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# The Hybrid Model of Academic Capitalism in Iranian Higher Education: A Complex Interplay of Neoliberal and State-Controlled Practices

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## Abstract

This study explores the unique implementation of academic capitalism (AC) in Iranian higher education Institutions (HEIs), identifying a hybrid model that blends neoliberal strategies with state-imposed ideological controls. Employing qualitative methods, including interviews with stakeholders and analysis of educational policy documents from 1979 to 2023, the research reveals a complex interplay between market-driven approaches and rigid ideological constraints. This dual approach impacts academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and integration into the global knowledge economy, presenting a distinctive governance model that complicates the conventional understanding of AC. The findings offer profound insights for policy-makers and educational administrators, suggesting the need for nuanced strategies that harmonize economic objectives with ideological imperatives.

**Keywords** Academic capitalism · Higher education · Neoliberalism · State ideology · Iranian universities · Market-driven education · Educational governance · Global knowledge economy · Qualitative research · Higher education policy

## Introduction

Academic capitalism (AC), a manifestation of neoliberal policies in public higher education institutions (HEIs) (Rhoades and Slaughter, 2004), refers to the increasing commercialization and marketization of academic research, teaching, and service in higher education (HE) (Mizrachi, 2018). It is a concept used to analyze the market-oriented strategies and practices universities adopt in response to changing dynamics in HEs and serves as a normative framework for understanding and examining these transformations (Olson and Slaughter 2016, Schulze-Cleven and Olson 2017).

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Normatively, AC has been used a critique of the excessive and commercialized marketized logic in HE, which can shift priorities away from knowledge and promoting critical thinking toward excessive financial gain and competition with other institutions (Giroux, 2014).

By marketization, AC refers, simpliter, to the dominance of frameworks such as demand, supply, and cost-profit analysis. In this sense, the ‘improvement’ in HE can become synonymous with metrics dominated by neoliberal frameworks. It is argued that marketized frameworks overly prioritize metrics such as citations, student feedback, and revenue. Through commercialization, universities and academic institutions engage in market-like behaviors, such as patenting research, creating spin-off companies, engaging in real estate investment, and diversifying institutional portfolios, alongside forming partnerships with industries. The dominance of neoliberal frameworks can be exemplified when universities may prioritize reputation over challenging the status quo of industry partners due to concerns over potential revenue loss, and thus, the advancement of knowledge and truth may be restricted (Karran et al., 2022; Slaughter and Leslie, 1997). Likewise, excessive neoliberal application can negatively affect the quality and integrity of academic work, eroding public perception and trust in HEIs (Slaughter and Gary, 2004). For example, if universities are perceived to be limiting academic freedom in order to preserve their reputation, then consumers of the research may doubt the objectivity of the knowledge being produced (Karran et al., 2022).

## Global Perspectives on the Capitalism of HE

Capitalism in HE has transformed it into a market-driven entity and commodification. Initially, Marx (1887) describes commodification as the process where objects are transformed into commodities through the replacement of use-value by exchange-value, which alters their identity and fosters a system of commodity relationships, often leading to what he termed “commodity fetishism” (Lukács, 1971). By the late 20th century, the concept had expanded across various sectors, including education, where scholars like Friedman, Kuznets, and Mincer advocated for the introduction of market principles into HE through Human Capital Theory (HCT), aiming to enhance economic growth by improving graduate skills (Friedman and Kuznets, 1954; Mincer, 1958; Shaffer, 1961; McCulloch, 2009).

In practice, this has led to universities being assessed on economic metrics, treating education as a commodity, with students as customers, and emphasizing income generation over academic or scientific capital (Shumar, 1997; Aronowitz, 2005; Scherrer, 2005; Bassett, 2009; Saunders, 2010). For instance, in the UK, neoliberal reforms introduced during the Thatcher era significantly cut public funding for HE, pushing institutions toward market-oriented models and performance metrics (Randle and Brady, 1997; Naidoo and Jamieson 2005; Thompson and Bekhradnia 2010; McArthur 2011; Eagleton 2015). Similarly, the Bologna Process and the Lisbon Strategy in Europe aligned HE closely with economic activities, evident in programs like Finland’s Tuli program, which funds commercial research (Miklavič 2012; Kauppinen, 2014; Urbanovič *et al.*, 2016).

