The Transition from State-Centered Governance to Good Governance in Higher Education: A Grounded Theory Study[1]

Elham Haririan Tavakoli[2], Maghsoud Farasatkhah[3], Baharak Shirzad Kebria[4] and Fateme Hamidifar[5]

Abstract

Higher education governance refers to the formal and informal authority that arises from the laws, policies, and rules that determine the responsibilities and powers of various actors. The purpose of this article was to present a model of good governance in Iranian higher education institutes. We used classic grounded theory methodology to explore this model. The data were collected using semi-structured interviews with 20 key informants with knowledge and experience with the higher education system. Based on Strauss and Corbin's coding paradigm, the data analysis consisted of a three-step coding process, including open, axial, and selective coding. The process concludes that the relations between codes were examined using a continuous comparison approach using a coding paradigm that focuses on causal conditions, context, intervening conditions, action/interaction strategies, and consequences. Findings showed that 259 conceptual constructs (codes), classified into 52 subcategories and 17 categories, affect the central phenomenon. Among the causal conditions, the categories of academic autonomy, the economics of higher education, administrative decentralization, and authority distribution significantly impact higher education's good governance. In the contextual categories, structural factors affect action or interaction strategies and causal conditions more than others. Among these factors, the negative impact of the non-academic management subcategory is more than other factors. Realizing strategies and establishing good governance will have desirable results and consequences that may be causal conditions for the other emerging phenomenon in a different situation. Future studies can design a framework

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2. Ph.D. Candidate, Islamic Azad University, Central Tehran Branch, Faculty of Psychology and Social Sciences, Tehran, Iran.
3. Professor, Higher Education Institute for Research and Planning in Higher Education, Tehran, Iran. *Corresponding author: m.farasatkhah@irphe.ir*
4. Associate Professor, Islamic Azad University, Central Tehran Branch, Faculty of Psychology and Social Sciences, Tehran, Iran.
5. Assistant professor, Islamic Azad University, Central Tehran Branch, Faculty of Psychology and Social Sciences, Tehran, Iran.

with measurable metrics based on this model that higher education governance qualification could be measured and compared. Additionally, testing the model by quantitative approach can increase the validity and transferability of research findings.

Keywords: higher education in Iran, governance, good governance, Grounded theory, good governance in higher education.

Introduction

The development of higher education is a key driving force behind international development, and achieving this requires good university governance. Adopting good governance practices within universities can help achieve strategic goals and meet the needs and expectations of stakeholders. In order to fulfill the 20-Year National Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran, which includes gaining the first scientific and economic rank in the Western South Asia region (Atafar et al., 2009), changes are needed in the approach to higher education governance. This includes changes in revenue generation, privatization, increasing productive and influential interaction with industries to meet labor market demands (Fathollahi et al., 2014), and reducing the role of government in higher education management in general, all of which require structural reform (Vali Mohammadi, 2018).

Higher education governance is generally defined as the direction and approach of government actions or inactions in response to public problems directly or indirectly related to higher education (Pekkola & Kivistö, 2016). According to De Boer & File, the European Union, in the Eurydice document (2008), defines governance as "the formal and informal exercise of authority under laws, policies, and rules that articulate the rights and responsibilities of various actors, including the rules by which they interact." This definition is based on governance studies such as Braun and Merrien, 1999; Clark, 1983; Currie, et al., 2003; de Boer, et al., 2006; Eurydice, 2008; Goedegebuure, et al., 1994, among others (De Boer & File, 2008).

Previous research has demonstrated that good governance in higher education can improve effectiveness and transparency, reduce corruption, and foster systemic thinking (Padash Zivah & khoda Panah, 2015). Reviews have also shown that different countries have adopted various governance models based on their educational and political systems, and there is no one-size-fits-all successful model in the world (Naghizade, 2019). Therefore, the purpose of this article is to identify and present a model of good governance specifically tailored to Iranian higher education institutions.

Methodology

This article presents the findings of a research study that aimed to develop a good governance model for higher education institutions in Iran, using the Grounded Theory method. The research question focused on identifying the components and elements of a good governance model in Iranian higher education institutions, and how they interrelate.

The study used a purposive and theoretical sampling method to select 20 key informants with knowledge and experience in the phenomenon domain, including faculty members, university administrators, policymakers, experts, and external stakeholders. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using the classical GTM founded by Strauss and Corbin, which involves a continuous comparative analysis to discover or construct theory from data. The data analysis process was performed simultaneously with data collection, following the principles mentioned in GT research method sources. The data was encoded in multiple stages, and the results were arranged and represented within a model using ATLAS.ti 9 software. The study findings offer insights into the development of a good governance model for higher education institutions in Iran, which can be applied to enhance the quality and effectiveness of governance practices in this context.

