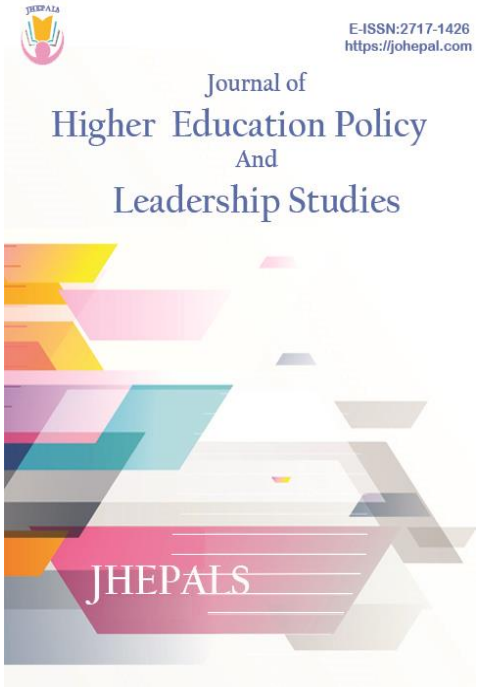
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Four Decades of Academic Services in Iranian Higher Education: An Interview with Prof. Ali Meghdari

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Interview

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Ali Meghdari *



Professor Ali Meghdari has devoted over 38 years to advancing higher education in Iran. A pioneer in mechanical engineering, social robotics, and interdisciplinary research, he has also played a key role in national higher education policy, serving on academic boards, research councils, and advisory committees. Now, he leads Fereshtegan International University, Iran's first and only fully inclusive university, serving deaf and hard-of-hearing students, as well as students with other disabilities.

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https://scholar.google.com/citations?user=Au9vVMUAAAAJ&hl=en
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JHEPALS has the honor and privilege to publish an exclusive interview with Prof. Ali Meghdari, with extensive leadership, research, and teaching experience within the higher education context of Iran. He brings novel and innovative ideas for the success of HE leadership, drawing on the best practices of higher education worldwide in terms of teaching, research, and leadership.

We are sure that Prof. Ali Meghdari's insightful, illuminating, and critical responses will be of interest to a broad audience of international researchers, students, policymakers, and leaders in Higher Education.

Question #1

Based on your enormous leadership experience in higher education, how do you see "Higher Education Policy and Leadership" in Iran?

What have we received from the past (from introducing HE in Iran up to now)? What do we have now (Strengths & Weaknesses)? What do we need for the future (short- and long-term)?

Answer:

Iranian higher education has grown impressively, but the focus must now shift to quality, relevance, and innovation. Effective leadership requires striking a balance between academic excellence, research productivity, and ethical governance while also responding to societal needs. Policies should emphasize meritocracy, transparency, interdisciplinary collaboration, and global engagement, ensuring universities serve both national development and cultivate responsible global citizens. In my view, education is not a privilege—it is a human right. Universities must empower all students to thrive academically and socially. Effective higher education policy and leadership in Iran must evolve toward a more evidence-based, transparent, and globally engaged model. We need to shift from quantity-oriented growth to quality-driven development, emphasizing innovation, interdisciplinary collaboration, and the nurturing of critical and creative thinkers. Leadership at the institutional level should empower faculty and students alike, promoting a culture of autonomy, accountability, and academic freedom—all essential for meaningful progress.

Furthermore, our policy framework must better align university outputs with national needs—not only in terms of industry and technology but also in addressing social, environmental, and ethical challenges. Ultimately, I believe Iran possesses exceptional human potential and intellectual resources. With visionary leadership and a clear policy direction that values both tradition and innovation, our higher education system can play a transformative role in shaping a more prosperous, just, and knowledge-based society.

As a point of weakness, "Equity and Access" in Iranian Higher Education is indeed a pressing concern. While Iran's higher education system has expanded remarkably in recent decades, equal access to opportunity remains uneven. Admission to top universities has become closely tied to socioeconomic background, as students from privileged families often attend

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well-resourced private or semi-private high schools and institutions that offer superior preparation for the national entrance examination (Konkoor). Such disparities risk limiting social mobility and undermine the core mission of universities—to serve as engines of equity, inclusion, and national development. Addressing this imbalance requires systemic attention at multiple levels:

- Reforming admission and assessment systems: Greater emphasis should be placed on students' holistic abilities, creativity, and social commitment, not just test scores.
- Expanding public access to quality secondary education: Investment in teacher training, school infrastructure, and equitable funding can reduce the performance gap between affluent and less advantaged students.
- Scholarships and support programs: Universities should offer targeted financial aid, mentoring, and academic bridging programs for talented students from underrepresented or low-income backgrounds.
- Promoting inclusive university cultures: Beyond admission, universities must cultivate supportive learning environments that help all students—regardless of background—flourish academically and socially.

