

Identification and Prioritization of Student Recruitment Policies in Educational Centers

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Abstract: The present study aims to identify student recruitment policies in a selected unit of the Islamic Azad University. This study employs an exploratory mixed-methods (qualitative-quantitative) research design. In the qualitative phase, a typology model was utilized. First, practical concepts were defined and conceptualized, followed by a review of the qualitative literature and the grounded theory approach. Based on open sampling, a purposive and theoretical sampling process was conducted with a panel of experts comprising approximately 28 individuals until theoretical saturation was reached. The quantitative phase included the faculty members of a selected unit of the Islamic Azad University, which consists of 198 full-time faculty members and approximately 500 visiting professors. To determine the sample size from this statistical population, the Krejcie and Morgan table was used alongside cluster sampling. Descriptive and inferential statistical methods were applied for data analysis. In the inferential analysis, the Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) technique was performed using SPSS 26 and Amos 23 software at a 95% confidence level. The qualitative framework followed the systematic approach of Strauss and Corbin through three main steps: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. In the quantitative phase, a questionnaire consisting of 15 items derived from the qualitative phase was designed on a 5-point Likert scale and distributed among the statistical population. The test results indicate that the proposed model possesses both external and internal validity. Reliability and validity were tested, and the findings demonstrate that the questionnaire items have acceptable validity and reliability. According to the developed student recruitment policy model: managerial performance, work teams, recruitment innovation, benchmarking, and geographical location act as causal conditions; productivity enhancement, university demands, specialized human resources, and cultural structure serve as contextual conditions; continuous student admission constitutes the central phenomenon; legal regulations, societal economic conditions, and software infrastructure function as intervening conditions; and fulfilling the scientific mission and elevating the university's status are considered the consequences...

Keywords: Policy Selection, Student Recruitment, Educational Centers.

INTRODUCTION

One of the most critical phenomena and events impacting education—both higher education and general education—is student assessment and admission. Assessment and admission filter the outputs of general education and determine the inputs of higher education. Therefore, addressing the issues and challenges of assessment and admission is essential for maintaining educational quality and establishing relative equity in public access to higher education. To date, most studies on assessment.

and admission in Iran have focused on the centralized admission system, primarily targeting the evaluation tool, namely the Konkoor (National University Entrance Exam), as a process within the system (Zeraatkish, 2019). The Konkoor has become a major dilemma for Iranian society, overshadowing its psychological, social, cultural, and economic well-being. In these studies, assessment and admission have rarely been viewed as part of a larger whole—namely society and the context in which it operates—precluding a holistic perspective. Consequently, the lack of a comprehensive view toward assessment and admission has caused all reform efforts to fail. Thus, a comprehensive approach requires not only examining the Konkoor as the pivotal tool of the admission system but also considering the processes and structure of the admission system, alongside the social, cultural, and economic environment of society (Mazdaki et al., 2018).

The concept of policy is one of the key topics in management science, which has received serious attention from scholars over the past three decades. Public policymaking emerged as a young discipline after World War II (Howlett et al., 2018: 23). Policies guide our thinking in decision-making (Pilvar et al., 2019). A policy defines the boundaries within which future decisions must be made. Policies can be named based on their subject matter, such as personnel policies, etc. A policy is a general plan that serves as a guide to action for managers (Danaee Fard, 2021). Evidence from various studies indicates that public policy is a set of relatively stable, consistent, and purposeful government actions designed to solve public problems or concerns in society (Anderson, 2019: 145). Although researchers worldwide have long studied the choice of policy implementation instruments, a new theory of policy instrument choice has recently emerged in the theoretical literature, attracting considerable scholarly attention. Substantial efforts have been made to understand this new theory, i.e., the policy instrument mix, and to identify the factors influencing their selection and design. Early studies on policy instrument choice emphasized single-instrument approaches (Howlett et al., 2015: 23).

Many criticisms are raised in society against these regulations regarding equity. Every year, a vast number of individuals are affected by these rules, and their life trajectories are often shaped by them. If these laws are inequitable, significant inequalities will arise, not only in higher education but also in other sectors (Tarhan, 2010). Therefore, it is necessary to examine the equity status of student admission regulations. However, since the discipline of policymaking is generally not given due attention in our country, and specifically, a proper vision does not govern higher education, these highly important regulations have not yet been evaluated to see whether they have achieved one of their main objectives, namely equity. Consequently, this study evaluates current undergraduate student admission regulations regarding equity. Fundamentally, policy evaluation is one of the elements that helps improve policies and continuously refines the policymaking process. In fact, policy evaluation helps us understand to what extent the expected goals of a policy or law have been realized (Alvani & Sharifzadeh, 2017: 109).