Countries like Germany and France, however, have shown resistance to such commodification due to their strong socialist traditions (Scherrer 2005; Graf 2009; Miklavič, 2012; Erkkilä, 2014). Conversely, Japan and Taiwan have embraced it, linking HE closely with hi-tech industries and corporate sectors to improve their global economic stance (Hawkins and Furuto, 2008; Chen and Lo, 2013). Overall, commodification has various degrees of influence, from subtle shifts in university operations to profound transformations where education itself becomes a globally traded commodity.

The capitalism of HE originally conceptualized in the Global North<sup>1</sup> during the 1970s, evolved under economic pressures that reduced governmental support, compelling institutions to optimize economically. This transition manifested in forms ranging from minimal, focusing primarily on operational efficiencies within institutions, to maximal, where universities were transformed into economically self-sufficient entities to generate surplus value (Kazemi and Safari, 2020). As this concept transitioned to the Global South, it was critically adopted with significant delays, emphasizing the critique of economic policies rather than mere adoption. This critique aimed to better position these countries within the global economic landscape, reflecting a nuanced integration of market-driven educational reforms influenced by global capitalist norms (Ramezani, 2020).

The capitalism of HE in Global South countries<sup>2</sup> presents both typical and exceptional experiences. It involves treating education as a lucrative sector, focusing on economic gains from HE institutions, as seen through various reforms and practices across countries like India (Tilak, 2018), Uganda (Ssesanga, 2004), China (Tsang, 2002; Yang, 2006), Turkey (Yalcintan and Thornley, 2007; Önal, 2012; Fırat and Akkuzu, 2015), Chile (Fleet and Guzmán-Concha, 2017), Malaysia (Marimuthu, 2008), and Saudi Arabia (Dakhiel, 2017). These include emphasizing surplus value, developing ‘university towns,’ fostering industry-university cooperation, increasing tuition fees, and tailoring educational programs to market demands, emphasizing disciplines like engineering, management, and ICT that are deemed more profitable.

However, each country implements these dimensions uniquely, adapting to its socio-economic and political contexts. For instance, private HE predominantly thrives in urban rather than rural areas in countries like China (Mok, 2009) and Turkey (Fırat and Akkuzu 2015), where neoliberal policies are intensely applied. In Islamic countries, this trend often conflicts with traditional values where education is seen not just as a tool for economic productivity but also as a means for spiritual and moral development (Birler, 2012; Mohammad Miharaja, 2014; Baba and Zayed, 2015; Othman *et al.*, 2017; Dakhiel, 2017). This has led to criticisms regarding the neglect of Islamic teachings in favor of a more market-driven approach to education.

<sup>1</sup> The Global North refers to countries that are more developed economically, have higher living standards, and enjoy greater political and social stability. These countries are typically located in regions such as North America, Europe, and parts of East Asia.

<sup>2</sup> The Global South refers to countries generally considered less developed economically, have lower living standards, and face social and political challenges. These countries are often located in regions such as Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

Furthermore, in regions like the Persian Gulf, the proliferation of Western educational models through branches of American universities has led to concerns about the relevance and integration of such education within local cultural contexts (Donn and Al Manthri, 2010; Romanowski, 2014). Overall, while these countries seek to enhance their global economic standing by aligning their educational systems with market needs, this has often resulted in the marginalization of traditional knowledge and values, signaling a deep and complex impact of global neoliberal policies on local educational landscapes (Rust *et al.*, 2010, p. 100).

### Iran's HE Landscape: Academic Capitalism in Iran

The capitalism of HE in Iran presents a unique case in the Global South, as it is neither a member of the World Trade Organization nor the General Agreement on Trade in Services (Naidoo and Jamieson, 2005, p. 2; Davis and Wilf, 2017, p. 6), frameworks typically associated with education commodification globally.

The local political and ideological climate influences the AC in different regions, notably marked by authoritarianism and the deep integration of religious doctrine into governance and societal norms. In Iran, the intersection of neoliberal economic policies with a centralized political system has uniquely shaped the educational landscape, particularly after the 1979 revolution (Ashraf and Banuazizi, 2001; Ritter, 2015; Abazari and Zakeri, 2018). Iran's universities, deeply integrated and controlled by the state, have experienced significant changes in their structure and autonomy, moving increasingly toward market-driven models. This shift was accelerated by substantial educational expansions post-revolution, leading to a heightened need for funding, which in turn spurred market-oriented reforms (Hamdhaidari *et al.*, 2008; Jamshidi *et al.*, 2012; Mirzamohammadi and Hamdollah, 2017; UNESCO, 2019). These reforms in Iran contrast with those in Western countries, where marketization often accompanies political and organizational freedom. However, universities remain under strict state control in Iran despite their market-oriented financial restructuring. This reflects a unique form of AC where economic changes do not necessarily equate to political freedom. This study demonstrates how AC in HE can vary significantly depending on the socio-political context, adapting to local conditions while reflecting broader global economic trends.