"A truly excellent university is not defined by whom it admits, but by how effectively it enables all students to realize their potential."

As educators and policymakers, we must work toward a system where every capable student, regardless of economic status, can access and succeed in quality higher education. This is not only a matter of fairness but also essential for the long-term intellectual and social vitality of the nation.

Question #2

You have served on numerous government boards, including the Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology (MSRT), as well as HEIs in Iran. Please list some of those leadership positions in chronological order, and explain the following questions:

Answer:

During my 38 years of academic and administrative service, I have been privileged to contribute to Iranian higher education through a range of leadership and advisory roles, including:

- Chair, Department of Mechanical Engineering, Sharif University of Technology (4 years)
- Founding Director, Center of Excellence in Design, Robotics & Automation, Sharif University of Technology (20 years)
- Vice President for Academic Affairs, Sharif University of Technology (9 years)
- Founding Chancellor of IAU-Fereshtegaan International University (7 years)
- Advisor to the Deputy Minister in Education, Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology (MSRT) (2 years)
- Member, National Elites Foundation Council (4 years)
- Affiliate Member, Iran's Academy of Sciences (10 years)

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- Member of several National Scientific and Policy Committees on curriculum reform, innovation ecosystems, faculty promotion, and research evaluation

These experiences have provided me with a comprehensive understanding of both the strategic policy dimensions and the institutional realities of higher education governance in Iran.

#2-1: What are the high priorities of Academic Governance in Iran?

Iran's higher education system has expanded rapidly over recent decades, achieving significant progress in accessibility and capacity building. However, the current stage of development requires a decisive shift from quantitative growth toward qualitative excellence. Accordingly, I see the following as the principal priorities for academic governance in Iran:

- Quality Assurance and Accreditation – Establishing rigorous mechanisms to ensure academic standards, research integrity, and institutional accountability.
- Autonomy and Accountability – Empowering universities to make independent academic and financial decisions while maintaining transparent and responsible oversight.
- Innovation and Interdisciplinary Development – Encouraging collaboration across disciplines to address complex scientific, technological, and societal challenges.
- Internationalization – Expanding meaningful global partnerships, joint programs, and scholarly exchanges.
- Ethical and Inclusive Leadership – Promoting governance practices grounded in integrity, inclusivity, and service to society.

These priorities require coherent policy alignment and sustained commitment at both the governmental and institutional levels.

#2-2: How do you see the collaboration between Government-HEIs, HEIs-HEIs, and Industry-HEIs?

Effective collaboration is a cornerstone of a dynamic and responsive higher education ecosystem. In Iran, the relationships among government, universities, and industry have evolved significantly, although several challenges remain.

- Government–HEIs: The Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology has played a crucial role in strategic planning and regulation. Nevertheless, greater institutional autonomy and trust-based governance are necessary to enhance universities' innovative capacities.
- HEIs–HEIs: There is an encouraging trend toward inter-university partnerships, particularly in shared research centers and graduate programs. However, bureaucratic complexities and competition for limited resources still hinder broader collaboration.

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- Industry–HEIs: While national emphasis on a "knowledge-based economy" has increased awareness, practical mechanisms for technology transfer, joint R&D, and research commercialization remain underdeveloped. Strengthening this interface is vital for sustainable national innovation.

The success of these collaborations ultimately depends on mutual respect, shared objectives, and continuity—values that must be embedded in both policy and institutional culture.

#2-3: As a member of those leadership teams, what have been your concerns and how have those changed over time?

At the beginning of my academic career, my concerns were largely structural and operational: improving educational facilities, updating curricula, and enhancing faculty capabilities. Over time, as I became more engaged in national policymaking, my focus broadened toward strategic and systemic issues—balancing expansion with excellence, ensuring fairness in academic promotion, and fostering a sustainable research culture.