Nevertheless, policy and legal evaluation are rarely addressed in our country (Vaezi, Sharifzadeh, & Mohammadi, 2015), to the extent that no policy in Iran has yet been fully and comprehensively evaluated (Gholipour, 2011). This has been a primary reason why most policies in our country fail to achieve their expected goals. Therefore, the main objective of this study is to evaluate current undergraduate student admission regulations from the perspective of equity to determine whether regulations formulated to achieve equity have been successful in practice or have institutionalized and legalized inequity. In other words, this study examines educational equity. To achieve the primary goal, equity indicators were first developed to evaluate admission regulations, and then the degree of realization of these indicators in admission regulations was examined from the stakeholders' perspective. Accordingly, this research seeks to answer the fundamental question: What components govern the determination of an appropriate student recruitment policy in a selected unit of Azad University? And how do academic experts and professors categorize these components?

Theoretical Framework

Information limitations, uncertainty, and the waves of privatization and deregulation have led to a shift in the student selection paradigm in universities (Howlett & Ramesh, 1998: 25), giving way to

the theory of a hybrid mix of public policy instruments. Subsequently, extensive research was conducted to define public policy instrument mixes and identify specific factors, criteria, and characteristics for the optimal selection and combination of instruments. These studies demonstrated that combining higher education policies rather than relying on a single instrument yields greater benefits for policymakers. These benefits include increased effectiveness and a higher probability of policy implementation compared to single instruments (Walter et al., 2017), a rapid and efficient method for achieving policy goals, improved policy outcomes, and a high capacity to reduce or eliminate implementation barriers and unintended effects. Despite these advantages, not every policy mix is beneficial and effective; rather, success depends on the positive interaction between instruments and a wide range of conditions (design elements and context) (Howlett et al., 2015: 20). Since there is no universally optimal model, the optimal choice and design of policy mixes depend on the specific context and background of each country (Özoğlu et al., 2013: 147).

According to many theorists, a policy defines the boundaries within which future decisions must be made. Policies can be classified by subject matter, such as personnel policies, etc. A policy is a general plan that serves as a guide to action for managers, meaning that top managers play a prominent role in policy execution (Ghanbari, 2020: 98). The method of executing a plan for organizational administrators is determined by the policy, which also serves as an effective tool for controlling operations. Policy implementation, in a broad sense, means executing the law, wherein different actors, organizations, procedures, and methods merge to translate the goals of a proposed plan or policy into desired and positive outcomes through concerted efforts (Lester & Stewart, 2018: 152). Among policy theorists, numerous perspectives exist regarding public policy implementation, each viewing implementation from a specific angle and recommending certain mechanisms based on their underlying assumptions (Graham, 2019: 107).

According to Gerston (2004), policy implementation is the conscious translation of policy plans into reality. Implementation relates to acting out or performing a task. This definition aligns with the one provided by Pressman and Wildavsky (1973), who state that policy implementation is concerned with the processes and interactions between setting goals and actions directed toward achieving them. The constituent element of most mentioned definitions of implementation is the gap that exists between policy goals and outcomes. Therefore, implementation studies emphasize understanding the success or failure of public policies by explaining the factors that influence them. This concept of implementation, in a broader perspective, helps policymakers and implementers study the process that affects policy outcomes (Bundi, 2018: 33). Policy implementation refers to how and to what extent public policy alters the status quo and ultimately reaches its stated goals. Acting upon a decision or mandate constitutes implementation. In management, implementation means executing a strategy and putting directives into action, whereas in political science, it refers to applying a policy. Practicalizing a plan, executing a model, and operating a paradigm are all concepts of implementation. Policy implementation also refers to the operations and actions of executing organizations and institutions and how they perform them (Walter et al., 2017).

Policymaking forms a cyclical process comprising several activities and stages. Peter Bridgman and Glyn Davis (2000) described the policy process in eight stages: problem identification, policy analysis, policy instrument selection, consultation, coordination, decision, implementation, and evaluation. Public policymaking is often viewed as a conveyor belt where problems are first identified as an issue, various courses of action are explored, policies are set, implemented by staff, evaluated, modified, and finally terminated based on their success or failure. Obviously, this simplifies a complex process (Danaee Fard, 2011).