The AC concept is relatively new in Iran, with limited scholarly attention before the last decade. Scholars such as Abbasi *et al.* (2009) critique its potential to exacerbate class divides by granting unequal access to resources, while Mirzamohammadi and Hamdollah (2017) observe a paradox between Islamic values and neoliberal ideologies in Iran's universities, underscoring the need for empirical studies within this context, as well as Sedaghat views it as a shift away from human values (Sedaghat, 2016).

In recent years, four distinct notions of AC have emerged in Iran: commodification as privatization and marketization, the fetishization of scientific works and academic norms, and a deviation from the Islamization of HE. The terms 'khososi-sazi' and 'khososi shodan' describe the privatization processes affecting Iran's educational landscape, where public institutions gradually become privatized or rent out

their spaces, and private sectors encroach upon public education (Jamshidi *et al.*, 2016). Despite constitutional mandates for free education, the trend shows a significant shift toward privatization, with a notable increase in tuition-paying sectors within public universities from 2001 to so far (IRPHE, 2021).

The Islamic Azad University (IAU), established in 1983, marks a significant phase of privatization, catering mainly to war veterans and families affected by the Iran–Iraq war through scholarships, which also reflect the institution’s ideological affiliations (Islamic Azad University, 1985; Foskett and Maringe, 2010; MEHR NEWS AGENCY, 2013; Rounagh, 2017). Despite its official non-profit status, the IAU receives substantial support from high-ranking political figures, illustrating a blend of economic and ideological functions unique to Iranian HE privatization compared to global trends (Sakurai, 2004; Hamidifar, 2012).

The marketization of HE involves selling educational services, which has significantly increased due to policies promoting economic self-sufficiency in HE, initiated during Rafsanjani’s presidency (Ayalon, 1992; Menashri, 1992: 324–325; Iranian Parliament, 1989; UNESCO, 2020). This transition has led to universities engaging in economic activities unrelated to traditional academic goals, promoting a model where education serves market rather than societal needs, significantly impacting the quality and nature of HE (Karimi, 2014; Mohadesi Kilvaei, 2018).

Furthermore, the formalization of teaching and research aligns with the fetishization of academic laws, where the quantity of output is prioritized over quality, affecting faculty promotion and the integrity of academic work (Ministry of Science, Research and Technology, 2016; Tanaomi and Asaadi, 2017; Rushan and Ghasemi, 2018, p. 4; Ghasemi *et al.*, 2018). Finally, the marginalization of Islamic knowledge and the push toward Western models highlights a significant ideological shift in Iranian HE, increasingly driven by market forces rather than Islamic educational values (Farasatkah, 2009; Ghorbani, 2013; Abazari and Parnian, 2016).

Previous studies, as noted, have typically used four concepts to analyze the conditions in Iran’s HE institutions; yet, ‘AC’ has not been applied to describe these scenarios. Nevertheless, a significant meta-analysis spanning from 1997 to 2020 by Ramezani (2020) identified 14 key components of AC, including commodification, privatization, commercialization, expanded managerial capacities, internationalization, competitive policies, New Public Management (NPM), the emergence of new funding circuits, new circuits of knowledge, branding and commodification policies, quantification policies, transparency and accountability policies, shifts in government political approaches, globalization of knowledge and education, and the role of academic staff as educators and economic actors (Ramezani, 2020). This comprehensive review forms the basis for this study, which aims to explore how these indicators of AC are implemented and managed within Iran’s HE system.

As such, this research takes a comprehensive approach to AC by examining all its components and indicators, unlike previous studies that have focused on isolated aspects like commercialization (Hemmati *et al.*, 2015), internationalization (Valimoghaddam *et al.*, 2019), privatization (Azizi *et al.*, 2021), or limited aspects like Back’s study (2016) focused on four dimensions of AC indicators according to the views of Slaughter and Larry (1997) such as New Public Management (NPM), new funding circuits, new circuits of knowledge, and privatization (Back, 2016).

