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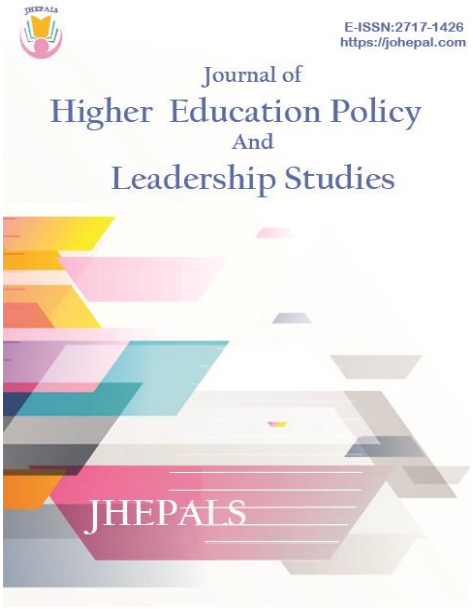
A Reflection on Organizational Adaptation & Higher Education in Iran: What Are the Building Blocks?



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A Reflection on Organizational Adaptation & Higher Education in Iran: What Are the Building Blocks?

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Abstract

University as an organization must follow the same rules and regulations in terms of its members and other stakeholders to achieve the goals and objectives of the strategic plans. Universities and colleges in centralized governing policy-making systems usually perform the policies from outside the campus with no choice to revolutionize their organizational structure. The result can be imperfect implementation of their strategic plans with no commitment to the national development plans. In this regard, organizational adaptation is introduced as a panacea to increase the congruence between the public's priorities and challenges out of the campus with the universities' strategic plans. Here, we reflection on the building blocks towards successful implementation of organizational adaptation in Iranian higher education system. To do so, 36 higher education professionals with previous/ current leadership experience in university and/ or out of college are purposefully recruited to participate in this research. As a qualitative research; critical policy analysis and grounded theory shape the research design. Our participants responded to the interview questions as the only source of data collection submitted trough email. Practical and easy to use solutions are offered for the governing and leadership team of the universities to update their structure for successful implementation of organizational adaptation.

Keywords: Organizational Adaptation; Higher Education; Centralized Policy-Making; Strategic Plans; Critical Policy Analysis; Grounded Theory

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Introduction

While universities and colleges focus on their earlier defined missions - education and research- we witness urgent shifts of their focus over the recent years with emphasis on public priorities and concerns (political, economic, social, climate, war, genocide, etc.). It means HEIs' voice and ideas are considered as keys to the success of national strategic plans. In the same line, the United Nations introduced the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to help countries move based on the seventeen priorities to bring successful and thriving life for their people. These goals now are integrated into teaching and research priorities of HEIs worldwide. So, service to the public, and training proficient new generation of future citizens of the countries are at the core of all global higher education decision- and policy-making programs. HEIs are no longer considered as a place to transfer already available knowledge into students' minds; but as a scene of play where different groups of actors try to impose their power on the governing boards' decisions and policies. This happens as universities and colleges are also treated as organizations; so, the prevalent ideological and political visions out of the campus have their effects on leadership practices of the governing team at universities. A review of the motto, vision, and mission of universities (autonomy, humanity, wisdom, awareness, equality, justice, collaboration, etc.) highlights the ideal horizon and utopia of HEIs is to train the future generation who are committed to knowledge, wisdom, and awareness towards surrounding community. In this regard, the analysis mission statements of universities and colleges now receives high priority (Devies & Guthrie, 2022; Devies et al., 2023; Winfield & Pressimone Beckowski, 2023; Guthrie & Devies, 2024) to see if HEIs are committed to their mission and vision or not. Bourner et al. (2020, p. 3) highlight the following three goals of Western university over the years and through developments stages "(1) the HE of students, (2) the advancement of knowledge and (3) service to the world outside the walls of the university". Collaboration between universities and industries in china, for instance, can be a good example of joint programs to in this area (Abbas et al., 2019, p. 23). However, in most cases, universities and colleges fail to meet these priorities. Like other organizations out of the campus; they are also manipulated by the political authorities and power; so condemned to accept what are dictated as higher education policies. Giroux and Polychroniou (2008, p. 44) well illuminate society impacts the university governance and puts and end to the HEIs' success to achieve their goals "corporate leaders are now hired as university presidents, tenure-track professors are replaced by contract employees, students are touted as customers, and learning is increasingly defined as instrumental, …". In this regard, the ideal situation is that university as an organization has constructive effects on its surrounding community; and is not supervised/ manipulated by the organizations of power.

