

National Governance of Higher Education in Iran

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

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Table of Contents:

• Introduction.....	1
• What is Governance?.....	2
• Higher Education Governance.....	3
• Iran.....	6
• Higher Education Sector in Iran.....	7
• Main Higher Education Governance Actors in Iran.....	8
• Discussion: Governance and HE Governance Model in Iran.....	9
• Conclusion.....	11
• References.....	12

Introduction

Iran is relatively successful in higher education and science production rankings worldwide. According to World Bank, the Tertiary enrollment rate went from 18.3 in 1999, to 72.9 in 2015, and 58.2 in 2020 (School, 2022). Around 48,000 scientific and technical journal articles in 2018, more than four times of Norway in the same year, have been produced in Iran (Scientific, n.d.). During the political and ideological confrontations with the rest of the world, the Iranian government uses scientific achievements as a sign of power and development to present itself equal to superpowers. Although rapid growth of the sector might be considered a success in the governance of higher education, there are several problems around higher education in the country. Higher education has not been successful in improving country's income or its dependence on the oil industry. Iran's GDP per capita for 2020 is 2,422 dollars, which is less than 1/27th of Norway in the same year (GDP, n.d.). Also, brain drain is a problem in the country.

Irrespective of the judgment of success or failure of higher education governance in Iran, there is a relatively low number of articles on Iran's higher education and its governance, especially in English. How higher education in Iran is governed? **What are the main actors and decision-makers in Iran's higher education governance at the highest level? What are their responsibilities and scope of authority? How could Iran's higher education be categorized with respect to the literature on higher education governance?** This study will try to provide some answers to these questions.

In search of answers, first, concepts of governance and higher education governance are discussed, using literature in the field. Then, Iran, its political system, and its higher education sector will be focused. Next, using the available literature and policy documents at Iranian government websites, the article will try to answer the question of main actors and decision-makers in Iran's higher education governance structure. Afterward, the most influential actor, its structure, the extent of its authority and responsibilities will be studied. After presenting an overview of the higher education sector's governance structure, the article will try to analyze it using the conceptual framework offered by different authors introduced in the literature review section. In the conclusion part, the overall findings are again presented and the possible topics for future research are discussed.

What is Governance?

The purpose of this text is not to focus on governance per se. But, in order to have a better understanding of Higher Education Governance, a general understanding of governance seems necessary. In its simplest meaning, governance is what governments do for governing or "steering their societies" (Bovens, 2001, p.12). Meek provides a more elaborated definition of the term, quoting Gallagher, as "the structure of relationships that bring out organizational coherence, authorize policies, plans and decisions, and account for their probity, responsiveness, and cost-efficiency" (2003, p.12).

Governments and public governance have a long history of formation and evolution. Francis Fukuyama (2011), in his book *The Origins of Political Order: from prehuman times to french revolution* (2011), identifies three different phases; state-building, the rule of law, and the rise of political accountability. But as he clarifies these three are not necessarily accompanied by each other in all governments in the world (2011, p.16):

The fact that there are countries capable of achieving this balance constitutes the miracle of modern politics since it is not obvious that they can be combined. The state, after all, concentrates and uses power, to bring about compliance with its laws on the part of its citizens and to defend itself against other states and threats. The rule of law and accountable government, on the other hand, limit the state's power, first by forcing it to use its power according to certain public and transparent rules, and then by ensuring that it is subordinate to the will of the people.

Even in the countries with relatively high political order components balance, governance is increasingly challenged. According to Peters societies are less governable for three reasons: “increasing social and political heterogeneity among populations”, less bargainability of the issues, and “decline of stable organizations” (2001, p.15-16).

Despite all the challenges in governance, governments still govern their societies, and many do it in a relatively unique way. These unique styles, national policy styles, are based on a country’s “essential structural and cultural features that predispose them to make and implement public policy in certain distinct ways” (Bovens, 2001, p.15). Scientists who regard the concept of national policy style as a suitable analytical tool, consider it “roughly the same irrespective of the particular characteristics of the issue and the policy sector they belong to” (Bovens, 2001, p.15). However, there are other competing concepts such as sectoral or transnational policy styles. According to Bovens (2001), national policy styles can be understood along two axes: level of consensus or imposition; and whether it is reactive or proactive (p.16).