This study's methodology is also innovative. It examines policy documents, other published materials, and the real-life experiences of universities and academics across various disciplines. Previous research, while valuable in terms of theory, has either been based on a review study on Iran's HE (Hamdhaidari *et al.*, 2008; Abbasi *et al.*, 2009; Pourezzat and Heidari, 2011; Bagheri, 2012; Mohammadi and Zibakalam, 2014; Kazemi and Safari, 2020) or the personal experiences of the researchers themselves (Shahghsemi, 2017). To the best of the author's knowledge, the only study that followed this methodology was by Back (2016), which focused on Iraq, not Iran.

This study is pioneering in its comprehensive examination of all policy documents relating to AC in Iranian HE; an endeavor only previously attempted in a limited scope by Mirzamohammadi and Hamdollah (2017) in their work on Iran's Comprehensive Scientific Map.

Furthermore, while there are thematic overlaps between Valadbaygi's works (2021, 2022, 2024) and this study—particularly in using terms like 'capitalism' and 'neoliberalism' and a shared focus on Iran—Valadbaygi does not explicitly explore the impact on HE. In contrast, this research targets this precise gap, carving out a place within the academic domain by applying and potentially expanding the concept of hybridity to HE governance and policy.

Building on this foundation, the present research delves deeply into the nuances of AC within the context of Iranian universities. The goal is not to promote AC but to critically evaluate its prevalence and implications in Iran. This analysis aims to inform decision-making and stimulate discussions about aligning HE practices with societal needs and foundational academic values.

In pursuit of this objective, the research poses a pivotal question:

How do the neoliberal agendas in HE interacts with the theocratic governance structures in Iran, and what are the implications for policy and practice within Iranian public universities?

The contributions of this research are manifold and extend across various domains of HE policy and practice, both within and beyond Iran:

**Policy Implications:** The findings can inform more nuanced policy decisions considering economic efficiency and cultural-religious values by dissecting the interplay between neoliberal and theocratic elements in Iranian HE. This dual consideration is crucial for policy formulations that seek to balance modernization with tradition.

**Practical Insights for HE Administrators and Stakeholders:** The study provides empirical evidence on the outcomes of merging market-oriented strategies with religious doctrines in university governance. These insights are invaluable for university administrators who must navigate the complexities of implementing financially sound yet culturally sensitive policies.

**Global Perspective on HE:** Beyond Iran, the study's outcomes offer a comparative perspective that can help educators and policymakers from other regions understand and evaluate the potential impacts of similar governance structures on their educational systems. This global viewpoint fosters a broader understanding of how different governance frameworks affect academic practices and policies.

## Research Design and Methodology

### Research Design

A qualitative research methodology following a pragmatic approach was chosen in this study. Therefore, epistemological and ontological assumptions were shaped around the demands of our research question. A combination of interviews and document analysis was used, aligned with Hackett (2017: 249), Vallas and Kleinman (2008: 290), and Back (2016).

### Participants

A) Participants were from public universities and MSRT, including current or recently serving officials in the following capacities: Senior official (president, vice president or professional administrator, Chief Financial Officer, Chief Academic Officer, and Director), Academic administrator (College dean, Department head, and Program chair), International Relations Officer, and academics. Out of 15 participants, 12 were from Public Universities (Senior official 3, Academic administrator 4, academics 4, and International Relations Officer 1), and three were from the MSRT. The 14 participants held doctoral degrees, one had a master's degree, and six had earned doctorates from universities outside Iran (France, Italy 2, Canada, USA, and Sweden). In all cases, the university interviewees were currently employed. There were no female interviewees at the Ministry or universities. All of those to whom the researcher was referred were men.

The snowball sampling method and direct contact via email were employed to ensure the appropriate selection of participants for this study. Initial steps involved identifying relevant individuals and expanding the sample by requesting recommendations from the participants. This approach facilitated the inclusion of individuals with knowledge and awareness of entrepreneurial activities within their respective institutions. Additionally, in line with the sampling practices described by Beitin (2012: 244), the norm in this study was to sample until theoretical saturation was reached. This ensured that a comprehensive understanding of the research topic was achieved through data saturation.