The important and noteworthy point is that university as a cradle to nurture and train wise, skilled and expert people for different situations, must always maintain its key position and role in decision- and policy-making among other organizations out of college walls. According to EUA (2021, p. 5) "when looking to the future, we envision universities without walls; these are universities that are open and engaged in society while retaining their core values". One important key to the success of HEIs to achieve this goal is incorporating organizational adaptation beliefs and best practices into their leadership and governing policies. Sarta et al. (2020, p. 46) conceptualized adaptation as

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Organizational Adaptation in HE

> (a) *intentional*, that is, rooted in organizational members' awareness of their environment, resulting in a choice to react to, anticipate, or ignore changes in the environment; (b) *relational*, whereby organizations and environments influence one another; (c) *conditioned*, since environmental characteristics also depend on, and evolve with, other organizations' actions; and (d) *convergent*, in that organizations seeking to adapt are attempting to move closer to a set of environmental characteristics.

So, for a successful organizational adaptation in HE there should be total engagement between governing boards and the leadership team of the universities with all stakeholders as staff (academic/ admin), researchers, students, and the public. One of the recommendations by the National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983) to support the US (higher)education is emphasizes the role of engaging stakeholders to help the success of future of education:

> The task of assuring the success of our recommendations does not fall to the schools and colleges alone. Obviously, faculty members and administrators, along with policymakers and the mass media, will play a crucial role in the reform of the educational system (p. 128).

It is important to note that the university, from its central role in producing knowledge and transferring information, has acquired a multifaceted nature, and to achieve each of them, it is necessary to have participation of all members in decision-making meetings, cooperation among all departments within the university, to work in line with the policies and needs of the surrounding society, and to take into account competition in the international arena.

The success of individuals, the requirements and characteristics of a productive and ideal organization: agility, being up-to-date, equality, power, arrangement of individuals, the characteristics of the leader and managers, and participation has an enriched history as long as human-being. These concepts also have undergone changes in terms of policy-making and providing the conditions for the organization's life based on the conditions of each era, the requirements of societies, governments and administrations in different times. An organization can be depicted not in a stereotypical form and structure, but as a collection of individuals with specific goals and policies that are pursued by managers and leaders with a specific budget to achieve success in line with the vision.

An undeniable point for individual success is the use of experiences and collective wisdom, which greatly reduces the irreparable costs of trial and error. Therefore, organizations with diverse intellectual, religious, cultural, economic, educational, and ethnic background need to accept the already confirmed and practical solutions and experiences of successful organizations worldwide. Hence, all organizations will be required to adapt to the best approaches for their success. According to Barnhardt and Phillips (2017, p. 93)

> When the social institution of higher education offers the promise of being a site for advancing social justice, equal opportunity and inclusion, we as scholars must work to decipher the organizational dynamics that allow campuses to do these things, to continue doing these things across time and contexts, and to cultivate

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> organizational capacities for engaging in administrative routines that foster justice and equity.

When organization adaptation is introduced into HE research; Cameron and Bilimoria (1985, p. 116) highlight that

> as the environment in which institutions of higher education function becomes more and more competitive, both internationally and in the domestic arena, the quality and effectiveness of colleges and universities demand new and dynamic interpretations to match the changing needs of strategic constituencies.

In alignment with these organizational changes and updates; Keller (2008, p. ix) emphasize that

> our basic organizational structures are no longer adequate for social or educational needs. They resist shifting human and material resources across departmental lines ... We need a new structure inside the university that actually meets the needs of those whom we are serving.