Higher Education Governance

The governance of higher education has always been special, simply because higher education as an institution is special. Various kinds of authority, bottom-heaviness, vertical diffusion of power, weak institutional collective action, and various sources of belief are some of the distinct characteristics of a higher education institution that makes it special (Gornitzka, 1999, p.12). Therefore, the governing relation of state and higher education, as an institution, is always complex. In this complexity, in addition to the state and academics, there are two other players that need to be recognized: other participants in higher education institutions such as students or administrative staff, and the market.

By the advancement of democracy and ever-increasing importance of democratic values in different countries, especially after the 1960s student movements, another actor claimed a place in the classical state and higher education institution relations (Olsen, 2007, p.32). This made a triangle with government, academics, and students (de Boer et al., 1999, p.335).

Also, higher education has always had strong ties with the market, since its two major outcomes, knowledge and graduates, are mainly used in the market. So, as presented by Clark, to understand coordination in higher education, one needs to look at all these three: state, market, and academics (1984, pp.137-143). The ties with the market is growing with the emergence of the knowledge economy in the last decades.

Considering all, the higher education governance could be understood along two axes: autonomy, and conflict (Olsen, 2007, p.30). Higher education institutions can be autonomous, meaning that they are governed internally, or they can be governed externally, by state or market. Likewise, there may be different conflicting ideas or one dominant idea, that determine the policies. These two axes provide four visions of higher education governance, or four different steering models: Olsen's four models. They "are the sovereign state; the institutional state; the corporate-pluralist state; and the classical liberal state (referred to as state supermarket model)" (Gornitzka & Maassen, 2000, p.270).

Olsen (2007) also, differentiates between higher education as an institution and higher education as an instrument. He writes (p.29):

The first portrays the University as a rule-governed community of scholars and an institution constituted upon academic values. The three other portray the University as a tool for different groups: an instrument for shifting national political agendas and governments, an instrument for a variety of internal individuals and groups constituting a representative democracy, and an instrument for external "stakeholders" and "customers" treating the University as a service enterprise embedded in competitive markets.

And by an institution he explains (p.27):

a relatively enduring collection of rules and organized practices, embedded in structures of meaning and resources that are relatively invariant in the face of turnover of individuals and relatively resilient to the idiosyncratic preferences and expectations of individuals and changing external circumstances.

The other point in his article is the notions of ‘institutional imperialism’ and ‘institutional defense’. Institutional imperialism is when one institution “attempts to achieve ideological hegemony and control over other institutional spheres” (Olsen, 2007, p.28). The invaded institution in return tries to defend itself against the norms of the invading institution. He quotes Merton, “an institution under serious attack reexamines its pact with society and its rationale, identity and foundations, its ethos, codes of behavior and primary allegiances and loyalties” (Olsen, 2007, p.28). Different examples of institutional imperialism or attempts for it by different institutions, the religion, the state, the market, or even the university, can be seen throughout history.

As mentioned before, higher education governance, can be understood as a balance of external control and internal autonomy. Society is looking to have “sufficient control over the university”, while the university tries “for an appropriate level of freedom in handling its own affairs” (Maassen et al., 2017, p.240). This balance is not static, it changes in time. This change might be incremental or it might be in form of reforms. The bottom-heaviness of higher education makes it resistant to sudden changes, but in case of rapid changes in society, reforms are inevitable.

During the last decades, globalization and the emergence of the knowledge economy have changed the role of higher education (Varghese, 2013; Cloete et al., 2017). Also, the rise of Neo-liberalism and New public management had led to attempts for reform in higher education and its governance (Meek, 2003). As Meek says, “changed government perspectives on their role in system steering, changed community perceptions on the purpose of higher education, and changed economic conditions have impacted higher education institutions nearly everywhere” (Meek, 2003, p.1). These reforms, which in many cases intended for the enhancement of university autonomy, have not necessarily resulted in more real autonomy (Maassen et al, 2017; Christensen, 2011).