Additionally, two specific eligibility criteria were established for participant selection. Firstly, participants were required to have professional experience within the past 5 years or to have been serving for at least 1 year in their respective roles. This criterion ensured that participants had recent and relevant knowledge of their institution's dynamics. Secondly, participants were expected to have authored a scientific publication addressing topics related to neoliberalism, AC, the marketization of HE, or similar relevant terms. In this case, the researcher directly contacted individuals/authors via email. This criterion aimed to identify individuals who had actively engaged with and demonstrated expertise in the subject matter of interest.

B) In addition, policy documents were considered. Documents were the Iranian Upstream Educational Documents (IUED) related to 1979–2022, including 1) documents on HE development strategy, 2) Iranian parliamentary legislation (laws



and policies) regarding HE, 3) upstream documents, such as the Constitution, and a vision document of 1404 (=2025), CSM (2010), 4th, 5th, 6th, and 7th 5-year development plans, and 4) publications from the MSRT, parliament, and universities. At the Ministry level, documents were obtained through a variety of sources, including the websites of the Expediency Discernment Council, the Islamic Parliament Research Center of the Islamic Republic of IRAN, the Institute of Research and Planning in HE (IRPHE), and the MSRT website, as well as university officials participating in the study. Public institutions' organization charts and websites were also examined at the organizational and university levels. The *documents* were chosen based on several criteria: 1) They must be related to Iran's HE or academic policies, 2) the time frame should be from 1979 onward to capture recent developments and changes over time in academic policies, 3) they should include policy documents from relevant governmental bodies, ministries, or organizations responsible for setting academic policies in Iran, 4) required to be directly related to AC, including policies on research funding, commercialization of research, industry collaborations, intellectual property rights, privatization of HE, etc, and 5) policy documents that address or influence AC markers, such as policies promoting university-industry collaboration, incentivizing commercialization of research, or encouraging entrepreneurial activities within HEIs, etc.

## Research Tools and Procedures

In this research, the data collection procedure primarily involved conducting semi-structured interviews (based on Roulston's protocol (2018)) to identify and describe possible indicators of AC in Iran's public HEIs. The data collected through interviews provided a rich source of firsthand perspectives and valuable insights, enabling a deeper understanding of the research topic. An interview guide was utilized tailored toward our exploratory research question with the focus of AC but in allowance for participants to provide their own perspectives. Participants were selected based on predetermined criteria and contacted to schedule interviews. They were informed beforehand that they could choose not to answer any questions that they felt uncomfortable answering, ask not to have the answers recorded, and terminate the interview at any time for any reason. It was ensured that participants were given absolute freedom of choice and the right to consent to interviews, anonymity, and confidentiality. Also, informed consent and authorization were obtained from respondents before the interview. The interview phase of this research began in May 2019. Most interviews occurred in person in the interviewees' offices during normal business hours, at their wishes as this provided an opportunity for the author to understand better the social circumstances under which AC emerged.

Each interview session was conducted in a conducive environment to encourage open and honest responses, lasting between 30 and 100 min. The interviews were audio-recorded with the participant's consent. During the interview, participants were asked questions related to AC in Iran HEIs, such as: Are you familiar with AC? How would you define AC in Iran's HE context? Have you observed any specific markers or indicators of AC within your institution? If so, could you provide

some examples? While protecting key informants' views, a fair hearing of all views was maintained. In the end, the recorded discussions were transcribed verbatim for analysis. In addition to conducting interviews, this research also simultaneously involved analyzing policy documents. Analyzing documents began with identifying relevant policy documents related to the research topic. After gathering a comprehensive collection, these documents were carefully reviewed, and key information was extracted using a structured framework. The extracted data were then organized and coded based on themes and categories for the analysis. This process allowed for a systematic and rigorous examination of the policy documents, enabling the identification of patterns, trends, and critical insights. The analyzed data from policy documents provided a valuable supplementary perspective to complement the findings from the interviews, enhancing the overall depth and breadth of the research and contextualizing AC as it emerged or developed over time and concerning other events (Rapley, 2018: 119).

## Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed using the Maxqda 2020 software to analyze, code, organize, and theme the data. Following the transcription of the interviews, participants were allowed to review the transcripts, ensuring the accuracy of their responses. The transcriptions, field memos, and policy documents (IUED) were then uploaded into the software for analysis. Consistent with the guidance of Wicks (2017), a thorough review of the data sets was undertaken to identify prominent themes related to the research question. The iterative coding and categorization process continued until 'saturation' were achieved, meaning that all potential relationships within the data had been exhaustively explored. This rigorous approach to data analysis ensured a comprehensive and in-depth exploration of the research findings, enhancing the overall validity and reliability of the study.

