

Freedom of the Higher Education Market in Iran

Department of Education
Faculty of Educational Sciences
UNIVERSITY OF OSLO
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Pedram Vafadari

Introduction

It could be argued that Iran's higher education system to some degree has been successful during the last four decades, especially in increasing participation rates and also in science production rankings worldwide. The Tertiary enrollment rate went from 18.3 in 1999, to 72.9 in 2015, and 58.2 in 2020 (School, 2022). More than 48,000 articles in 2018, around four times of Norway in the same year, were produced in Iran (Scientific, n.d.). The Iranian government uses scientific achievements in its propaganda both inside and outside of the country. These achievements are considered by the Islamic Republic (IR) as a sign of power and development due to its ideology's superiority. On the other hand, the higher education system in Iran faces many problems. The worst might be the brain drain; "one-third of Iran's total human resources in research" work outside Iran (2020, p.3). Also, the sector has not been successful in increasing the country's income or decreasing its dependence on selling crude oil. World Bank estimated Iran's GDP per capita for 2020, 2,422 dollars, less than 1/27th of Norway (GDP, n.d.).

Simultaneously, there has been a universal move towards quasi-market systems in higher education. "Quasi-market mechanisms and university self-regulation are replacing more and more elements of the central steering role of the government" (Gornitzka, 2000, p.283). This is based on a vision of the university as an organization that accepts participating "actors have conflicting norms and objectives" (Olsen, 2007, p.30).

This paper aims to examine the degree of freedom in the higher education market in Iran, as an indicator of a shift in the higher education steering model, based on Jongbloed's eight conditions for a free market in higher education systems (2003, p.114).

In the following sections, Iran and Iran's higher education system is briefly presented. Then in Iran's context, the eight conditions and their main policy arguments are examined. Finally, comes the conclusion.

Iran

The Islamic Republic of Iran is located in the Middle East, with around 85 million population in 2021 (Britannica, Iran, 2022). The current constitution and its latest amendment in 1989 (Constitution, n.d.) state six principles: Oneness of Allah; Divine Revelation; Return to God; God's Justice; Imamat (divine leadership); and dignity and value of humans (Article 2). The first five are principles of Shia Islam. Based on Shia beliefs, the last Imam is in occultation. 'Absolute Guardianship of Jurist', the underlying doctrine of IR, states that during the

occultation the leadership of the society is upon the highest Islamic jurist. The Jurist Guardian or the supreme leader should be (one of) the highest in ranks among Islamic scholars.

Accordingly, Supreme Leader is at the top of the political order (Article 107) and the commander-in-chief of the armed forces (Article 110). Many of the leading figures in the next level of the political order such as the head of the judiciary are directly appointed by him. President and parliament members are elected by direct vote of the people (Article 114 and 62) on candidates approved by the Guardian Council (Articles 99 and 110). Guardian Council members are directly and indirectly appointed by Supreme Leader (Article 91). Also, acts approved by the parliament should be approved by Guardian Council (Article 94) (Vafadari,2022).

The 1979 revolution which ended the constitutional monarchy in Iran was due to an alliance between Islamists and pro-leftist groups. Thus, the IR's ideology was based on anticapitalism joined with some interpretation of Islam.

Iran Higher Education System

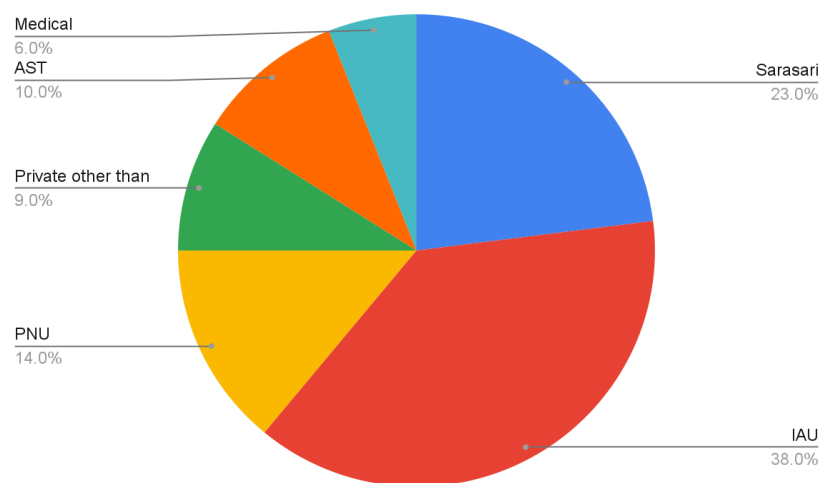
Modern higher education in Iran was introduced as an alternative to traditional Islamic Scientific Centers in 1851. In 1934 the University of Tehran was established. In 1935, the government established universities across the country, so “by 1979 they added up to 26 universities, 87 colleges, and 226 higher education institutions, admitting over 180,000 students” (Arani et al, 2018, p.317). These public universities are called *Sarasari*.