For successful implementation of HEIs' strategic plans, there should be total agreement between the leadership team and governing boards, the organization members, and the goals/ mission/ vision. Shaw (2006, p. xii) well illuminates the reason for success of leadership team of the American HEIs "from the recession of the early 1990s through the shock of 9/11"

> the leaders of these institutions, in collaboration with their boards, their faculty colleagues, their administrative staff members, and their external constituencies, have charted successful paths that have not simply kept their institutions functioning at the same level in times of fiscal stringency but have taken them forward to new heights of academic achievement in both teaching and scholarship.

Power is another important concept which is introduced into the HEI context which supports or hinders the success of organizations to achieve their goals. Power is one of the most widely used concepts in the field of management and organization. Despite all the research on the positive and constructive effects of its intelligent and wise use, it can be very dangerous and create a toxic environment in the organization. In some cases, it can be defined as "arising from the people, transmitted by libertarian, egalitarian and rationalist ends to that it becomes, in effect, not power but only exercise of the people's own will" (Nisbet, 1993, p. 40 as cited in Clegg et al., 2006, p. 384). In this sense, power works as a trigger to motivate the organization members' zeal and zest to speed up the activities to move based on the strategic plan, mission, and vision of the organization to achieve their goals. Long Lingo and McGinn (2020) also introduce a constructive overview of power in organization with three dimensions:

> Situational power rests on the ability to align objectives, the environment, and bases of power. Relational power is about connections and coalitions: They can be a major source of support, advice, information, and resources-but if

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> neglected or ignored, they can loom as potential points of resistance. Dynamic power involves continually adapting influence strategies to changes in organizational and social systems. The degree to which leaders draw on all three dimensions of power determines how effectively they get things done.

However, in most cases, the concept of power is misunderstood by the management board and the employees. This leads to failure of the organization to achieve their goals as toxic environment prevails the organization. Knights and Roberts (1982, p. 47) present this misunderstanding of the power:

> both management and staff typically act on the basis of a false understanding of the nature of power. Power is typically treated as if it were an individual possession, rather than as a relationship between people. Consequently, managers ignore or attempt to deny their ultimate dependence on staff, and use their power coercively. Staff respond with various counter coercive strategies. The result is a series of vicious circles which seriously undermine the productive potential of the relationship between management and staff.

Rus (1980, p. 3) also highlights that "positive power (induction), as an ability to initiate activity, and negative power (resistance), as an ability to stop some activity, are treated .. as two closely related poles of the same power cycle". Further, he argues that "successful leadership can provoke greater induction than resistance". Mumby and Stohl (1991, p. 317) views power "as a structured and relational feature of organizational life which frames both the identity formation and disciplining of organization members". Another keyword for the success of HEIs in obtaining their goals to help surrounding communities is organizational adaptation as Eaton and Stevens (2020, p. 1) believe that

> Universities are positionally central to the institutional order of modern societies, providing working links between state, market, civil society, and private-sphere organizations. Universities are polysemic, embodying civic, economic, and sacred meanings simultaneously. And universities are quasi-sovereign, enjoying a substantial margin of jurisdiction over their own boundaries and internal affairs.

According to Boin et al. (2016, p. 3) define adaptation as "the organizational capacity to implement changes that restore or maintain a fit with the ever-changing expectations and values of key stakeholders. We thus define adaptation as a goal-oriented activity, and not as the random outcome of small changes". We witness extensive changes in our community so HEIs are obliged to cope with these (unprecedented) changes to meet the requirements of the society. Chirico and Salvato (2008) believes that "the speed of change in competitive environments has driven firms to develop processes directed at changing existing capabilities—their idiosyncratic, path-dependent ways of doing business—and increasing their strategic adaptiveness and competitive fit" (p. 169). It also needs to be mentioned that

> The people within adaptive organizations understand how their work contributes to outcomes, share a sense of pride and responsibility for those

