or social sciences (Khodadadi, 2018).

The first curriculum for undergraduate program, titled "Tourism Management," was introduced in 1996, comprising 132 theoretical and practical credits. After two decades, the program underwent a comprehensive revision, rebranded as "Tourism," and redefined to include 134 theoretical and practical credits. In 2001, the graduate program in Tourism Management with specializations in Tourism Marketing and Tourism Development Planning was launched, consisting of 32 theoretical credits. Finally, in 2014, the PhD program in Tourism was approved within the higher education system, offering

a curriculum with 36 theoretical credits. All three programs are currently offered in both public and private universities across Iran, with the same curricula implemented in both types of institutions.

Material And Methods

This study aims to explore the integration of cultural knowledge components within tourism curricula at the undergraduate, graduate and PhD programs in Iran. A qualitative research design was adopted, utilizing a document analysis approach to examine the tourism curricula across these programs. Qualitative content analysis served as the primary method for analyzing the textual data. As all universities offering tourism programs in Iran currently teach the three curricula at the undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral levels titled Tourism, Tourism Management and Tourism respectively, this study includes a comprehensive review of these curricula.

In the initial phase, a deductive approach was employed to identify keywords linked to cultural knowledge education components (Figure 1) within the curriculum texts. The selection of keywords was guided by cultural indicators outlined in UNESCO's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2019). Choosing the content of each course, encompassing course objectives, learning outcomes, and the topics to be covered, within the curricula as the unit of analysis, the content was scanned for mentions of keywords such as cultural diversity, sustainable cultural development, global citizenship, intercultural interaction, cultural elements, historical elements, artistic elements, and cultural values to identify courses addressing cultural knowledge.

In the subsequent phase, an inductive approach was utilized to explore cultural knowledge education components integrated within the courses through qualitative coding. To ensure the credibility and reliability of the findings, a peer debriefing process was incorporated during the analysis and coding of the curricula (Micallef et al., 2021). Debriefing sessions were held at regular intervals to critically assess the interpretations and resolve any discrepancies. During these sessions, two reviewers examined the coding framework, discussed potential biases or alternative interpretations, and ensured that the findings aligned with the data. By introducing external perspectives, the peer debriefing process helped minimize researcher bias, provided transparency in the analysis, and ensured that the interpretations were consistent and well-supported (Wittevrongel et al., 2021; Raemer et al., 2011).

The overall research process is depicted in Figure 2.

Findings

The integration of cultural knowledge into the tourism higher education curriculum was analyzed by identifying courses explicitly addressing its various components within their syllabi. This process involved searching for relevant keywords in the curricula of undergraduate, graduate and PhD programs.

Table 1 illustrates the proportion of courses incorporating cultural knowledge components across these three programs.

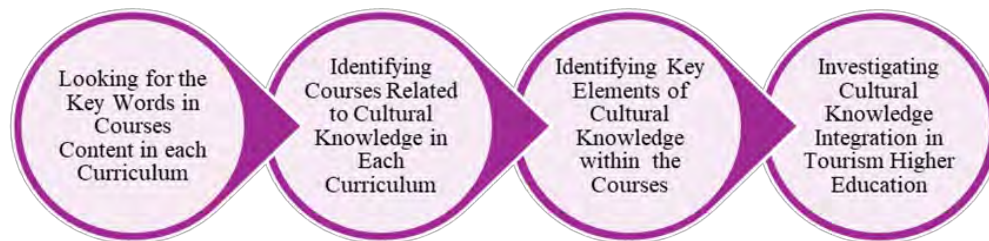


Figure 2. The Research Process

Table 1. Courses with Focus on Cultural Knowledge within Tourism Higher Education Curricula

Degree	Courses with Focus on Cultural Knowledge	Courses in Curriculum	Share
Bachelor of Art	34	66	51.51%
Master of Art	5	28	17.85%
PhD	7	21	33.33%

As depicted in Table 1, cultural knowledge components are embedded in the syllabi of over half of the undergraduate tourism courses including Human Communication in Tourism, Intercultural Communication in Islamic Countries, Cultural Studies of Nations, and Anthropology. However, at the postgraduate level, this representation declines significantly. For instance, in the graduate program specializing in Tourism Marketing and Tourism Development Planning, less than one-fifth of the courses address cultural knowledge components. Courses such as Behavioral Analysis in Tourism and Cultural Interaction and Evaluation of Tourism Development Projects are among the few that incorporate these elements.

In the next phase, the identified courses were classified to determine which components of cultural knowledge were emphasized within their content. The results of the qualitative content analysis of course syllabi revealed 16 categories that form the core components of cultural knowledge education in Iran's tourism higher education. The components can be organized under the broader dimensions of cultural knowledge education (Table 2).

Finally, figure 3 presents the distribution of the identified components of cultural knowledge across the curricula of the three programs.