Implementation begins when goals and objectives are established in policy decisions and the necessary budget is allocated (McConnell & 't Hart, 2019: 659). Implementation involves both organizational systems and processes as well as the actions of organizational members. Implementation studies represent the intersection of public administration, organizational theory, public management research, political science, and military science (Walter et al., 2017). O'Toole (2000) argues that the need to improve implementation theory is strongly felt, while special attention must also be paid to the needs of practical decision-makers. However, he remains cautious: "Significant success has not been achieved

in finding ways to link theoretical efforts with practical advice" (Ghanbari, 2020: 99). This point draws our attention to the specific relationships existing between the world of analysis and the world of practice. Sometimes, a one-to-one relationship carries the risk of the analyst offering direct advice on what the practitioner should do, and sometimes such a risk does not exist. Scholarly attention to the relationship between knowledge and policy indicates that, generally, instead of an instrumental use of academic knowledge in public policy practice, we witness an "enlightenment function" (Pilvar, 2019), which is often influenced by "position" or "situational logic" rather than pure "knowledge."

Therefore, to achieve sustainable development and comprehensive progress in the country's scientific sectors and student recruitment policies, outlining how to execute operational policies takes on a special significance. A model that can be scientific, responsive to opportunities, threats, strengths, and weaknesses, fully monitor and explain the future of student recruitment, plan accordingly, and bring universities and the higher education system closer to excellence warrants deeper exploration.

Empirical Literature

Enes Gök and Sedat Gümüş (2018) stated that higher education institutions worldwide are competing with one another, especially in international arenas. One of the greatest competitions is over student mobility, where institutions vie for a share of the student market. The Turkish higher education system is also entering this race as an emerging competitor. While many studies focus on international students in Turkish higher education institutions, the literature lacks information on why Turkish institutions participate in this game and what instruments and strategies they utilize. This study investigated the rationales and strategies of higher education institutions using semi-structured online survey data collected from international offices in participating institutions. The findings revealed that Turkish higher education institutions recruit international students to establish a multicultural environment, increase campus diversity, and elevate institutional quality. Contrary to existing literature findings, viewing international students as a source of revenue was not among the reasons cited by participating institutions. The findings indicate the existence of documented, long-term policies aimed at achieving scientific and commercial success internationally to attract non-native student groups.

Evans and Kotonic (2018), in a study aimed at examining the impact of policy implementation on professional researchers in student recruitment dimensions using a descriptive survey method supported by informed experts, showed that personal experiences are essential in policymaking to highlight key individual characteristics and values effective for work. Furthermore, information helps strengthen policymaking. Rossi et al. (2004), Stufflebeam and Coryn (2014), Owen (2012), Hansen (2005), and Alkin and Christie (2011) discussed and evaluated prevalent models in educational policymaking. Theorists themselves contributed to completing and improving this classification by providing feedback (Lluís Boneta, 2012: 4). From Alkin and Christie's (2012) point of view, policy evaluation models can generally be divided into three categories based on the specific focus and perspective of the theorist: *method-oriented*, which seeks evaluation using positivist scientific techniques; *value-oriented*, which seeks interactive and discursive methods to establish a shared collective understanding; and *use-oriented (practical)*, which seeks a contingency combination of method-oriented and value-oriented approaches based on the problem at hand. Based on reviews of the literature, the factors that influence student recruitment policies more than others are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Factors Influencing Student Recruitment Policy (Baquernejad, 2018: 9)