After the revolution, universities as centers of political activities were considered a threat to the newly formed government. Leader of the Revolution, Khomeini, issued a decree in which he appointed the Committee for the Cultural Revolution (CCR) to Islamize the universities and purge “universities from the affiliations of East and West”. CCR later developed into the Supreme Council of Cultural Revelation (SCCR) (Razavi, 2009, p.1-6). Since then SCCR is the main policymaker in Iran's cultural and educational sectors.

The statute of the Islamic Azad University (IAU), a non-governmental, nonprofit higher education institution, was approved by SCCR in 1988. Though IAU is officially a nongovernmental institution, it is important to note that it was founded by Khamenei (current Supreme Leader and the president at the time), Rafsanjani (President of the Parliament at the time), Musavi (PM at the time), Ahmad Khomeini (Son of the Leader), Musavi Ardebili (a high ranked clergy), and Jasbi (Statute, n.d.). Jasbi is the only person on the founders'

committee that has a doctorate, and except for Musavi who had studied architecture at the University of Tehran non of the others had any tertiary education in a university. As clergies, they had studied at traditional Islamic Scientific Centers. Now IAU is “the third-largest university by enrollment in the world and, according to its website, with over 400 branches in Iran” (Arani et al, 2018, p.317). Though IAU is not officially governmental, it has strong ties with the government and many of its highest decisions are made by the government. It has also received much financial support in form of endowments from individuals and institutions in government. In 1988, SCCR also approved the statute of Payame Noor University (PNU) as a governmental distance-learning university. Now PNU has many branches throughout and outside Iran.

Based on the data provided on the Ministry of Sciences, Research, and Technology (MSRT)’s website (Statistics, n.d.), out of 3,370,000 students studying in 2019, 23% study at Sarasari universities, 38% at IAU, 14% at PNU, 9% at private universities other than IAU, 6% in Medical Education, and 10% in Applied Science and Technology.



SCCR, mainly appointed by Supreme Leader, is the main macro-level actor in Iran’s higher education governance (Vafadari, 2022, p.8). It “sets policies to ensure the establishment of the IR cultural, religious, and political hegemony in the universities, by imposing regulations over a wide range of institutional activities such as admissions, recruitment, and curriculum development” (Shamekhi, 2020, p.2).

The Extent of Marketization in Iran's Publicly Funded Higher Education

In the following sections, Jongbloed's eight conditions of the free market (2003, p.114) in Iran's higher education and their main policy arguments are examined. The first four conditions are regarding the providers, and the second four criteria are about the consumers or students.

Freedom of entry

Freedom of entry is "freedom for new higher education providers to establish themselves" (Jongbloed, 2003, p.115). Government should protect the market from forming monopolies as a form of market power (Mankiw, 2015, p.12), which might be done by facilitating entry into the field. So, in this context, the main questions are, whether new higher education institutions can enter the higher education market and if yes, how. Moreover, whether the newcomers receive the same support and share as existing institutions.

According to SCCR, "approving the establishment criteria, of scientific, cultural, and research institutes, academies, and universities and higher education centers" is one of SCCR's responsibilities. (Status, n.d.). Thus, the entry of new providers into the sector is dependent on SCCR approval. However, there is not any document about the criteria for approving new public higher education institutions. The proposal for each case (like in the case of PNU) is discussed individually.

However, there is a document about general regulations for the establishment of non-governmental, non-profit higher education institutions. Exploring it might illuminate what the criteria for publicly funded institutions may be. The first item of the act obliges the inclusion of one clergy member in the founders' committee who should be approved by SCCR. Furthermore, all the other members should be Muslims who practice Islam, believe in the Guardianship of the Jurist, and not be related to the opposition groups of the IR. Regulations are the same for the board of trustees. Only one member needs to have three years or more of work experience as a faculty member. Also, these institutions should follow the SCCR's moral and political protocols for recruiting students and staff (Regulations, n.d.).