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> outcomes, know how they are held accountable for those outcomes, know that their management supports their efforts to achieve the outcomes, and know that time is essential. (Cross, 2013, p. 4)

HE in Iran is governed by centralized policies of the state; so, almost all policies are imposed by the higher order authorities of the ministry as well as governing groups out of the educational context. It is believed that universities and colleges in Iran fail to meet the requirements of the public as their only focus remains on teaching, research, and exhaustive hard working to meet the requirements of their promotion. Teaching at the undergraduate levels remains at the theoretical levels with no outlook for the success of the graduates for the employment. Students at the graduate and post-graduate levels, specially in social sciences and humanities, pass almost the same path like their undergraduate and K-12 studies. The syllabi and curricula are overwhelmed with extensive loads of reading materials for the sake of assessments and testing. We rarely see public priorities and urgencies to be taught in the classes for solutions by the HE community. Research also pass the same journey within HE community as there is no alignment with the HEIs' strategic plans; needs, policies, and priorities of each region; seventeen priorities of the UN SDGs 2030; and also the national plans. So, research as a final step for (post)graduate students' defense program receives high priority in the HE context of Iran.

We believe that the concept of organizational adaptation with its practices and policies has lost its place within the policy-making bodies of Iran; hence, the present research aims to identify the building blocks in administering organizational adaptation within the HE community of Iran.

Research Methodology: Design, Context, Analysis

We aim to portrait the realities of HE community in Iran which avoids successful implementation of organizational adaptation. We aim to remind the higher education policy-makers that HEIs' contributions to the society must be back to the top priorities of our universities. In this regard, we have a good understanding the corresponding team who are competent enough to highlight the building blocks which avoids successful implementation of organizational adaptation in universities of Iran. So, according to Author Services (n.d.)

> The methodology you select will determine the type of data you collect, how you collect it, and how you analyse it. Understanding the different types of research methods available along with their strengths and weaknesses, is thus imperative to make an informed decision.

This research is part of a nation-wide project as Ph.D. dissertation. We aim to inform our policy-makers about the place of HEIs in government policy-making sessions; and the potential practical step-wise guidelines to help universities and colleges provide services to the public based on their strategic plans; and move based on national plans. So, we believe that "the researcher's task is to provide policy-maker with information and perhaps advice. It assumes a case for action, in terms of either the introduction of a new policy, or the revision of an existing one" (Gordon et al., 1997, p. 6). In this regard, our research is guided

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by the Jenkins's (1997, p. 35) Model of Policy Process (Figure 1) with an understanding of all social, political, religious, cultural, international, economic, and ethnic considerations which might manipulate the higher education policies which are submitted to the universities and colleges under the centralized governing practices of HE in Iran.