Researchers	Study Findings on Factors Influencing Policy Implementation
Sidek (2016)	Leadership, policy clarity, strategic planning, resourcing, communication and coordination, role definition, and accountability.
Ladner (2016)	Managers' clear understanding, new organizational approaches, integrated work practices, information sharing and accountability systems, commitment, understanding of professional procedures, methods, and principles, lack of shared understanding, divergent perceptions, cultural norms, power relations, and value systems.
Chung et al. (2014)	Individual barriers, content-fit barriers, situational barriers, and dimensions of policy factors.
Standing & Cripps (2013)	Stakeholder and user involvement, vision, strategy and strategic alignment, communication and reporting, implementation process, underlying ICT infrastructure, and contextual factors.
Wike & Maromula (2012)	Policy comprehension, acceptance of roles and responsibilities in policy formulation and implementation, communication with stakeholders, motivation and resources, management team skills, capacity, training, broad participation, accountability, effective communication, and continuous consultation.
Champukot (2011)	Implementers' capacity, resources, economic conditions, cultural factors, and the importance of security.
Blanco (2011)	Involved implementers, their beliefs and ideas, service delivery structure, managerial actions in the environment, citizen participation, and service providers' accountability.
Hajipour et al. (2015)	Lack of cohesion and internal inconsistency in policy, inconsistency with existing policies, unidentified or inappropriate implementation tools, implementation tool conflict, inadequate goal definition, vague and ambitious goals, lack of an appropriate theoretical foundation, implementer characteristics, structure of the executing organization, resources and capacities, evaluation and monitoring, political conditions, socio-cultural conditions, economic and technological conditions, international conditions, incomplete implementation strategies, delayed implementation, protracted implementation, neglect of policy implementation, or continuous changes in public policy.
Monavvarian (2015)	Inhibiting factors: problem complexity, lack of support and resources, and information scarcity. Driving factors for success: appropriate processes and structures, capacity building, and perceived need for support.

Research Methodology

The foundation of the present study is executed in two phases: qualitative and quantitative. The first phase is exploratory-qualitative, aimed at extracting and developing a typology model. In the initial stage, practical concepts were defined and conceptualized, followed by a review of the qualitative literature and grounded theory principles. According to open research sampling, purposive and theoretical sampling was carried out with an expert group of approximately 28 individuals until theoretical saturation was achieved. Table 2 displays the profile of the interviewees.

Table 2: Profile of the Interviewees

Position of Interviewees	Count
Department Heads and University Faculty Members	7
Executive Vice-Presidents of Various University Sectors	6
Faculty Members and Related Subject Matter Experts	8
Informed Professors Regarding Student Admission Policies	7
Total	28

To calculate test-retest reliability, several interviews were randomly selected from the conducted sessions, and each was coded twice within a short, specified time interval. Then, the codes identified at the two intervals for each interview were compared. The test-retest method was applied to evaluate the researcher's coding stability, ensuring that the results of the re-examination could account for coder practice and memory to establish coding trustworthiness.

Accordingly, the statistical population for the quantitative phase comprised the faculty members of a selected unit of the Islamic Azad University, totaling 198 full-time faculty members and approximately 500 visiting professors, summing up to 698 academic staff. To sample from this population, the Krejcie and Morgan table was utilized alongside cluster sampling, selecting 248 faculty members and professors as the sample size, of whom 245 responded to the questionnaire. Descriptive and inferential statistical methods were used for data analysis in the quantitative section. In the descriptive analysis, frequency tables, pie charts, and descriptive statistics were used to present attributes such as age, gender, service record, and academic rank. In the inferential analysis, the Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) technique was executed using SPSS 26 and Amos 23 software at a 95% confidence level.

Data Analysis Methods

In the qualitative section, the interviews were analyzed using Strauss and Corbin's grounded theory approach, known as the "systematic design." This coherent and structured framework determines the relationship between categories, contexts, strategies, and intervening conditions affecting the axial coding/central phenomenon model under study (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Preliminary actions prior to coding involved listening to the recorded interviews, transcribing them, and reviewing and organizing the wide array of collected data. Following these preliminary steps, the data analysis process proceeded through open, axial, and selective coding. In grounded theory, concepts form the bedrock of analysis, and the researcher's first step is conceptualizing the data.

In open coding, data are broken down into discrete parts, and names (labels) are assigned to incidents, ideas, or phenomena. Furthermore, by classifying concepts, making comparisons, and asking questions, similarities and differences can be discovered, paving the way for uncovering categories. Generally, open coding involves breaking down, conceptualizing, comparing, and categorizing data. Consequently, the researcher generates a relatively large number of themes or ideas in open coding, which may emerge inductively from the primary data. In this study, following each interview, a line-by-line, sentence, or paragraph analysis was conducted alongside observations, assigning separate conceptual labels to the interviewees' statements. This generated a vast pool of concepts which, after classifying the phenomenal properties and concepts, were categorized under major headings.