The coding process's reliability was assessed by comparing the coding results from independent coders. The agreement percentage was 90%, which is considered acceptable and close to complete agreement based on Holst's method.

Finding

Following Corbin & Strauss's systematic approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Corbin & Strauss, 1990), the coding process began with open coding. This involved converting the interview text into quotes and assigning codes and conceptual structures to the quotes derived from the text. In the second step, axial coding or theoretical coding, the concepts obtained from the open coding stage were compared, combined, separated, and categorized. Categories from the same family were grouped together, and homogeneous groups were placed in a higher-level cluster category representing a more abstract level than the second-level cluster.

The study's findings show that 259 conceptual constructs (codes) were identified, classified into 52 subcategories and 17 categories, which affect the central phenomenon of good governance in Iranian higher education institutions. Among the causal conditions, the categories of academic autonomy, the economics of higher education, administrative

decentralization, and authority distribution were found to have a significant impact on good governance. In the contextual categories, structural factors had a greater influence on action, interaction strategies, and causal conditions than other factors. Among these factors, the negative impact of the non-academic management subcategory was found to be the most significant.

The study suggests that realizing strategies and establishing good governance will have desirable results and consequences that may be causal conditions for other emerging phenomena in different situations. The study's findings provide valuable insights for policymakers, university administrators, faculty members, and other stakeholders seeking to enhance good governance practices in Iranian higher education institutions.
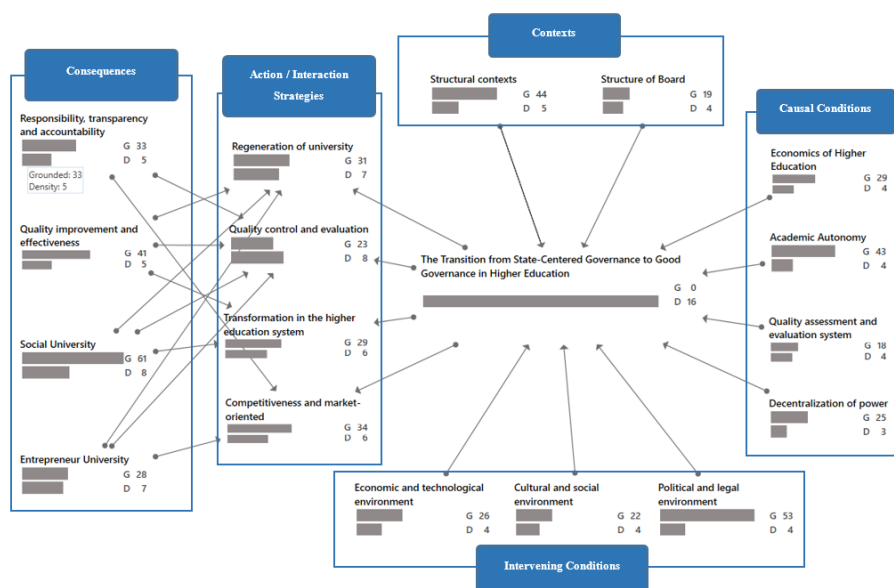

Figure 1. Research Model

Discussion

This article presents the findings of an exploratory research study conducted using the Grounded Theory method to develop a good governance model for the Iranian higher education system. The research question focused on identifying the components and elements of good governance in Iranian higher education institutions and explaining the relationships between them.

The study's first finding was the identification of the central phenomenon as the transition from state center governance to good governance, where academic governance focuses on competitiveness and socialism. Among the

causal conditions identified in the study, academic autonomy, higher education economics, and decentralization and power distribution were considered important, with 43, 29, and 25 grounded concepts, respectively. These concepts have been found to be similarly important in previous research.

For instance, Berdahl has argued that academic autonomy and governance are interrelated (Berdahl, 2010). Similarly, Clark has discussed how academic governance involves balancing the coordination and power dynamics between the government, market, and academic actors (Maggio, 2011).

Future studies could build on the findings of this research by developing a framework with measurable metrics based on the good governance model for higher education institutions in Iran. Such a framework would enable the measurement and comparison of the quality of higher education governance.

Moreover, testing the model using a quantitative approach can increase the validity and transferability of research findings. Quantitative research methods could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the relationships between the identified components and elements of good governance in Iranian higher education institutions. It could also allow for the generalization of the research findings to other higher education contexts beyond Iran. Generally, future research should focus on implementing the good governance model and evaluating its effectiveness in promoting high-quality governance practices in higher education institutions. This would help to ensure that the model is practical, feasible, and effective in achieving its intended outcomes.

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