

## Evaluation of Privatization Policies in Public Higher Education: A Case Study of Iranian Higher Education

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### ABSTRACT

This article, focusing on establishing and expanding autonomous university campuses as a policy tool, evaluates the privatization policies of public higher education in Iran. This study, using a qualitative, process-based research method, analyzes the design and implementation of this policy based on the policy cycle model and policy feedback theory. The findings reveal that the policy of establishing autonomous campuses has not been as successful as expected in achieving its primary objectives, including the internationalization of higher education, expanding access, and increasing student enrollment to meet social and scientific needs. This research examines the resource, interpretive, and institutional impacts of this policy and its socio-political, financial, and executive feedback mechanisms. The resource, interpretive, and institutional impacts include promoting market logic in public universities, encouraging universities to find new financial resources, and creating contradictions in the policy-making and implementation of higher education privatization. The socio-political feedback mechanism focuses on the deviation of campuses from their primary mission, the financial feedback mechanism highlights universities' need for diverse financial resources, and the administrative feedback mechanism points to the lack of adequate oversight of these campuses. The article concludes that while the privatization of public higher education through autonomous campuses has had some positive effects, such as diversifying university financial resources, it has also led to concerns about equity and quality of education. This research suggests that future privatization policies in higher education should be carefully designed and implemented, with adequate oversight, to balance financial sustainability and the maintenance of educational standards. Furthermore, in developing privatization policies in public higher education, all social classes should be guaranteed equal access to higher education. Based on the findings, three scenarios are proposed for the future of autonomous campuses: maintaining the status quo, merging with parent universities, or shifting towards specific missions.

**Keywords:** Privatization of higher education, Article 30 of the Constitution Law, Autonomous university campus of a public university, Policy evaluation

## Introduction

This paper examines the privatization policies of public higher education in Iran, focusing specifically on establishing and expanding autonomous university campuses. The study analyzes how these campuses have been a policy tool for privatization efforts in Iranian higher education. The research is particularly timely given the global trends in higher education privatization and the ongoing debates about the role of private funding in public universities.

Privatization in higher education has seen significant expansion worldwide, primarily manifesting in two forms: the growth of private higher education institutions and cost-sharing mechanisms in public universities. In Iran, higher education privatization efforts began in the 1960s but gained momentum in the 1980s when increasing demand for university education could not be met by public institutions alone.

A key development came in 2011 when major public universities were authorized to establish autonomous campuses based on Article 20 of Iran's Fifth Development Plan (2011-2015). These campuses were intended to diversify higher education offerings, increase access for qualified students, particularly at the graduate level, and prevent the exodus of Iranian students to foreign universities. The policy also aimed to attract Iranian students studying abroad and increase enrollment capacity in various fields to meet social and scientific needs.

However, implementing this policy has raised significant concerns about educational equity and quality. While these autonomous campuses have helped universities diversify their funding sources through tuition fees, they have also led to questions about the commercialization of public higher education and its alignment with Article 30 of Iran's Constitution Law, which emphasizes free education.

The research addresses a critical question: To what extent has Iran's public higher education privatization policy achieved its intended goals and missions? This question is particularly relevant given recent demographic changes and declining demand for higher education, which have prompted a need to reassess privatization policies and the role of autonomous campuses.

The study employs the policy cycle model and policy feedback theory as theoretical frameworks to evaluate these privatization efforts. This approach allows for a comprehensive analysis of how the policy was designed and implemented and its effects on various stakeholders. While some positive outcomes have been achieved regarding financial diversification, significant educational equity and quality challenges remain.

The paper's contribution is significant as it provides one of the first comprehensive evaluations of Iran's higher education privatization policies through the lens of autonomous campuses. It offers insights for Iranian policymakers and other countries grappling with similar challenges in higher education funding and access. The findings can inform future policy decisions about balancing public funding and private resources in higher education, particularly in developing countries facing similar demographic and economic challenges.

## Methodology

The study employed a qualitative process-based research methodology to analyze how the phenomenon of autonomous university campuses has emerged, developed, and evolved over time. The researchers used a bottom-up approach to data collection, starting with specific areas affected by the policy and expanding to broader implications.

The data collection involved multiple sources, including archival data from official policies and implementation guidelines, public interviews with senior ministry officials and university administrators, reports from the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology, press releases, related websites, and news coverage of campus activities. Additionally, the researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with 20 university experts and managers of autonomous campuses to understand policy effectiveness and implementation challenges.