To enhance the validity of the study, member checks and the corroboration of different sources were employed, as well as triangulation, to ensure data interpretation accuracy, following the recommendations of Yin (2009: chapter 4). Member checks were conducted by involving participants in the research process. After the interviews were conducted and the data were analyzed, the findings were shared with the participants to validate the accuracy and interpretations of their responses. This process allowed participants to input and give feedback, ensuring that their perspectives were accurately represented.

Furthermore, corroboration of different sources was implemented by cross-referencing the data collected from interviews with the data extracted from policy documents. By comparing and contrasting the information obtained from multiple sources, discrepancies or consistencies were identified, providing a more comprehensive and robust understanding of the research topic. Additionally, triangulation was employed to validate the data interpretation accuracy further. This involved utilizing multiple data collection and analysis methods, such as interviews and document analysis. By employing diverse sources and methods, a single approach's potential biases or limitations were mitigated. Triangulation allowed for

a comprehensive examination of the research topic, strengthening the overall reliability and validity of the findings.

For example, the statements of Ministry officials were compared with those of university officials and experts and with information derived from document analysis. The statements of university officials, faculty, and international relations experts were similarly compared. Having had opportunities to meet those directly involved in privatization activities and visiting universities personally; the author was comfortable validating statements by direct observation.

## Findings

This section presents the findings organized around 12 distinct themes of AC aspects, each highlighting a different aspects of the transformation underway in Iran's academic sector.

### Theme 1: New Circuits of Knowledge in Iranian HEIs

The first theme focuses on the emergence of *new circuits of knowledge within Iranian HEIs*. These circuits include parallel education, evening programs, and English language centers, which are strategic responses to meet the needs of broader and non-traditional audiences. These initiatives aim to provide opportunities for individuals previously excluded or who had faced barriers to HE.

Parallel education allows unqualified or blocked individuals to pursue studies as private students, offering an alternative pathway to HE. Evening programs cater to employed individuals seeking flexible options for degree completion, accommodating their work schedules. English language centers serve as auxiliary units, supporting students in improving their English skills and fulfilling their aspirations to study abroad or secure funding for graduate degrees.

Participants in the study highlighted the financial aspect of these initiatives, emphasizing that *universities generate revenue through the sale of degrees via evening programs and the establishment of campuses* [P5]. In addition, *these activities are supported by government policies that allow universities to build campuses, run evening programs* [P4], and *offer short-term training for financial purposes* [P15]. While these activities serve as new circuits of knowledge, facilitating access and generating income for universities, it is crucial to consider the broader implications.

These findings align with Back's study (2016) on Kurdish public universities in Iraqi Kurdistan, which also adopted similar mechanisms, such as parallel education and evening programs, as part of AC initiatives. These initiatives aim to generate revenue and connect universities with non-traditional communities. The alignment between the findings suggests that the emergence of new circuits of knowledge, including parallel education and evening programs, is a common response to the changing landscape of HE in both Iranian and Iraqi Kurdistan contexts, driven by the principles of AC.

While these initiatives expand educational opportunities and promote inclusivity, questions arise regarding quality assurance, equitable access, and the maintenance of academic standards amidst pursuing financial goals. Balancing the financial sustainability of universities with the preservation of educational integrity becomes essential. The legal support for these activities reinforces their role as accepted components within the HE system, indicating that universities operate within the confines of governmental policies and align with national priorities. However, ongoing evaluation and research are necessary to monitor the long-term effects of these initiatives on the HE landscapes and ensure that the broader educational mission is not compromised.

## **Theme 2: Extended Management Capacities and Challenges in Iranian Universities**

*The second theme explored in this study focuses on the extended management capacities observed in Iranian universities as part of the AC approach. This involves the establishment of new positions and implementing management methods to optimize university operations and outcomes (Slaughter and Gary, 2004). However, the findings reveal that the appointment of managers and leaders within Iranian HEIs is influenced by individuals' ideological and political attitudes [P3], indicating a top-down management approach [P5]. This prioritization of political perspectives was highlighted in a report by the Institute of Research & Planning in HE (January 28, 2022). Participants criticized this approach, noting that universities are managed according to traditional principles [P9], with a lack of clarity in guidelines [P12] and a lack of cohesion between the heads of science parks and universities [P7].*

These challenges indicate a disconnect between the traditional management practices adopted by Iranian universities and the principles of AC, hindering efficient collaboration and innovation. While the extended management capacities in line with the AC approach aim to optimize university activities, the traditional management approach within Iranian universities does not inherently align with AC principles and Global North trends. The prioritization of political and religious perspectives in appointing managers and the lack of clarity in guidelines suggest the need for a more strategic and inclusive approach to management within the HEs.