Table 2. Key Elements of Cultural Knowledge within Iranian Tourism Higher Education Curricula

Key Elements of Cultural Knowledge	Key Dimensions of Cultural Knowledge Education
Cultural Policies	Education for Cultural Sustainable Development
Cultural Development Models	
Cultural Preservation Management	
Cultural Impacts Management	
Cultural Resource Management	
Intercultural Interaction	Intercultural Awareness Education
Intercultural Understanding	
Cultural Behavior Patterns	
Cultural Capacity Building	
Cultural Values	
Cultural Diversity	Cultural & Artistic Education
Cultural Components	
Artistic components	
Shared Artistic Heritage	
Shared Cultural Heritage	
Multilingual Skill	Multilingual Education

It is important to note that multilingual education appears exclusively at the undergraduate level, where the curriculum includes five courses focused on developing verbal and written proficiency in English, as well as an additional foreign language.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study aimed to examine how various components of cultural knowledge are integrated into the curricula of tourism higher education across undergraduate, graduate, and PhD programs in Iran. To achieve this, a qualitative content analysis was conducted on the curricula of these programs, identifying courses that focus on cultural knowledge. The findings revealed that the undergraduate curriculum, accounting for 51.51% of the courses, includes the highest number of cultural knowledge-related courses, followed by the doctoral and graduate programs, respectively (Table 1). The substantial difference in the number of courses can be logically attributed to the broader scope of the undergraduate program.

However, beyond the disparity in course numbers, the distinct objectives underlying the design of tourism curricula at different programs play a significant role in this variation. Specifically, the undergraduate program is designed to develop competent and skilled professionals capable of working in the operating sectors of the industry, such as travel agencies, transportation companies, tour operators, hotels, and other types of accommodations. These graduates serve primarily in front-line roles, delivering tourism services and products. As a result, equipping them with cultural knowledge—

especially in areas such as intercultural interaction, cultural and artistic education, and multilingual training—is critically important.

The undergraduate curriculum not only includes a higher number of cultural knowledge-related courses compared to other programs, but these courses are also well-suited to the program's overarching objectives (Figure 3). For instance, courses on multilingual training, which focus on equipping graduates with proficiency in various languages, are exclusively offered at the undergraduate program. Furthermore, key components of intercultural awareness, such as intercultural interaction, cross-cultural understanding, and cultural values, are integrated across several courses. However, the notable absence of courses addressing cultural diversity is a significant gap. The lack of emphasis on cultural diversity is particularly critical, as education in this area is essential for two main reasons: first, to enhance the delivery of tourism products and services to end-users (tourists), and second, to empower graduates to work effectively in culturally diverse environments and foster productive interactions with colleagues from varied cultural backgrounds. Moreover, the undergraduate curriculum stands out for its well-distributed focus on cultural and artistic education, particularly in areas such as cultural heritage, artistic components, and shared cultural heritage. These courses align closely with the program's objectives and meet the practical needs of graduates. However, the incorporation of cultural knowledge components related to cultural sustainable development in the undergraduate curriculum is limited to topics such as cultural policies and cultural development models. While this is understandable given the program's primary objectives, it underscores the need to provide undergraduate students with foundational knowledge in areas like managing cultural impacts. This foundational training could serve as a basis for more advanced coursework on cultural sustainable development at the graduate level.

Turning to the postgraduate programs, the relatively smaller emphasis on cultural knowledge-related courses within the master's program compared to the PhD program is particularly noteworthy. The number of such courses in the doctoral curriculum is nearly double that of the master's program (Table 1), despite only a marginal difference in the total number of courses offered across the two programs (28 in the master's curriculum and 21 in the doctoral curriculum). A detailed examination of the various components of cultural knowledge within the curricula of these programs, as illustrated in Figure 3, reveals an uneven distribution in both cases. The master's curriculum, in particular, exhibits significant deficiencies in incorporating several critical components. These include elements of cultural and artistic education, key components of intercultural awareness (cultural behavior patterns, cultural capacity-building, cultural values, and cultural diversity), and two essential components of cultural sustainable development education (development models and cultural impact management). The primary objective of the graduate program is to train senior-level professionals capable of managing organizational units within the tourism sector and to develop researchers equipped to address challenges

facing the industry. Considering this objective, the inadequate integration of cultural knowledge within the curriculum represents a critical weakness, undermining its potential to fully prepare students for the demands of their roles in both professional and research capacities.

Finally, the doctoral curriculum allocates 33.33% of its courses to cultural knowledge-related content (Table 1). Given the program's primary objective—to cultivate graduates capable of assuming senior management roles in public and private tourism organizations, contributing to tourism education, providing consultancy, and conducting research, the integration of diverse components of cultural knowledge, particularly those pertaining to cultural sustainable development and intercultural awareness, is of critical importance. However, the exclusion of key components, such as cultural policies, cultural development models, and cultural preservation management within the cultural sustainable development dimension, as well as cultural values and cultural capacity-building within the intercultural awareness dimension, represents a significant shortcoming for this program. On the other hand, the program's focus on cultural diversity, a component neglected at the undergraduate and graduate programs, can be regarded as a strength. Nonetheless, the uneven distribution of cultural knowledge components across the curriculum, like the imbalance observed in the graduate program, highlights a significant design deficiency. Addressing this issue is essential to enhancing the overall effectiveness of these curricula.