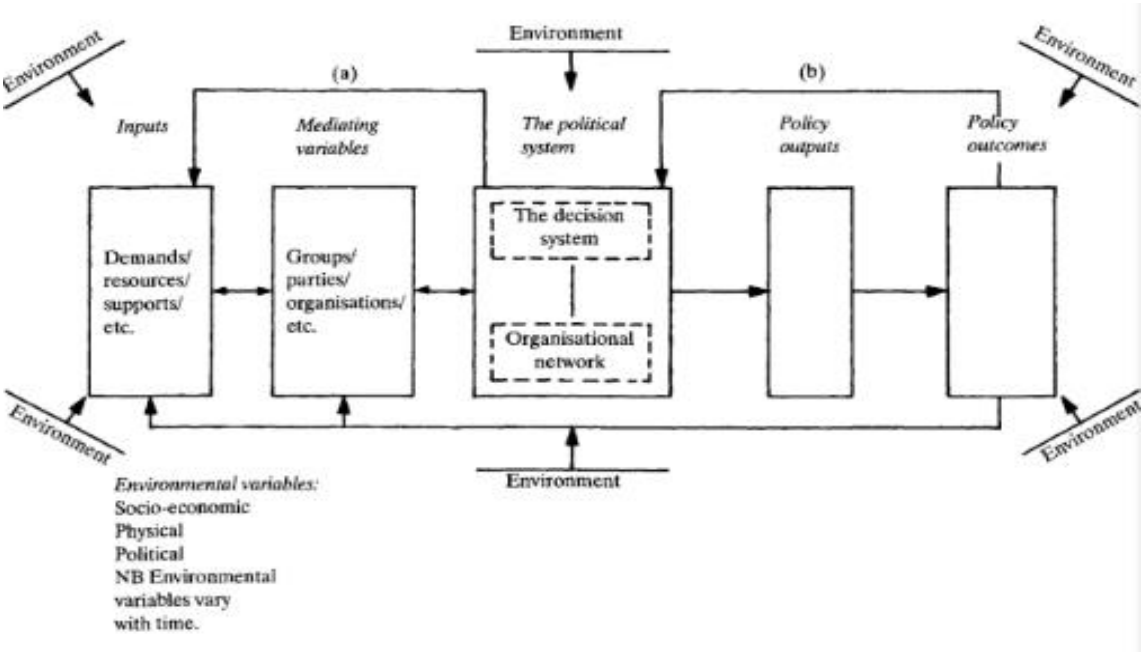

Figure 1. Jenkin's Model of Policy Process (adapted from Jenkins, 1997, p. 35)

Further, critical policy analysis guides our research as we have the same concerns as Young and Diem's (2017, p. 4) concerns:

> 1. Concern regarding the difference between policy rhetoric and practiced reality 2. Concern regarding the policy, its roots, and its development (e.g., how it emerged, what problems it was intended to solve, how it changed and developed over time, and its role in reinforcing the dominant culture) 3. Concern with the distribution of power, resources, and knowledge as well as the creation of policy "winners" and "losers" 4. Concern regarding social stratification and the broader effect a given policy has on relationships of inequality and privilege 5. Concern regarding the nature of resistance to or engagement in policy by members of nondominant groups.

Khorsandi Taskoh (2014, p. 56) also highlights that "in critical policy research, it is significant to know how policy values are directed and organized around a set of policy statements". So, our research is qualitative in nature as we must obtain the experiences of the HE leadership team in the context of Iran. According to Lapan et al. (2012, p. 3) "qualitative research from the critical theoretical view uses interpretive frameworks but also reveals ways that power is embedded in social contexts". In alignment with the nature of the present research, we adopted grounded theory and followed the Chun Tie et al.'s (2019, p. 3) research design framework.

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Our 36 participants are purposefully selected based on their current/ previous leadership experience in higher education as well as their membership in governments' ministries in Iran and worldwide. 20 emeritus Iranian participants had previous leadership positions (chancellor: 1/ vice-chancellor: 19) with the following ranks (Professor: 7; Associate Prof.: 10; Assistant Prof.: 3). Some also had previous/ current management positions in other state organizations. In alignment with the nature of research question and to provide enriched and globally approved guidelines for our policy-makers in Iran; we also recruited 16 leaders from international universities (chancellor: 3/ vice-chancellor: 13) with the following academic ranks (Professor: 7; Associate Prof.: 9). They also had current/ previous membership in (non)government organizations. We have provided our participants with the approved version of the interview questions as the only source of data collection. We have also asked them to sign the informed consent form prior to data collection. We used the Strauss and Corbin's (1998) Constant Comparative Method of Data Analysis.

Results

One of the drawbacks and pitfalls which leads to the failure of HEIs to obtain the goals/ objectives of the national development plans and their Strategic Plans is looking for the reasons of their failures out of college. Organizations (universities and colleges in our case) must revolutionize their strategies and structures with the collaboration of all the stakeholders of higher education. In the centralized decision- and policy-making environment of higher education in Iran; almost all policies are addressed to the middle and bottom levels of pyramid of power with nearly no engagement of the stakeholders in decision-making meetings. One immediate panacea is the HEIs' commitment to their own strategic plans and restructuring and reengineering their mission and vision. The centralized system of policy-making of the government, in most cases, happens within the context of universities and colleges. This behavior creates "all for one" mentality so other members of the HEI lose their motivation to work enthusiastically for the sake of the organization's success. This "all for one" atmosphere is the result of "one for all" policy-making practice which is usual in centralized governing countries. Table 1 present an overview of the themes emerged to illuminate the building blocks which hinder or postpone the organizational adaptation in HEIs of Iran.