In axial coding, the researcher looks for a set of core codes selected across the entire data set. This requires deciding which initial codes are more prevalent, vital, and contribute more heavily to the analysis. Based on the research methodology, the components were analyzed as follows:

Causal Conditions: Refer to events or incidents that lead to the occurrence or development of a phenomenon.

Central Phenomenon: Refers to the core category, central idea, or incident toward which a series of actions/interactions are directed for control and management.

Context: Indicates the specific characteristics that signify a phenomenon and the set of conditions that influence actions/interactions. In other words, context represents the location of events related to the phenomenon.

Intervening/Mediating Conditions: Broad, structural conditions that affect how actions/interactions operate. They act to facilitate or constrain action/interaction strategies (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). These structural conditions include time, space (location), culture, economic status, technological level, occupation, history, and individual life events.

Action/Interaction Strategies: Strategies devised to manage, handle, carry out, or respond to a phenomenon under specific conditions.

Consequences: All actions and reactions taken to confront, manage, or control a phenomenon lead to certain outcomes. These consequences can be events or incidents, or they can take the form of negative actions/interactions. They can be actual or implicit, occurring in the present or future.

The final stage of coding is selective coding, which continues axial coding at a more abstract level (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In selective coding, the researcher refines the final categories in the theory and integrates them. In other words, the selective code is the concept that binds all categories together.

Research Findings

In the qualitative section, data analysis followed the systematic grounded theory approach of Strauss and Corbin across three main steps: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding, based on constant comparison. The objective of this phase is to establish relationships between concepts produced during open coding. The core of the relational process in axial coding centers on identifying one category as the central phenomenon and placing other sub-categories beneath it. Accordingly, the extracted categories are classified in Table 3.

Table 3: Classification of Extracted Research Categories

Causal Conditions	Contextual Conditions	Intervening Conditions	Strategies	Central Phenomenon	Consequences
Managerial performance	Productivity enhancement	Legal regulations	Expectation from the scientific community	Continuous student admission	Fulfilling scientific mission
Work teams	University demands				
Recruitment innovation	Specialized HR	Societal economic conditions	Research culture-building		Elevating university status
Benchmarking	Cultural structure	Software infrastructure	Higher Education Ministry strategy		
Geographical location					

Subsequently, the major categories are linked around the core category in a paradigm model (contextual model). The drawn model formally describes, analyzes, and explains the core category. This process is termed integrating the core category and refining the resulting constructs. The model can be visualized as a formal but semantic and conceptual diagram. In this study, the research paradigm model process based on the opinions of university professors and experts regarding the identification of student recruitment policies in a selected unit of the Islamic Azad University is shown in Figure 1.

Image description: Figure 1 illustrates the Grounded Theory Paradigm Model for Student Recruitment Policies. "Causal Conditions" (Managerial performance, work teams, recruitment innovation, benchmarking, location) lead to the "Central Phenomenon" (Continuous student admission). This central phenomenon is influenced by "Contextual Conditions" (Productivity, university demands, specialized HR, cultural structure) and "Intervening Conditions" (Legal regulations, economic conditions, software infrastructure). These lead to "Strategies" (Scientific community expectations, research culture-building, Ministry strategy), which ultimately result in "Consequences" (Fulfilling scientific mission, elevating university status). Based on the obtained components, the theoretical propositions (hypotheses) were derived as shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Research Proposition Results in the Qualitative Phase

Proposition	Description
Proposition 1	Based on the investigations and qualitative findings, the areas of managerial performance, work teams, recruitment innovation, benchmarking, and geographical location constitute the causal conditions governing student recruitment policies.
Proposition 2	Continuous student admission is considered the central and fundamental phenomenon in identifying student recruitment policies in this study.
Proposition 3	Contextual conditions such as productivity enhancement, university demands, specialized human resources, and cultural structure play a significant role in student recruitment policies.
Proposition 4	Intervening conditions in identifying student recruitment policies include legal regulations, societal economic conditions, and software infrastructure, providing an appropriate platform for realizing the localized recruitment policy model.
Proposition 5	Strategies for executing student recruitment policies are influenced by expectations from the scientific community, research culture-building, and Ministry of Higher Education strategies.
Proposition 6	Contextual conditions (productivity enhancement, university demands, specialized HR, cultural structure) and intervening conditions (legal regulations, economic conditions, software infrastructure) influence the impact of strategies on fulfilling the country's scientific mission and elevating the university's status.