Today, my concerns have taken on a more humanistic and societal dimension. I believe that the ultimate purpose of higher education is not solely to produce skilled professionals but to cultivate ethical, creative, and socially responsible citizens. Hence, my greatest aspiration is to see Iran's universities evolve into spaces where knowledge, compassion, and innovation coexist—where governance serves not merely as administration but as a form of intellectual and moral leadership.

Question #3

How do you think about synergy between universities with special focus on Humanities and Social Sciences, Engineering, and Basic Science?

Answer:

The future of higher education—both in Iran and globally—depends on our ability to transcend disciplinary boundaries and create genuine synergy among the Humanities and Social Sciences, Engineering, and Basic Sciences. In my view, these domains are not isolated silos but complementary pillars of a holistic academic ecosystem.

For many years, universities in Iran, like those in much of the world, have developed along disciplinary lines, often with limited interaction among faculties. While this specialization has contributed to deep scientific advancement, it has also created a form of intellectual fragmentation that limits our capacity to address complex real-world problems—issues such as sustainability, social equity, ethics in technology, and human well-being.

True synergy arises when we recognize that scientific and technological progress must be guided by humanistic insight, and that social and ethical understanding can be deepened through the application of scientific reasoning. Engineering and the Basic Sciences provide the tools and methods for innovation; Humanities and Social Sciences offer the frameworks

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to assess the social impact, ethical implications, and cultural context of those innovations. The integration of these perspectives leads to responsible innovation—knowledge and technology that serve humanity rather than merely advancing technical capability.

From an institutional standpoint, this synergy can be cultivated through:

- Interdisciplinary curricula and research centers that unite scholars from diverse fields around shared societal challenges.
- Joint graduate programs that encourage dual competencies—such as technology and ethics, or engineering and sociology.
- Collaborative platforms where students and researchers from different disciplines co-design solutions to national and global problems.
- Policy incentives that reward interdisciplinary projects and promote academic collaboration beyond departmental boundaries.

At Sharif University of Technology, we have made efforts in this direction—for instance, through the Human and Social Robotics Program, which brings together engineering, psychology, linguistics, art, and design to study human–robot interaction. Such initiatives demonstrate that when technological innovation is informed by human-centered understanding, it becomes more meaningful, ethical, and sustainable.

Ultimately, I believe that the true strength of a university system lies not in its individual disciplines but in the depth of its interconnections. By bridging the technical with the humanistic, and the analytical with the ethical, we prepare a generation of scholars and professionals capable of leading Iran—and the world—toward a more balanced, compassionate, and intelligent future.

Question #4

As a Distinguished Professor of Mechanical Engineering at Sharif University of Technology (Tehran, Iran), how do you see:

#4-1: Students' life experiences and their expectations from HE policy and leadership in Iran.

Today's university students in Iran belong to a generation shaped by rapid global transformation—technological, social, and cultural. Their aspirations go beyond acquiring degrees; they seek purpose, empowerment, and global relevance. Many students expect universities to provide not only academic knowledge but also life skills, career readiness, and opportunities for personal growth. However, this expectation also brings new responsibilities to higher education leadership. We must design policies that are more student-centered, more inclusive, and better aligned with the realities of modern life. Iranian universities should nurture environments where students feel heard, respected, and supported, where their creativity is encouraged, and where learning is viewed as a lifelong pursuit rather than a pathway to a credential.

#4-2: Teaching-Learning environment in classes: Teaching practices, Academic Staff-Students Dialogue, and Best assessment practices.

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The classroom is the true heart of the university, where teaching and learning intersect as a shared intellectual journey. At Sharif University of Technology, and indeed across many Iranian HEIs, we have witnessed an evolution from traditional lecture-based instruction toward more interactive, project-oriented, and research-driven approaches.

- Teaching Practices: Effective teaching must be dynamic, reflective, and student-responsive. The use of real-world problems, teamwork, and interdisciplinary projects helps students connect theory with practice.
- Academic Staff–Student Dialogue: Productive dialogue between faculty and students builds trust and mutual respect. A professor should not only teach but also mentor and inspire, helping students build confidence and find direction.
- Best Practices in Assessment: Assessment should be formative, continuous, and fair. Rather than focusing solely on examinations, we should evaluate students' critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and ethical reasoning.

#4-3: What do you suggest to the students for success in their learning journey at college? Not just as successful students, but as successful members of the global community.