Table 1.
Building blocks: Organizational Adaptation in HE

Internal Factors	Human Capital: Low Efficiency – Inefficient Organization Structure	Assessment-based Teaching: Students' Surface Knowledge
		Admin Staff: Clichéd Duties – No Responsibility
		Academic Staff: Conflict of Interest – Survive
		Board of Directors: Government in University
External Factors	Red Tape: Multiple Policy-making Organizations	
	Multiple List of Universities/ Colleges: Forget Quality for the Sake of Quantity	

Internal Factors -- Human Capital: Low Efficiency – Inefficient Organization Structure

Assessment-based Teaching: Students' Surface Knowledge

Students experience twelve-year-continuum of training in public education (6-3-3). The main policy also governs the educational practices of early years at the schools; hence, the

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real mission is the same! Our students must enter universities. Unfortunately, it is believed that success means access to higher education. In this regard, almost all educational policies are in alignment with such a theme that students must be proficient enough to succeed in a one-shot 3-4-hour fast test at the last year of K-12 educational cycle. We believe that the emphasis on testing is misleading even our K-12 teaching practices as what usually happens in schools is not training students to be competent citizens of the future society; rather, they are only trained to be successful students in assessments. These students comprise the undergraduate community of the universities with a 12 years of testing-based teaching at schools. So, they are not trained to think out of the box and, in some cases, no questions/ queries arise from college classes. The reality of teaching and learning is to empower the students with critical thinking and questioning the hidden scene which leads to biased and unfair practices in society and impaired graduates with no competency for successful life out of college.

> Higher education the other side of the same coin: K-12 [Participant #4]
> Competency is forgotten: memorization is appreciated [Participant #12]
> Impaired generation to solve critical problems [Participant # 21]
> Unemployment rate of HE graduates: Increasing rate of crimes [Participant #9]
> University creates crises and challenges [Participant #18]
> Shallow learning and illusion of knowing [Participant #1]
> No dialogue, less team work, no caring and sharing [Participant #23]

Admin Staff: Clichéd Duties – No Responsibility

Universities and colleges in Iran like most organizations follow a centralized government-based path to recruit admin staff. It needs to be mentioned that there are some quotas which work as veto right; so, those appointed for the positions, in some cases, might even have no relevant educational background or professional experience to meet the requirements of the position. Our staff are used to clichéd daily activities based on their jobs with a focus on duties. So, responsibilities, in most cases, are taken for granted.

> Toxic working conditions with no chance to thrive [Participant #23]
> Living costs, no balance between personal life and work load – exhausted staff [Participant #34]
> Focus on jobs and duties than responsibilities [Participant #16]
> Admin staff: servants of academic staff [Participant #32]

Academic Staff: Conflict of Interest – Survive

Recruitment of academic staff in Iran is so rigid, tough, and exhaustive enough which is like an unfair and biased competition. So, all ideal and utopia of Ph.D. graduates is to enter the HE community just as a panacea for all the pressures they experienced over the years. It is also a good way to receive monthly salary for, at least, 30 years of full-time academic appointment while there is no balance between income and living costs to have an ideal personal life. As an academic staff, he/ she tries not to be a victim of winning political parties in universities. In this case, the newly appointed academic staff puts survival in the university as his/ her top priority and tries to accept unconditionally what are imposed by the

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leadership team. So, there would be no questioning of biases, unfairness, injustices from the academic staff.