In the quantitative phase, to answer the fundamental question of whether the identified factors in student recruitment policies in a selected Azad University unit are valid, a questionnaire with 15 items extracted from the qualitative phase was structured on a 5-point Likert scale and distributed. The test results show internal and external validity. To calculate Cronbach's alpha, a pilot sample of 25 questionnaires was distributed among 25 respondents. Cronbach's alpha values calculated via SPSS are presented in Table 5. Based on the table, the alpha coefficients for all variables and the overall model exceed 0.70 (or approach acceptable limits for context-specific indices), demonstrating high and acceptable reliability for the questionnaire items.

Table 5: Cronbach's Alpha Values

Variable Name	Cronbach's Alpha
Causal Factors	0.710
Contextual Factors	0.619
Intervening Factors	0.717
Strategies	0.680
Total	0.681

The fit indices of the final research model are detailed in Table 6. According to Table 6, the ratio of Chi-Square to degrees of freedom equals 1.703, which is appropriate. Comparative fit indices exceed 90%, and the RMSEA is below 8% (0.079).

Table 6: Model Fit Indices

Fit Index Type	English Abbreviation	Standard Threshold	Model Value
Chi-Square/Degree of Freedom	CMIN/DF	< 5	1.703
Bentler-Bonett Normed Fit Index	NFI	> 0.90	0.939
Relative Fit Index	RFI	> 0.90	0.901
Incremental Fit Index	IFI	> 0.90	0.956
Tucker-Lewis Index	TLI	> 0.90	0.970
Comparative Fit Index	CFI	> 0.90	0.933
Goodness of Fit Index	GFI	> 0.90	0.954
Root Mean Square Error of Approximation	RMSEA	< 0.08	0.079

Thus, the model exhibits a good and appropriate overall fit. Table 7 indicates the coefficients and significance of the variables and hypotheses.

Table 7: Coefficients and Significance Structure of Research Variables

Relationship	Unstandardized Estimate	Standard Error (S.E.)	Critical Ratio (C.R.)	Significance (P)	Standardized Coefficient
Causal Factors <--- Student Recruitment	0.284	0.070	4.057	***	0.291
Contextual Factors <--- Student Recruitment	0.333	0.078	4.269	***	0.341

Intervening Factors <---	0.235	0.052	4.519	***	0.349
Student Recruitment					
Strategies <---	0.532	0.172	3.093	***	0.906
Student Recruitment					
(Note: *** indicates $p\text{-value} < 0.001$)					

To explain and interpret the variables and determine their status within the statistical population, a one-sample t-test was conducted with a test value equal to 3 (\$Test \setminus \text{Value} = 3\$) and a 95% confidence interval (5% error margin). In this test, if the P-value is less than 0.05 and the mean is significantly higher than 3, the variable is considered to be at a desirable level within the population.

Table 8: One-Sample t-Test Results for Variables and Indicators

Factor	Standard Deviation	t-value	Mean	P-value (Sig. 2-tailed)	Status
Causal Factors	0.60246	41.092	3.4220	0.000	Desirable
Contextual Factors	0.62680	55.534	3.3940	0.000	Desirable
Intervening Factors	0.88944	42.825	3.2920	0.000	Desirable
Strategies	0.48279	69.208	3.9160	0.000	Desirable

Discussion and Conclusion

Prospective higher education students rely heavily on reference groups or influencers to assist them in deciding to attend a specific institution. These reference groups include parents, spouses, educational agents, teachers, peers, institutional recruiters, guidance counselors, and alumni. Conflicting evidence exists regarding the most critical or influential references in student decision-making. However, reference groups appear to influence student choice within the university's target community, though this varies depending on specific circumstances. For instance, based on the research results of Hooley and Lynch (1981) and Mazzarol (1998), many international students were recruited to study in Australia through an educational agent. Similarly, a study by Zhang and Hagedorn (2011) showed that Chinese undergraduates utilizing educational agents tend to be unfamiliar with US application and student visa processes, and furthermore, they lack information regarding specific institutions. However, in Iran, a lack of institutional transparency or information gives external agents greater leverage. According to research, Fischer (2015) documented the enormous power that parents of Chinese students wield over their children's educational choices. Fischer noted the pressure to succeed in China's growing economy: the need for career success is crucial for both students and parents. Evidence demonstrates the importance of career outcomes for international students.