For students, success is not defined merely by grades or degrees—it lies in developing a balanced intellectual, emotional, and moral identity. I often advise my students to:

- Be curious—ask questions not only about "how" but also "why."
- Be resilient—see challenges as opportunities for growth.
- Be ethical and empathetic—your integrity is your greatest credential.
- Be globally aware—learn from diverse cultures, languages, and perspectives.
- Be innovative and collaborative—the problems of the future require teamwork and creative thinking.

A successful student of today must become a responsible global citizen—one who understands that science and technology have meaning only when they serve humanity and contribute to peace, sustainability, and social justice.

#4-4: What kind of advice/suggestions and best practices would you like to offer to the following HE stakeholders in Iran (based on your international lived learning, teaching, and research experiences):

Students: Pursue your education with passion, patience, and purpose. Do not seek shortcuts; seek understanding. Take initiative in your learning, engage with faculty, and participate in interdisciplinary activities. Remember that your university journey is not only about earning a degree—it is about discovering your identity, values, and capacity to serve society.

Admin staff (employees): Administrative personnel are the backbone of institutional success. I encourage staff to view their work as part of a broader educational mission. Efficiency, professionalism, and empathy toward students and faculty are vital. Continuous

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professional development, digital literacy, and openness to innovation can transform administrative units into true partners in education.

Academic staff: Faculty members must embrace their dual role as scholars and mentors. Teaching should not be viewed as a routine duty but rather as a creative and moral responsibility. Academic excellence must go hand in hand with humility, mentorship, and service. Faculty should also engage in interdisciplinary research, collaborate internationally, and continuously update their pedagogical methods to reflect contemporary realities.

Governing Boards at HEIs (Board of Trustees; Board of Directors; Chancellors; Vice-Chancellors; Deans of Colleges; Heads of Departments; etc.): University governance must embody vision, integrity, and inclusivity. Leadership should prioritize transparency, meritocracy, and accountability while creating structures that empower departments and individuals. Policymakers must support academic freedom, research autonomy, and international engagement. Above all, they must ensure that universities remain ethical institutions of knowledge—dedicated not only to economic advancement but also to cultural enrichment and social responsibility.

In essence, the strength of higher education lies in synergy—between teachers and students, administration and faculty, science and humanity, tradition and innovation. Iranian universities have a proud legacy and immense potential. By cultivating collaboration, empathy, and excellence at every level of governance and pedagogy, we can ensure that our institutions continue to shape generations of thoughtful, creative, and responsible citizens—both for Iran and for the global community.

Question #5

We also like to learn about your academic, research, and leadership contributions to the higher education community in Iran?

Answer:

Over the past 38 years, my professional journey has been deeply intertwined with the evolution of Iranian higher education. As a faculty member and Distinguished Professor of Mechanical Engineering at Sharif University of Technology, I have been privileged to contribute to our national academic community in three interconnected domains—education, research, and leadership.

As an academic staff/ researcher

My foremost commitment has always been to teaching and mentorship. Since joining Sharif University of Technology, I have taught a wide range of courses in mechanical engineering, design, dynamics, control systems, and robotics, at both undergraduate and graduate levels. I have also continuously worked to integrate innovative, student-centered pedagogies—such as project-based learning, interdisciplinary research, and experiential education—into the engineering curriculum.

A significant part of my academic mission has been to bridge technical education with human and social understanding. I have encouraged students to view engineering not

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merely as a technical pursuit, but as a creative and ethical discipline that serves society. Many of my former students have gone on to become influential educators, entrepreneurs, and leaders in Iran and abroad, and I consider their success the most meaningful outcome of my academic career.

My research activities have focused primarily on robotics, dynamics, and design, while progressively expanding into the interdisciplinary fields of human–robot interaction, social robotics, and engineering education. I founded and continue to direct the Center of Excellence in Design and Robotics at Sharif University of Technology, one of Iran's pioneering research hubs in advanced robotics and mechatronics. Over the years, this center has produced numerous graduate theses, peer-reviewed publications, and applied innovations—contributing to both academic knowledge and technological development in the country.

In recent years, I have initiated the Humanoid and Social Robotics Research Program, which integrates engineering with art, psychology, cognitive science, and linguistics to explore the relationship between humans and intelligent systems. This program exemplifies my enduring belief that the future of science lies in interdisciplinary research, where technological innovation is deeply informed by ethical, social, and humanistic insights.

