

Study of opportunities for access to higher education in Upstream documents of the Islamic Republic of Iran (1357-1402)

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ABSTRACT

What frameworks and policies have been seen in upstream documents and laws after the Islamic Revolution regarding creating opportunities for access to higher education, so that policymakers can use them to discover and address policy gaps? The present study was conducted with a qualitative approach and using the document analysis method. Qualitative content analysis technique was used in the study of 14 documents. Sampling was carried out purposively. The findings showed that the most important policies affecting access to higher education opportunities in upstream documents included 13 selected themes, 32 central themes, and 167 open themes. These themes are presented in detail in the research findings section. "Ideological foundations of quantitative and qualitative expansion of higher education"; "Participation of individuals and institutions in quantitative and qualitative expansion of higher education"; "Priority of local, regional, and cultural needs in the expansion of higher education"; "Paying attention to the opportunity for special groups to access higher education"; "Organizing the student admission system with a focus on increasing access" was of the themes of the study that ultimately shaped the main theme of "Policies Affecting Access Opportunities to Higher Education". These themes are based on the approach of justice of Islamic researchers and with Capability approach.

Keywords: Higher education; Access opportunities; Document analysis; Content analysis technique, Politics documents; Upstream documents

Introduction

Education, together with health, is considered one of the most important social institutions in modern societies. Governments view education not only as a public service but also as a strategic means of reducing poverty, improving quality of life, and promoting social justice. Higher education plays a central role in human development and in promoting educational equity, which entails providing all individuals, regardless of their social background, with fair opportunities for academic advancement. Structural arrangements should therefore ensure a just distribution of educational opportunities and outcomes.

Despite this importance, a significant theoretical and epistemological gap remains in the conceptualization of equitable access to higher education. Policy documents often emphasize expansion and quality improvement, yet they do not always clearly define the meaning of educational justice or explain how equal opportunities should be achieved. As a result, society is frequently left to infer policymakers' intentions regarding equity and access.

In Iran, major upstream documents such as the Constitution, the Comprehensive Scientific Roadmap, and the Five-Year Development Plans have addressed higher education. However, important questions remain regarding whether these policies have genuinely expanded capabilities, reduced structural barriers, and ensured equitable access for vulnerable groups across different genders, ethnicities, and geographical regions. A content analysis of these documents can help determine whether they promote educational equity or inadvertently reproduce existing inequalities.

Accordingly, this study analyzes policies related to access opportunities to higher education in the policy documents of the Islamic Republic of Iran from 1979 to 2023. The analysis is informed by Amartya Sen's Capability Approach and the perspectives of contemporary Islamic thinkers, including Imam Khomeini, Allameh Tabataba'i, and Morteza Motahhari. The study addresses six questions concerning ideological foundations, institutional participation, indigenous and cultural priorities, opportunities for special groups, restructuring of admission systems, and the expansion of humanities and skills-based education.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative approach using inductive qualitative content analysis based on the method of Graneheim and Lundman. The aim was to identify and interpret concepts related to opportunities for access to higher education within Iranian upstream policy documents.

The study population included all available policy documents from 1979 to 2023. Through purposive sampling, 14 authoritative documents were selected and analyzed. Particular attention was given to concepts, sentences, and paragraphs specifically related to the conditions and prerequisites for entering higher education, rather than to access during the course of study or to post-graduation outcomes.

Content analysis was conducted through six stages: identification of meaning units, open coding, and the development of basic, organizing, central, and global themes. In total, 167 meaning units were extracted. MAXQDA 2020 was used to facilitate the organization and analysis of the data, and repeated reviews were conducted to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.

No.	Document Title	Approving Authority	Assigned Codes	Number of Meaning Units
1	Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran	Approved by Public Referendum	010–070	11
2	First Five-Year Development Plan	Islamic Consultative Assembly	100–180	15
3	Second Five-Year Development Plan	Islamic Consultative Assembly	200–270	11
4	Third Five-Year Development Plan	Islamic Consultative Assembly	300–317	10
5	Fourth Five-Year Development Plan	Islamic Consultative Assembly	400–450	15
6	Fifth Five-Year Development Plan	Islamic Consultative Assembly	500–550	18
7	Sixth Five-Year Development Plan	Islamic Consultative Assembly	600–650	12
8	Comprehensive Scientific Roadmap of the Country	Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution	800–853	18
9	Law on the Objectives, Duties, and Structure of the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology	Islamic Consultative Assembly	1300–1301	2
10	Announcement of the General Policies of the System in the Science and Technology Sector	Expediency Discernment Council	1200–1230	10