It could be argued that entering the higher education market is extremely selective even for nonprofit and non-governmental institutions. However, regulations are more political than scientific or professional. In other words, as is visible in the case of IAU, entering the field is exclusive to the 'insiders'. In a sense, the Iranian government, not only

does not prevent monopolies but also creates and reinforces a certain form of a political and ideological one.

Freedom to specify the product

Next is the freedom of the providers to alter the existing programs or to introduce new and specific ones. This is a form of specialization in production that is identical to the division of labor in society, and as Adam Smith emphasizes “the extent of this division must always be limited by the extent of ... the market” (2018, p.35). Furthermore, this specialization is even stronger in higher education since it is the source of new knowledge. This results in something which is described as “bottom heaviness” (Clark, 1983, p.234). No one knows the academic subject better than the academics themselves. Finally, although no one is qualified to judge the quality of academics’ work, students as consumers of their service need to be sure of the quality of the education they receive.

Iranian university faculties can apply to university deans for establishing new programs. After the dean’s approval, the application is sent to the Supreme Council of Planning (SCP), an office at MSRT. Appointed by SCCR (General, n.d.), SCP is responsible for “creating educational and research programs and courses at the level of higher education, examining, removing or merging fields and academic trends in different levels of the university” (Duties, n.d.). SCP’s approvals are binding for both public and private universities.

The government not only limits the introduction or change of courses and programs by academics but also tries to shape the existing ones following its ideology. For example, in an attempt to ‘evolve and promote’ humanities, and social sciences, SCCR established the Specialized Council for the Transformation and Promotion of Human Sciences (SCTPHS) to base “human sciences on the theoretical foundations of the IR and Islamic anthropology” (By-law, n.d.). As a case, SCTPHS included three courses on Islamic psychology in the Master of Psychology curriculum (19602, n.d.).

It could be argued that the government ignores the bottom heaviness, and also the economic value of specialization due to the market’s demand, with its heavy central control and interventions. Although interventions could be justified with the quality-insurance argument, it seems that this quality is defined more in political and ideological terms than academic ones.

Freedom to use available resources

Following is the freedom of providers of higher education to use available resources. These resources could be categorized into three groups; financial resources, staff, and students (Jongbloed, 2003, p.118). Mankiw categorizes resources based on two dimensions of excludability and rivalry into four groups; private goods, club goods, common resources, and public goods (2018, p.217). Higher education institutions' resources could be private goods, like the institution's property, or common resources, like the state's financial support or possible human resources. Institutions' level of control over their properties and governmental financial support could also be understood in terms of their freedom to use their available resources. While lump sum funding gives freedom to the institutions in using their resources, a detailed budget, and its supervised expenditure, constrain this freedom.

After the 1979 revolution, IR confiscated the properties of many, including monarchists, religious minorities, and businessmen. These incidents heavily threatened property rights in Iran (Saeidi, 2004, Hassan, 2007; Hoops & van der Voort, 2022).

The processes of allocating public funds to Iranian higher education institutions are not clearly available to the public. However, each university council proposes the detailed budget of the institution to the board of trustees, which in the case of public universities consists of the minister, the dean, 4 to 6 individuals with a minimum of two faculty members, and the head of the State's Plan and Budget Organization or its representative. It is responsible for the approval of the detailed budget while the dean is responsible for supervising the expenditure of the budget according to the plan. The budget is handed out seasonally (Management, n.d., Law, n.d.).

Regarding staff and students as resources, it is important to note that purging universities from anti-revolutionary individuals was the cultural revolution's initial *raison d'être*. Based on SCCR approvals, undergraduate students (Code, n.d.), graduate students (Priorities, n.d.), and faculty members (Criteria, n.d.), should believe in Islam or three other official religions (Christianity, Judaism, or Zoroastrianism), value Islamic norms, and be committed to the IR, to be recruited. Accordingly, most of the members of the Iranian Baha'i community, who historically had been one of the most academically active communities in Iran, have been deprived of their right to attend public higher education institutions as students or staff (Hassan, 2007, p.7). In this situation, both equity and efficiency are sacrificed for the sake of the government's ideology.

Normally, for Sarasari and IAU, students are admitted based on their rank on the national entrance exam (*Konkur*). The institutions are obliged to admit the applicants to their full capacity, which is less than all applicants. Applicants are admitted based on their relative ranks. So, the institutions can not choose the applicants freely. On the other hand, PNU is an open-entry, but not prestigious, university.