Another question regarding reforms is whether they have resulted in convergence or a divergence globally. According to Gornitzka and Maassen (2014), although there is a global script, which directs to convergence, there are other factors such as national or sectoral filters which give national and sectoral colors to institutional reforms in different countries (p.17-18).

It is important to note that although global trends and scripts are important forces in a majority of countries around the world, they do not necessarily apply to all. For example,

Christensen bases his article on the global dominance of NPM and post-NPM trends around the world (2011, p.503-504), while these trends may have not been that influential in some cases.

Iran:

According to the Britannica website (Iran, 2022), Iran is a country in southwest of Asia with more than 1.6 million square kilometers, and around 85 million population in 2021. Historically, Iran is the heartland of the historical Persian Empire, and one of the oldest centers of civilization. Twelver Shia Islam is the official religion of the country. Iran is a diverse country in terms of ethnicity and languages. According to the World Bank website, Iran's estimated Gini index is 42 for 2018 (Gini, n.d.).

Following the 1979 revolution, a new political system was established: the Islamic Republic. According to the current constitution and its latest amendment in 1989 (Constitution, n.d.), Islamic Republic is based on belief in six principles: Oneness of Allah; the fundamental role of Divine Revelation; Return to God; Justice of God; *Imamat* (divine leadership); and dignity and value of humans (Article 2). The first five principles are directly the five principles of Shia Islam. According to Shia beliefs, Imams are twelve descendants of the Prophet Mohammad, the twelfth of which has gone absent from the eyes around 1200 years ago. Based on these principles, and built on the idea of '*velayat-e motlaghe-ye faqih*' or 'Absolute Guardianship of Jurist', in the time of occultation of the Twelfth Imam, guardianship of the society is upon the highest Islamic jurist: supreme leader. The supreme leader should be (one of the) highest in ranks among Islamic jurists and scholars.

According to the constitution, Supreme Leader is at the top of the political order (Article 107). He is the commander-in-chief of the armed forces (Article 110). He also directly appoints many of the leading figures in the next level of the political order such as head of the judiciary, director-general of IRIB (Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting), and highest military commanders. President, as the head of the council of ministers, and parliament members are elected by direct vote of people (Article 114 and 62) on candidates approved by Guardian Council (Article 99 and 110). Guardian Council members are directly and indirectly appointed by Supreme Leader (Article 91). Also, all the acts approved by the parliament should be approved by Guardian Council to be valid (Article 94).

Higher Education Sector in Iran

Traditionally, '*Howza-Ilmiyya*' (Islamic scientific centers), has been the center for higher education in Iran. In addition to producing teachers for *Maktab*, traditional elementary education centers, Howza has been a center for the highest scholars throughout post-Islamic Iran history. The modern University, on the other hand, has been established around hundred years ago. The three most important categories of universities are: Public nationwide state-owned universities (Sarasari), Islamic Azad (free) University, and Payam-i-Nur University.

Based on "*Dar-al-Fonoon* (house of techniques)", established in 1851, and the College of Political Sciences established in 1899, "in 1934 the establishment of the University of Tehran marked the onset of university education, in the modern sense of the word" (Arani et al, 2018, p.317) in Iran. Following the University of Tehran the government established universities and colleges in different parts of the country, so "by the 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 universities are known as public or *Sarasari* (Nationwide). Meanwhile, the *Howzas* continued their traditional curriculum, educating Islamic scholars and jurists.

The university students, both Islamist and pro-lefties affiliations, were an important actor in the 1979 revolution. After the revolution, between February of 1979 and May of 1980, universities became a very important base for political parties and debates. In May of 1980 universities were shut down by order of the Revolutionary Council, after the demands of Leader of the Revelation, Ayatollah Khomeini for purging universities from the affiliations of East and West. At the same time, according to Khomeini's decree, Committee for the Cultural Revolution (CCR) was formed to Islamize universities. CCR later developed to Supreme Council of Cultural Revelation (SCCR) (Razavi, 2009, p.1-6).