11	Islamic-Iranian Model of Progress Document	Center for the Islamic-Iranian Model of Progress	900–952	13
12	Higher Education Spatial Master Plan	Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution	1000–1045	18
13	Law on Permanent Provisions of the Country's Development Programs (2016)	Islamic Consultative Assembly	1100–1110	3
14	Government's Popular Transformation Document	Cabinet of Ministers	1400–1440	11
Total				167

Findings

1. Ideological foundations of expansion

The analyzed documents conceptualize higher education both as an individual and collective right and as a component of spatial justice. Citizenship rights, protection of minorities and different genders, balanced geographical distribution of resources, and regional socioeconomic decentralization are repeatedly emphasized. The documents also draw on Islamic values such as nondiscrimination, respect for knowledge, and facilitating education as a benevolent social act.

2. Participation of individuals and institutions

Public participation is considered an important mechanism for expanding higher education. The documents encourage philanthropy, waqf (endowment), charitable contributions, and nongovernmental financial support. They also support private-sector participation in tuition-based higher education, the establishment of universities in free trade zones, and investment by nongovernmental actors. These policies aim to mobilize additional resources to support the quantitative and qualitative expansion of higher education.

3. Indigenous, regional, and cultural priorities

A major theme concerns the attention devoted to disadvantaged regions, local needs, and cultural considerations. Policies propose increasing admission quotas for underdeveloped areas, aligning university admissions with regional needs, developing academic programs suited to local conditions, and establishing institutions responsive to cultural concerns. Gender-related cultural policies are also mentioned within this framework.

4. Opportunities for special groups

The documents identify two main approaches: financial support and educational continuation for groups with special circumstances. Support includes scholarships, financial and moral assistance for talented students, aid for evening-program students, and measures facilitating access for veterans, families of martyrs, and other protected groups. Policies also emphasize opportunities for exceptional talents and elites to continue higher education in appropriate fields.

5. Restructuring the student admission system

Policies aimed at increasing access include expanding overall enrollment, strengthening international educational linkages, and diversifying admission mechanisms. The documents refer to integrated assessment systems, evening and tuition-based programs, and the diversification of educational formats and delivery methods as ways to broaden access opportunities.

6. Expansion of humanities and skills-based education

Two complementary priorities emerge: enhancing the status of the humanities and expanding skills-oriented and technical education. The humanities are linked to the intellectual development of society, while skills-based fields respond to economic and functional needs. The expansion of both dimensions is viewed as a strategy for increasing participation in higher education among wider segments of society.

Conclusion

The findings show that Iranian upstream policy documents address access to higher education through six interconnected dimensions: ideological foundations, public and institutional participation, indigenous and cultural priorities, opportunities for special groups, expansion of humanities and vocational education, and restructuring of admission systems. Justice is interpreted within a religious and normative framework, and policies related to educational access are evaluated in light of these underlying principles.

The analysis also demonstrates differences in the level of policy specificity. Broad concepts such as justice and equity are mainly derived from the Constitution and the Higher Education Spatial Master Plan, whereas the Five-Year Development Plans

provide more concrete and operational measures, including increasing the share of disadvantaged regions, improving student-to-population ratios, targeting special groups, and diversifying admission mechanisms. A recurring theme in the documents is the pursuit of equitable geographical distribution through the strengthening of regional universities, decentralization, institutional self-reliance, diversification of resources, and the promotion of equal opportunities.

Equity is further reflected in affirmative-action policies for veterans' families, beneficiaries of the Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation, and individuals supported by the State Welfare Organization. Financial assistance, loans, and support for students in tuition-based institutions are repeatedly emphasized across the Development Plans. At the same time, the mobilization of philanthropy, endowments, and nongovernmental participation constitutes an additional strategy for expanding higher education and broadening access opportunities. These measures are intended to reduce disparities affecting marginalized social groups and regions with historically lower levels of access.

Finally, Sen's Capability Approach provides a useful interpretive framework for understanding these policies. The emphasis on geographical, cultural, and indigenous diversity, together with efforts to empower vulnerable groups and encourage social participation, is broadly consistent with the expansion of individuals' substantive choices and capabilities. Overall, the analyzed policy documents demonstrate a substantial concern for educational equity and access; however, the extent to which these principles are effectively realized in practice remains a subject for further investigation.

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