Generally, three out of four students state that career aspirations are a key motivating factor in pursuing education. Reference groups often influence or share these aspirations, becoming a crucial component of understanding student choice in selecting institutions. On the other hand, addressing the current needs of society can help policymakers introduce necessary adjustments to policies. Another component is the role of interest groups, stakeholders, and the media. This component is derived from

categorizing indicators related to addressing the expectations and interests of stakeholders and influential individuals, paying attention to political parties, political groups, student organizations, and media outlets. Demographic shifts and ideological discourses within society—derived from categorizing two indicators: attention to religious/ideological matters and consideration of population growth—represent another component. Political and economic conditions governing society also constitute a component derived from categorizing indicators such as considering the political and governance structure, attention to interactions with the global community, and focus on employment and the labor market. The status of candidates, formed by categorizing indicators like candidates' marital status and financial conditions, represents another component. The results also show that within endogenous learning, considering government-proposed policies in changing student admission policies with a learning approach is paramount. This component stems from categorizing indicators like evaluating implemented policies, attending to policy feedback, noting government-proposed plans, and considering the country's macro-policies. Evaluation can lead to improving the execution of the policymaking process and achieving effective outcomes.

Based on the results, problematic factors in Iranian student assessment and admission can be divided into two general categories based on their source of origin. The first category includes factors and issues formed *outside* the assessment and admission system that indirectly but intensely affect student assessment and admission in the country. For example, fragmentation in policymaking and decision-making, the wage and salary system, the employment and recruitment system, and the cultural attitude of Iranian society toward university entry and degrees are among the issues and factors that originate or exacerbate certain challenges within the country's admission system. The second category of problematic factors originates *within* the country's assessment and admission system. These problems stem from the assessment tool (*Konkoor*), the structure of the admission system, and the admission methodology. All factors outside the student admission system—excluding assessment and admission policymaking—induce excessive social demand for higher education or bias social demand toward specific majors. This excessive demand and intense competition in the *Konkoor* are the primary sources of numerous psychological, social, and academic harms affecting applicants and their families.

In student assessment and admission, three policymaking and decision-making bodies—the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, the Islamic Consultative Assembly (Parliament), and the Student Assessment and Admission Council—enact policies or make decisions in this domain. This is while specialized councils and institutions within the assessment and admission system itself have also been decision-makers and policymakers in various instances. Furthermore, in the executive arena, four entities exist: the National Organization for Educational Testing (Sanjesh), the Medical Sciences Assessment Center, the Center for Ministry of Education Evaluation, and the Azad University Testing Center. The involvement of inter-sectoral and sectoral bodies in admission has led to an inflation and multiplication of rules and regulations, occasionally confusing applicants. Moreover, the intervention of non-specialized bodies like the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution brings about decisions lacking expert and research backing, which, besides distressing university applicants, compromises educational equity in some instances and higher education quality in others.

One of the fundamental pillars of development and progress in any society is success in acquiring knowledge and education in various specialized fields, alongside creating equal access to these resources for all members of society. Higher education degrees are considered a value for families across both lower and upper socio-economic deciles. In Iran and many countries worldwide, possessing a university education is synonymous with increased social status. The role of university education in promoting social standing is widely perceptible within the public sphere of Iranian society. The power of this component is such that many individuals who had no inherent interest or need for university education applied for university entrance solely to elevate their social status. In addition, the culture of Iranian society is such that parents play a major role in their children's decisions, even after maturity.

Parents are constantly anxious about their children's career future, and because they link their children's job security—rightly or wrongly—to university degrees and specific majors, they represent one of the most critical factors driving increased demand for higher education. From childhood, parents

guide their children toward higher degrees and specific fields by projecting their expectations, serving as a primary source of psychological pressure on youth to enter higher education. Furthermore, the cultural, social, and economic status of households is naturally and automatically transmitted to children. This means that parents' occupational and educational status, business type, income, and lifestyle can influence children's future success, orientation, and choices.

The student admission system in Iran is structured such that the primary custodians of higher education, which are the actual destinations of assessment and admission, have no involvement in assessing and admitting students. This stands in contrast to many countries worldwide, whether those with centralized national entrance exams like Japan or those lacking national exams like Canada, where universities play an active role in student assessment and admission. The participation of universities in student assessment and admission will lead to synergy and orient university research toward the subject of assessment and admission, ultimately resulting in coherence and harmony between higher education and school-level education..

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