The researchers employed data triangulation methods to verify findings across different sources and ensure reliability. The analysis followed an abductive reasoning approach based on Dubois and Gadde's (2002) framework, allowing continuous interaction between the theoretical framework and empirical observations. The study utilized two main theoretical frameworks: the Policy Cycle Model to analyze the design and implementation phases and the Policy Feedback Theory to evaluate the impacts and mechanisms of feedback.

The analysis focused on policy design and implementation processes, achievement of stated objectives, resource allocation and management, stakeholder perspectives and experiences, institutional impacts and challenges, and social and economic implications. The researchers paid particular attention to analyzing three types of policy effects: resource effects, interpretive effects, and institutional effects. This comprehensive methodology allowed for an examination of both intended and unintended consequences of the policy, providing insights into its effectiveness and implications for future policy decisions.

## Findings

The study revealed that by 2024, 54 autonomous campuses were established across Iran, with 14 campuses in Tehran universities and 40 in other provinces. The implementation pattern showed initial rapid expansion followed by a gradual decline in new establishments, with a notable shift from international focus to domestic student recruitment. Enrolment data indicated a steady increase from 22,081 students in 2013-2014 to 24,252 in 2021-2022, with significant variation across different universities. The top 12 universities accounted for the majority of autonomous campus students, with a growth rate of 4.5% in autonomous campus enrolment compared to 0.33% in regular programs.

The policy effects manifested in three main areas. Resource effects included increased financial resources for universities through tuition fees, helping universities diversify funding sources, and creating additional capacity for student enrolment. The interpretive effects led to a market-oriented approach in public universities, changing the perception of higher education as a commodity and creating tension between public service and commercial interests. Institutional effects revealed a lack of coherence in policy implementation across institutions, limited success in attracting international students, and challenges in maintaining quality standards.

Policy feedback mechanisms operated through social-political, financial, and administrative channels. Social-political feedback showed mixed support from stakeholders and growing concerns about educational quality and equity. Financial feedback revealed universities' increasing dependency on tuition revenue, influencing decision-making processes and resource allocation patterns. Administrative feedback highlighted oversight, quality control challenges, and faculty recruitment and retention issues.

The research identified persistent challenges in maintaining educational quality while expanding access, balancing financial sustainability with affordability, ensuring equity in access across social classes, managing competition with private universities, and coordinating with main university programs. The findings suggest that while autonomous campuses have successfully diversified university funding sources, they have largely fallen short of their original objectives, particularly in terms of internationalization and maintaining educational quality.

## Conclusion

The study concludes that Iran's policy of establishing autonomous university campuses as a privatization tool has produced mixed results. While the policy has succeeded in generating additional revenue for universities and expanding access to higher education, it has fallen short of its original objectives, particularly in internationalization and maintaining educational standards.

Based on the findings, the research proposes three potential scenarios for the future of autonomous campuses. The first scenario involves maintaining the status quo, allowing current operations to continue with minimal changes while letting market forces determine viability and addressing issues through gradual adjustments. The second scenario suggests integration with parent universities, which would involve merging campuses with the parent university operations, streamlining administration and resources, and standardizing educational quality and processes. The third scenario advocates for mission-oriented transformation, redefining campus roles with specific missions, focusing on industry-university collaboration, and developing specialized programs based on regional needs.



The research recommends that future higher education privatization policies should be carefully designed and implemented with proper oversight mechanisms. These policies must balance financial sustainability and educational standards while ensuring equal access across social classes. The implementation should maintain clear quality control mechanisms and integrate stakeholder feedback in policy development.

The study's implications extend beyond Iran, offering valuable insights for other countries grappling with higher education privatization challenges. It emphasizes the importance of systematic policy evaluation and the need for balanced approaches that consider both financial sustainability and educational quality. The experience of Iran's autonomous campuses demonstrates that privatization in public higher education requires careful consideration of multiple factors, including social equity, quality standards, and long-term sustainability.

Moving forward, policymakers should base their decisions on comprehensive evaluations considering broader implications for the entire higher education system. This approach would help ensure that privatization efforts serve their intended purposes while maintaining educational quality and accessibility. The study suggests that successful implementation of such policies requires a delicate balance between market-driven approaches and the fundamental mission of public higher education institutions. Future research should focus on developing more effective models for integrating private funding mechanisms while preserving the public service orientation of higher education.

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