The findings of this research align, to some extent, with the results of Costa and Goulart's study (2018) on the extended management capacities in AC activities, which arise from changes in HEs influenced by neoliberal policies. According to their research, universities must seek alternative funding sources and establish relations with support foundations to attract partners and commercialize innovations. This necessitates expanding managerial skills and creating offices for technology transfer, trademark registration, economic development, and corporate relations. Thus, this research and the current study highlight external factors, whether neoliberal policies or ideological considerations influence HEIs' management practices and decision-making processes.

This might mean that in Iran, if individuals with specific ideological and political attitudes have control over appointing managers and leaders within HEIs, they

may prioritize particular funding sources or adopt specific management approaches aligned with their beliefs. This can result in a top-down management approach based on ideological considerations rather than a more inclusive and participatory approach.

### Theme 3: Privatization and its Impact on HEIs

*The third theme explored in this study focuses on the privatization of HEIs and its impact*, emphasizing its significance within the framework of AC. Privatization is a policy process through which governments reduce their ownership role in the education sector (Harik, 1992). According to Marginson and Rhoades (2002), privatization trends in HE encompasses two primary forms: a shift in funding responsibility from the state to individuals, leading to decreased state subsidies and increased tuition fees, and a focus on technology and knowledge transfer for economic development.

The findings of this study indicate that both forms of privatization are evident in Iranian HEIs. Firstly, there has been *a notable increase in the number of private and semi-private universities and the establishment of self-governing campuses* [P6], indicating a shift in funding responsibility toward individuals. Additionally, *collecting tuition fees from domestic and foreign students* [P9] reflects a reduced reliance on state subsidies and increased individual contributions. Secondly, there is a clear emphasis on technology and knowledge transfer as drivers of economic development within Iranian HEIs. The government's focus on leveraging HEIs for economic growth is evident in policy documents prioritizing increasing the share of knowledge-based products and services in the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) by 2025, as outlined in Iran's sixth development plans.

Interestingly, participants highlighted that *despite the trend toward privatization, the Iranian government continues to exert significant influence over HEIs* [P11]. This paradox raises questions about the mechanisms of control in a privatized educational landscape. How does the government maintain its influence without direct ownership? One plausible explanation lies in the managerial and operational mandates of these institutions. For instance, it could be that HEIs, while privatized in terms of funding and administration, are still required to adhere to specific Islamic and political directives. This suggests a hybrid model where neoliberal approaches to funding and management coexist with state-imposed ideological and political constraints. Such a model aligns with the broader theme of AC's influence on Iranian HEIs, where intertwining religious and political mandates with neoliberal strategies shapes the educational framework. *Approximately 90% of universities are private and incorporating tuition fees does not preclude them from adhering to specific ideological and administrative guidelines set by the state* [P3]. This duality in control mechanisms—financial autonomy coupled with ideological conformity—could be a distinctive feature of the Iranian HEIs in the era of privatization.

On the other hand, such ideological conformity by academic staff is a strategy against academic freedom constraints. For example, an interviewee described self-censorship in academia, stating, *'In class, I only discuss cliché, repetitive topics, avoiding*

*any controversial subjects to prevent personal repercussions'* [P15]. The government has cited concerns about national security and preserving Islamic values as reasons for its involvement in university affairs (Khorsand *et al.*, 2022). However, critics argue that these justifications are often used to *suppress dissenting voices and control the academic landscape* [P12]. Hence, this statement highlights the tension between academic freedom and state interference, indicating a constrained environment for educators and researchers where engaging in potentially controversial academic discourse is avoided for personal safety or career preservation.

#### **Theme 4: Providing New Financial Resources and Challenges in Income Generation**

The forth characteristic of AC observed in Iranian HEIs is the emergence of new funding circuits. These circuits respond to the decrease in general university budgets and involve various market activities within and between universities and private companies, aiming to generate income and diversify revenue sources (Slaughter and Larry, 1997; Slaughter and Gary, 2004). Similar to trends noted by Cantwell and Kauppinen (2015), universities seek new income sources from the periphery, including business firms and external funding.