> Commitment to the prevailing political practices with no questioning of biases and injustice [Participant #35]
> No plan based on the HEI's strategic plan [Participant #27]
> New academic staff not selected by the department – Quotas veto others [Participant #11]

Board of Directors: Government in University

The university chancellor/ president is appointed by the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution which is a completely political practice. Governments appoint the chancellors based on the priorities of their political party; so, the university community has no role in this regard. Board of directors can be considered as a local government to supervise the universities and colleges based on the prevailing ideals of the current government. However, it should be kept in mind that the centralized governing and policy-making system of higher education in Iran limits the potentials and competencies of the board of directors to act based the needs, policies, and priorities of each region.

> No power except those assigned by the outside policy-makers [Participant #6]
> Government's representative on the campus [Participant #5]
> To control the HE community [Participant #28]
> University as a place for political campaign [Participant #15]

External Factors

Red Tape: Multiple Policy-making Organizations

Though our policy-making happens based on a centralized system; however, we have numerous decision-making organizations at the top level of pyramid of power. In some cases, the policies are imposed by organizations whose staff have no practical and on-campus leadership positions. So, it seems some policies are made with no real context for implementation as it happens in a vacuum. Recruitment of international academic staff and researchers, for instance, is not permitted based on the higher order policies of the state. Our higher education community suffers from excessive bureaucracy.

> Each organization exerts pressures and power on HE community [Participant #22]
> Organizations with power: Manipulation of higher education policies [Participant #8]

Multiple List of Universities/ Colleges: Forget Quality for the Sake of Quantity

Unfortunately, HE community in Iran suffers from lack of quality education as the priority is given to the quantity. Recently, we have witnessed an increasing number of higher education institutions which are affiliated to (non)government organizations. Some with more freedom in recruitment of academic staff, employment of staff, and extensive funding fail to provide quality education and applied research to meet the requirements of the country.

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Organizational Adaptation in HE

> There is no collaboration between HE and industry [Participant #7]
> Each organization has a college [Participant #19]
> No commitment to the national development plans [Participant #12]
> Strategic Plan as a missing link for universities [Participant #14]
> Each college/ university issues (post)graduate degrees with no employment opportunity [Participant #4]

Final Words

If we aim to help the higher education sector in Iran to move based on the global trends with a focus on national priorities, the UN SDGs 2030, and their own developed strategic plans; we have to reengineer the organizational structure and adopt organizational adaptation requirements. In this case, we need to update the recruitment procedures for the admin staff with priority to output-based performance appraisal and salary payment. The ratio of admin staff to academic and students is no longer a priority except for the ranking systems, so, outsourcing and remote working opportunities can be a solution to avoid extra payments with no satisfactory results. Ministry of Education, MSRT, and Ministry of Health and Medical Education now work independently while they are governed by the same policy-making bodies. There is no way to succeed except developing joint strategic plans in terms of teaching, assessment, research, recruitment of teaching staff, potentials of each region, and priority to offer solutions for available challenges and problems than publication in journals. Reengineering as a step towards successful implementation of organizational adaptation needs quality higher education systems than extensive number of institutions with no commitment to the society. In centralized governing systems, the policy-makers look for immediate solutions for long-lasting problems and crises; so, our policy-makers need to accept the urgency of a national reform in (higher)education policies with the collaboration of competent and professional staff (no matter of their gender, political party, educational background, ethnicity, etc.) as, in some cases, prior professional experience must be given priority to a university degree.

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As this manuscript is co-authored by the editors-in-chief, the following issues are considered:

- Two members of the editorial team were working on the manuscript (on behalf of editors-in-chief) in its initial editorial screening.
- Two other members of the editorial team (while the authors' identifying information was kept as anonymous) joined the team to pursue further review of the research.
- Potential reviewers were identified and they received the revised version based on the comments.
- Another round of review was administered to maximize the scientific merits of the research and avoid biased editorial decision-making.

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Originality Note

The paper is the authors' original work, and proper citations are used if others' works are included.

Use of Generative AI/ AI-assisted Technologies Statement

The authors claimed that there is "No Use of Generative AI/ AI-assisted Technologies" in preparing this paper.

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