In January of 1988, SCCR approved the statute of Islamic Azad University (IAU) as a non-governmental, nonprofit higher education institution. The founding committee was consisted of six individuals: 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.). 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).

In November of 1988, the statute of Payame Noor University (PNU) was approved. PNU, as a distance learning institution, eventually, presented graduate programs without any entrance exams for the first time in the country (Arani et al, 2018, p.317). According to its website, PNU has 490 branches in the country, 31 international branches, and more than 450,000 students (About-us, n.d.).

According to the Ministry of Sciences, Research, and Technology website (Statistics, n.d.), there are more than 3,370,000 students studying in 2019, in Iran. Out of this, around 500,000 are Associates, 2 million Bachelors, 600,000 Masters, 150,000 PhD students, and 100,000 Professional Doctorates. 22% of the students study at public (sarasari) universities, 38% at IAU, 14% distance learning, 9% private universities, 6% under Ministry of Health and Medical Education, 10% Applied Science and Technology, and 5% Technical and Vocational.

Main Higher Education Governance Actors in Iran

At the Macro level, the main actors in HE governance in Iran are the Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution (SCCR), the Ministry of Sciences, Research, and Technology (MSRT) (Shamekhi, 2020, p.2), and to a lesser degree, Ministry of Health and Medical Education (MHME). Although SCCR is not mentioned in the constitution, as an organization ordered by the Supreme Leader, it is of most importance. One of its own approval, regarding its status, states (Status, n.d.) (translated from Persian by the author):

The Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution is considered as the supreme authority for policy-making, determining lines of action, deciding and coordinating, and directing the cultural, educational, and research affairs of the country within the framework of the general policies of the system (i.e. Islamic Republic), and its decisions and approvals are binding and are considered as law. (translated from Persian by the author)

SCCR “sets policies to ensure the establishment of the Islamic Republic 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). Since its establishment, SCCR has been the most important policy actor in Iran’s higher education, at the macro level. According to its approval about its

responsibilities, there are several items directly relating to higher education (Status, n.d.) (translated from Persian by the author):

- evaluating conditions of the country's culture, education, and research (item 6).
- producing principles and indicators in accordance with Islamic System for University, and plans for its implication (item 8).
- determining education and higher education system policies (item 9).
- Policymaking for the production of educational textbooks, and publication of books and cultural products (item 19).
- approving regulations for the establishment of scientific, cultural, and research centers, academies, universities, and higher education centers, and approving or revising their statutes (item 24).
- approving general regulations for recruitment of principals, professors, teachers, and university students, of universities, cultural centers, research centers, and schools of the country, and determining authorities for choosing them. Note: candidates for the university's rectors are presented by ministers of Culture and Islamic Guidance, Sciences Research and Technology, and Health and Medical Education for approval (item 25).

Currently, SCCR consists of 18 individuals and 22 ex officio members (Members, n.d.). All the individuals, and many of the ex officio, are directly appointed by the Supreme Leader. Some of the ex officio members are the President, Head of the Parliament, Head of the Judiciary, Ministers of Culture and Islamic Guidance, Science, Research and Technology, Education, State, and Sports and Youth, Head of IRIB, IAU, Islamic Propagation Organization.

Discussion: Governance and HE Governance Model in Iran

Legally (and in practice) almost all the power is concentrated in the Supreme Leader, moving him and his inner circle above law, without any desire for accountability. Oil money in addition to a strong military makes this over-centralized system strong. So, regarding Fukuyama's three factors (2011), Islamic Republic is a strong state without a rule of law or political accountability.

This strong and centralized state leads to a relatively strong ‘national policy style’. Regarding the two axes presented by Bovens (2001), it is hard to fit IR in a reactive-proactive spectrum. As an ideological system, regarding some issues, it has a solid predetermined idea about how things should be. Therefore, in some cases, like purging other affiliated ideologies, it acts proactively, yet, the exact ideological views prevent the decision-makers from having developmental ideas regarding some other aspects, making them just reactive to severe crises. Also as an ideological system, it is very much preoccupied with its image, which leads to a tendency in decision-makers to ignore or even deny problems. Ever-increasing power of the supreme leader, in his last three decades, has also resulted in an ever-tightening circle of insiders, moving the system extremely away from consensus, towards more and more imposition of an individual’s ideas.