The detailed budget system constrains the scope of the freedom of Iranian higher education institutions. Also, it could be argued that in the case of staff and students, higher education institutions do not have complete freedom to use the resources too.

Freedom to determine prices

The last item in suppliers' freedom is their freedom to set prices for their services (Jongbloed, 2003, p.121). This means, in a free higher education market, universities should be able to set the prices that students pay. This item is directly connected to the last item and is discussed further in that section. Here it suffices to note that, the change in price due to supply and demand in a free market is the basis of Adam Smith's theory of the invisible hand (Smith, 2018, p.86). Hence, the freedom to determine prices might be considered the most essential component of any free market.

Sarasari universities are completely free in Iran, while others are obliged to gain the approval of MSRT (Regulations, n.d.).

The main rhetoric about tuition fees in Iran is influenced by Marxist-Islamist discourses. “The oppressed and talented” (Thertith, n.d.) is considered the priority for receiving higher education. In this context, equity can only be understood as giving to the underprivileged, consequently, there is no room for discussions about what is fair to the suppliers of a good or service. So, it could be argued that in this case, some aspects of equity are sacrificed for other aspects of it.

Taking everything into consideration, it seems the higher education institutions in Iran lack the freedom to determine prices for their products.

Freedom to choose providers

On the demand side, in Jongbloed's words “students should be free to choose the institution which they wish to enroll in, provided they possess the required qualifications” (2003, p.122). The main driving force of the market is the individual that tries to maximize their gain by finding the best deal. As noted by Von Mises “the only factors directing the market and the determination of prices are purposive acts of men ... to remove uneasiness” (1998,

pp.311-312). Finding the best deal implies finding the best dealer. In addition to the possibility to choose from existing suppliers, the freedom to choose providers is also related to the issue of true diversity among providers as well as products, which in turn is related to *the freedom of entry* and the *freedom to specify the product* mentioned before.

For enrollment at Sarasari universities, which are the most prestigious in Iran, and also at IAU, students are accepted based on their Konkur ranks among other students who want to enroll in that same university and program. The Konkur rank is just a competition and not a qualification. There is no minimum standard in Konkur exams.

However, despite the differences in qualification and competition, if a student gains a relatively high rank in Konkur they will be able to enter a wide range of universities. Yet, it could be said that due to a lack of resources, not all the students who have finished secondary education and are willing to enter university can choose the university they want.

The government's answer to this problem was to increase the supply by letting non-governmental institutions, such as IAU, in. It also established PNU, which accepts applicants without konkur. However, as discussed before, the ideological preferences of the government reduce the diversity and consequently the competition, which in turn results in a lack of quality despite all the resources spent. For example, PNU with 490 branches in the country, 31 international branches, and more than 450,000 students (About-us, n.d.), is ranked 1501+ in THE world rankings (Payame Noor, n.d.).

There is diversity in the forms of the higher education system in Iran while it is ideologically widely uniform which means a lack of freedom to choose providers. However, among the available providers, at least some of the students have some degree of freedom.

Freedom to choose products

Next is the freedom of the student to choose programs and courses. In a free market, to find the best deal, in addition to finding the best dealer that was discussed in the previous part, demanders should be able to choose the product they want. This freedom could be considered related to three things. The first, as Jongbloed explains, is “closely related to the range of providers that exist in the system” (2003, p.124). In this case, as said, there are very strict ideological limitations that limit the range of the providers.

The second item is the differences between the programs at different institutions. As mentioned before, there are strict rules for changing the format or content of existing programs and courses, as well as introducing new ones. At the same time, the government

imposes some ideological aspects on some courses or programs, mainly humanities and social sciences.

The third aspect of the freedom of the student to choose a product could be understood in terms of the proportion of the elective courses to the program. As an example, the curriculum of the bachelor of civil engineering at SUT consists of 140 credits or units of study. Out of 140, 88 are obligatory and 32 could be elected from two different groups of courses all related to different branches of civil engineering. 20 elective credits could be selected by the student from 44 credits, from which, 3 are on Persian literature, 3 are on a foreign language, 2 are on PE, and 36 are on different topics on Islam or the IR's ideology. In the same program at the Isfahan University of Technology, of 140 credits, the students can only have 10 elective credits all related to the different branches of civil engineering. The students have no say in choosing the 20 miscellaneous credits, out of which, 3 are on Persian literature, 3 are on a foreign language, 2 are on PE, and the rest are on Islam or the IR's ideology.