In conclusion, it can be argued that revisiting the curricula of tourism higher education in Iran, with a particular emphasis on the integration of various components of cultural knowledge, represents a critical priority for advancing sustainable tourism development in the country. In this regard, ensuring the alignment of cultural knowledge components with the objectives of each curriculum for the effective training of human resources required by the tourism industry, as well as achieving a balanced distribution of these components, emerge as two key criteria for the integration of cultural knowledge into tourism higher education curricula.

The findings of the present article are in line with previous studies such as Septyandi and Prawira (2022) and Güneş et al. (2012), which emphasize the existence of gaps in the curriculum regarding the integration of sustainability considerations in tourism higher education and the necessity of revising curricula to enhance the capacity of tourism education in promoting sustainable development in host communities. However, prior studies often focus on the number of sustainability-related courses (Kioupi & Voulvoulis, 2020). This paper, focusing on cultural knowledge within tourism higher education curricula, provides an in-depth approach to the content of courses in addition to the quantity of related courses. It positions this approach as a practical framework for assessing and evaluating the role of tourism education as a tool for achieving sustainable development goals. However, the integration of cultural knowledge into the curriculum of tourism higher education requires innovative pedagogical

approaches. Future research exploring innovative pedagogical approaches that enhance cultural awareness and promote sustainable practices within the tourism sector would contribute to the role of education in promoting sustainable tourism development in practice.

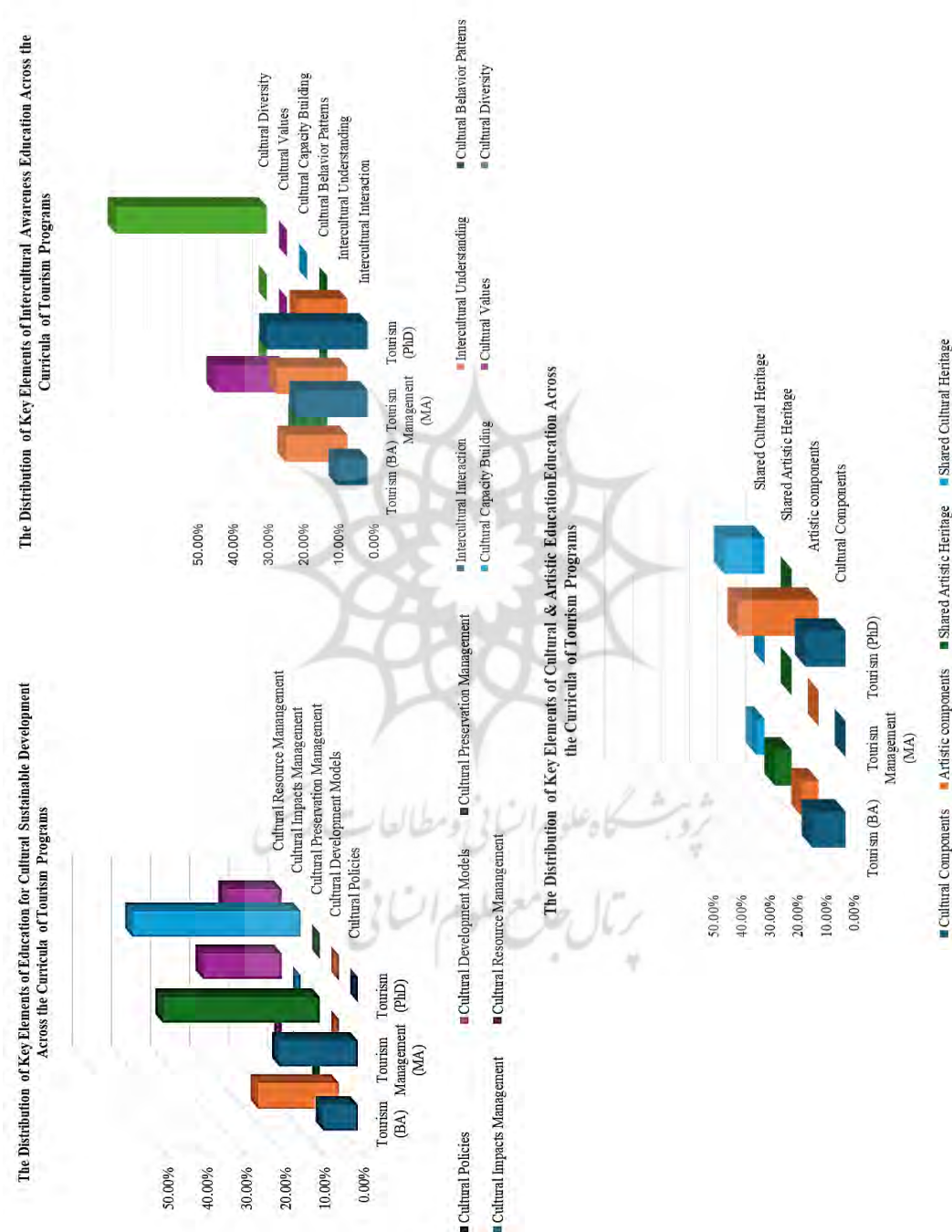


Figure 3. The Distribution of Cultural Knowledge Components Across the Curricula of Tourism Higher Education Programs

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