In 1979, contrary to Howza, University as a modern higher education institution was young and relatively weak, regarding both ‘structures of meaning’ and ‘structures of resources’. The cultural revolution, followed by SCCR acts, moved governance from internal to external. Since then, the highest circle of government has excluded any individual or group with norms and objectives other than its own, inside universities as well as inside the government itself. This is completely aligned with Olsen’s “instrument for national political agendas” (Olsen, 2007, p.30-32).

What had happened in the last century in Iran can also be discussed from institutional and institutional imperialism perspectives. At the beginning of the century, religion and traditional higher education institutions are allied, due to the strong institutional imperialism of religion over traditional higher education. State in its attempts for modernization, and due to its need for highly-trained workforces, established the new university or higher education institution, to build a new ally. After a while, religion and traditional higher education, who are threatened by the state, try to change the balance by forming an alliance with pro-lefties parts of the new higher education. This alliance resulted in the revolution. After the revolution, when religion and Howza dominated the state, they no longer needed university as an allied institution, worried about its institutional defense, shut the university down, and later by fundamentally changing its young structures of meaning and cutting its resources it became subordinated by the state.

The transnational convergence might be weakest in Iran. Most of the primary drivers of transnational convergence are absent or relatively weak in the country. Crude oil and

natural gas make up 82% of the country's exports in 2021 (Trading, n.d.). This shows that Iran has not an important place in the knowledge economy. Also, power and economy are very centralized. 80% of Iran's economy belongs to state or state-governed organizations such as Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) (Dadmehr, 2022). Islamic Republic never accepted the logic of the Free Market, let alone Neo-liberalism, NPM, or post-NPM. Therefore, Iran's HE policy is diverging from the world. In many countries higher education steering model has started from 'republic of science', moved to 'instruments for national authorities, and then from there to 'representative democracy' or/and 'supermarket model' (Gornitzka & Maassen, 2000; de Boer & Maassen, 2020). But in Iran, University has started as 'instrument for national authorities'. It has been in the way of strengthening its academics and therefore its institutional aspects up until 1977. From 1977 to 1980 there has been slight element of 'representative democracy. But again after 1980 and the cultural revolution, both academics and students lose most of their role in governing the universities. By 1991, even the traditionally pro-regime student organizations such as Office for Consolidation of Unity (OCU), and Pro-Line of Imam Students lost their say in universities (Razavi, 2009, p.9). University has again become an 'instruments for national authorities'.

Conclusion

The Islamic Republic regards university as an instrument for implementing its sociopolitical objectives. To IR as an authoritarian regime, neither academics nor students or any other participants' ideas are considered important. Even academic competence is considered secondary and dispensable to the regime. On the other hand dissatisfaction of students as customers are not important to the system, mostly because of the monopoly the state has for providing the service. These minimize the tendency towards policy models other than state sovereignty. SCCR is the highest authority in policy-making at the macro level in Iran about anything related to culture and education, including higher education. It is also responsible for the supervision of the implementation of its approvals.

As Gornitzka and Maassen (2000), and also Meek (2003) have stated, 'national filter' is an important factor in the understanding of higher education sector and higher education policy in different countries. Among different nations, Islamic and Middle Eastern ones might have even stronger national filters. This needs to be studied.

All Iranian higher education is under-researched and needs much more studies. One of the interesting topics in Iran's higher education could be the relations of Howza and University. Because of the ideological resistance of Islamic scholars towards modern Science as a symbol of western (infidels) culture, the national government in pursuit of modernization in many Islamic societies instead of reforming the traditional higher education institution preferred to form a new one. As a result, this new institution with its limited institutional capacity had to compete with an old one with much more developed structures of resources and meaning. This situation has had many consequences that might be subject to study.

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