My research has been supported by national and international collaborations, and I have had the honor of presenting Iran's scientific capabilities at numerous international conferences and in top-rated journals around the world.

As a HE leader

Beyond academia and research, I have been actively engaged in educational leadership and policymaking at both institutional and national levels, as mentioned earlier. In these capacities, I have contributed to strategic planning and curriculum modernization, helping to promote innovation and international engagement. A major focus of my leadership philosophy has been to encourage collaboration across institutions, to link universities with industry and society, and to ensure that academic governance remains ethical, transparent, and merit-based.

Through my academic, research, and leadership efforts, I have sought to contribute to the transformation of Iranian higher education into a globally engaged, human-centered, and innovation-driven system. I firmly believe that the advancement of our universities must be measured not only by rankings or publications but by their ability to improve lives, foster understanding, and empower future generations. Ultimately, my goal has always been to help shape an educational culture where excellence is harmonized with ethics, innovation with compassion, and science with humanity—a vision that I hope will continue to inspire both current and future members of Iran's academic community.

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Question #6

What are your top 5 ideas for the success of universities and colleges in Iran?

Answer:

Based on my decades of experience in teaching, research, and higher education leadership, I believe that the success of universities and colleges in Iran depends on a combination of academic excellence, ethical governance, and societal engagement. My top five ideas are as follows:

1. Prioritize Quality over Quantity and Prepare Fully-Inclusive Education

While Iran has made impressive progress in expanding access to higher education, universities must now focus on enhancing the quality of education and research, increasing accessibility for individuals with disabilities, and improving institutional governance. This includes strengthening curricula, promoting critical thinking, fostering interdisciplinary research, and ensuring that academic programs are aligned with both national needs and global standards.

2. Foster Interdisciplinary and Collaborative Research

Universities should break down disciplinary silos and encourage collaboration across faculties—integrating engineering, the basic sciences, humanities, and social sciences. Interdisciplinary research not only addresses complex societal problems but also cultivates innovation, creativity, and the ability to respond to emerging global challenges. Partnerships between universities, industry, and government should be strengthened to enhance applied research and technology transfer.

3. Empower Students as Active Participants

Students are not merely recipients of knowledge—they are co-creators of learning. Universities should create student-centered environments that nurture curiosity, leadership, ethical reasoning, and global awareness. Engaging students in research, community service, entrepreneurship, and international programs ensures they develop as responsible and capable global citizens.

4. Promote Ethical, Transparent, and Inclusive Governance

Strong institutions require accountable leadership. University boards, administrators, and academic leaders must uphold the principles of meritocracy, transparency, and inclusivity in their decision-making processes. Policies should empower departments and faculty while ensuring alignment with national priorities and objectives. Ethical governance fosters trust, motivates staff and students, and creates a culture of excellence.

5. Strengthen International Engagement and Knowledge Exchange

Iranian universities should actively pursue international collaborations in research, teaching, and student mobility. Exposure to global best practices, diverse perspectives, and cross-cultural learning enhances academic quality, innovation, and competitiveness. At the same time, institutions should maintain national relevance, addressing local societal challenges and contributing to sustainable development.

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In summary, the success of universities in Iran depends on quality, collaboration, student empowerment, ethical leadership, and global engagement. When these elements are embraced together, higher education institutions can not only excel academically but also serve as engines of social progress, innovation, and responsible citizenship.

And as a concluding question;

Question #7

With about 4 decades in higher education, we would like to learn Prof. Meghdari's current "To Do List".

Answer:

My current focus has shifted from routine administration toward strategic contributions that can have a long-term impact and build a legacy of inclusive education, globally engaged institutions that empower the next generation.

My "To Do List" today reflects a commitment to academic excellence, mentorship, and societal advancement, and includes the following priorities:

1. Leading Fereshtegaan University: Provide inclusive, high-quality education for deaf and students with disabilities, ensuring adaptive curricula and an empowering environment.
2. Mentorship: Guide students, researchers, and junior faculty in research, innovation, and ethical practices.
3. Interdisciplinary research: Expand projects integrating engineering, sciences, and humanities.
4. University-industry-government collaboration: Translate research into practical solutions, including assistive technologies.
5. Policy and governance: Advocate for inclusive, student-centered, and globally aware higher education.
6. Knowledge sharing: Document lessons and write memoirs from decades of experience to inspire educators and policymakers.

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