In conclusion, it could be argued that higher education products in Iran are very 'standardized' due to strict control and different interventions of the government even on the micro level. Thus, students have very limited freedom to choose the product.

Adequate information on prices and quality

The seventh criterion is the availability of information on prices and the quality of the provided services. While the information about the prices is easily available to the students, there is limited information about the quality. Most of the publicly funded universities in Iran are completely free, and the fees charged by the few institutions are mostly available on their websites. But the situation is completely different regarding the information about the quality. The Iranian government does not publish or help publish any quality assessment reports, rankings, or other quality documents. Neither the Ministry nor the universities share their evaluations, financial documents, or any other internal documents. So, students and their families are heavily dependent on the overall reputation of different universities in society.

As Jongbloed states, "higher education is a so-called 'experience good': its quality is revealed during consumption" (2003, p.125). But even during an experience, to be able to judge its quality, the consumer needs a point of reference in their mind to compare their experience with it. As discussed, the higher education system in Iran is almost uniform in many aspects. In addition, due to problematic political relations of the country with the world, sanctions, hardships of getting a visa for entering other countries, and other cultural and economic reasons, usually, Iranian university students do not spend any time as exchange

students at universities in other countries before or during their study. So, most of them do not have a reference point to evaluate the services they receive during their studies.

So, it could be argued that the absence of quality assessment reports in addition to the relative isolation of the country limits the students' access to adequate information.

Direct and cost-covering prices paid

The last criterion on the consumer side “is that consumers pay a price for the services consumed and that this price bears some relation to the cost of providing that service” (Jongbloed, 2003, p.125). This is a direct outcome of the two first principles of economics mentioned by Mankiw; the fact that people face trade-offs, and the fact that the cost of something is what a person gives up to get it. He says: “Because people face trade-offs, making decisions requires comparing the costs and benefits of alternative courses of action” (2015, p.4). In other words, when paid prices are related to the cost of the service that the students are receiving they can compare the costs to make better decisions.

The relation between the cost and price of a product is related to the discussion of externalities involved in it. Price is the cost plus the externality which can be positive or negative. Mankiw defines externality as “the impact of one person’s actions on the well-being of a bystander” (2015, p.12). As discussed by Barr, “there are strong arguments that higher education creates benefits to society above those to the individual” (2012, p.324), or positive externalities. So, it is understandable that the government on behalf of society pays for a proportion of higher education costs. But also on the other side, as long as the individual has some personal gain in their higher education they should pay a proportion of the costs too.

This item is directly connected to the fourth item of supplier freedom. If the supplier, as in the case of Iran, is not free to charge tuition fees or to set the price freely, and therefore the price has no relation with the cost, then the individual consumer is not paying any “direct and cost-covering prices”. Most of the publicly funded part of higher education in Iran is completely free. The rest and also private institutions are not free to set tuition fees as they want. As a result, students either do not pay at all or what they pay has no direct relation to the real cost. Therefore, students not only lose a very important tool in their decision-making but also, cannot be demanding a better quality of education. As a well-known Persian saying says, “it’s meaningless to count the teeth of a gift horse!”. Hence, and also due to the absence of competition, the quality of the provided service decreases.

Conclusion

As discussed, the Iranian higher education market has very limited freedom in almost all of the eight categories mentioned by Jongbloed as indicators of a free market. Though maybe historically the rationale of the government has been increasing equity even by spending efficiency, it seems that in reality, IR is sacrificing both efficiency and equity for ideology. The monopoly of the ‘insiders’, and the obsession of the government with central control has resulted in government failure, which is a situation “in which existing state policies contribute to inefficient and/or inequitable outcomes” (Teixeira et al., 2006, p.344).

The reasons for this situation need to be discussed in a separate situation. But there might be some possible explanations. Iranian government in general and Iranian higher education particularly are isolated from the world since the Islamic revolution. So, many of the reforms made in public administration worldwide, including the move towards the free market discussed by Gornitzka & Maassen (2000), are absent in Iran. Also, as an ideological government, the IR desires a uniform society in conformity with its ideology, and denies the existence of conflicting ideas in society, or considers it as a threat. Conflicting ideas that Olsen considers their acceptance as a driving force for moving from classical steering models to representative democracy or competitive market models (Olsen, 2007, p.30). Further, as an ideological political regime, rhetoric and propaganda might be considered more important than equity and efficiency for the government. These topics need to be explored in the future by expert scholars.

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