Participants underscored the importance of new circuits of knowledge, emphasizing *the direct sale of degrees* [P5], *evening programs* [P15], and *tuition fees* [P5] as crucial financial resources. However, they identified *leasing university public spaces* [P2] as a less effective form of revenue generation, contrasting with Cantwell and Kauppinen's discussion of universities leasing premises to companies as a form of marketization.

It indicates that Iranian HEIs primarily rely on internal market activities to diversify revenue sources rather than seeking earnings from external sources. This differs from the interconnection between markets, states, and HE institutions described by Kauppinen and Kaidesoja (2014) and Sigahi and Saltorato (2020). In Iran, *heavy state regulations govern the economic and industrial sectors* [P11], leading to a *lack of motivation for industry-university research collaboration* [P15].

As a result, universities face challenges in establishing a competitive environment and adequately addressing industry needs. For example: *Strict state-imposed sanctions have hindered income through joint research with reputable international universities in recent years* [P14]. Participants also highlighted obstacles to international income generation, such as *university policies that limit global connections due to cultural, religious, and clothing issues regarding international students* [P13]. Restrictions on internet access, including *weak broadband and social network filtering* [P1], and *the state law on national internet access* [P5], have further restricted universities' ability to *connect internationally and engage in internationalization efforts, even at home* [P3].

#### **Theme 5: Internationalization and Challenges in Iran's HEIs**

The fifth marker of AC identified in this research is internationalization and pluralism, significantly influencing scientific movements within nations (Knight and de Wit, 2018). The findings demonstrate that Iranian HEIs have pursued

internationalization through various activities, including *the development and strengthening of international cooperation, with a focus on Islamic countries* [6<sup>th</sup> Development plan] and *disciplines with market potential* [P7]. These efforts involve *joint international research* [P9], *granting joint degrees* [P4], *selling academic products to attract international students* [P14], *increasing mobility opportunities for academics and Ph.D. students* [P10], *participating in exchange student programs within Erasmus+* [P8], and *promoting socio-environmental aspects of academic tourism by awarding full scholarships to international students studying Persian* [P15]. Participants highlighted the establishment of *joint courses between domestic and foreign universities* [P12] and the *creation of platforms for virtual and in-person joint university degrees with other countries* as part of the internationalization policy [P14].

However, the emphasis on international cooperation with Islamic nations, as outlined in Iran's Comprehensive Scientific Map (CSM) (2010) and development plans, reflects a more limited focus, particularly on neighboring countries and countries subscribing to the system of Monism. These limited international cooperation frameworks have adversely affected universities and research centers. Participants noted that *under challenging economic conditions, sanctions, and political pressures from the West, researchers face difficulties importing necessary laboratory equipment and materials from developed countries* [P1], thereby hindering advanced research.

## Theme 6: Commoditizing and Branding Policies in Iran's HEIs

The sixth theme explores the implementation of commoditizing and branding policies within Iranian HEIs as a component of AC. This involves transforming universities into recognizable brands and creating consumer goods and consumption levels within the academic setting, according to Slaughter and Leslie (1997). The research findings highlight several activities aligned with these policies:

*Parallel and evening programs are adapted and marketed as courses to cater to specific consumer demands* [P10].

*Private universities prioritize cost and profit in their educational planning, emphasizing market-driven approaches* [P8].

*Knowledge is transformed into potentially profitable market commodities, particularly in fields such as military, nanotechnology, and engineering* [P6].

Policy documents also indicate an expectation for HEIs to align with branding policies, setting goals for regional leadership in science and technology and high rankings in scientific output (CSM, 2010; Twenty-year vision document of the Islamic Republic of Iran for the horizon of (1401), 12004).

Participants acknowledge these policies and practices, with examples such as *students at Allame Tabatabaei University working on turning education into sellable electronic games* [P10]. However, the research findings do not mention the specific results and implications of these policies and practices.

Relevant to this theme, Hauptman Komotar's (2019) study emphasizes the focus of universities on research and their efforts to improve their positions in global university rankings. This finding aligns with the observation that Iranian HEIs are



transforming knowledge into potentially profitable market commodities, *particularly in fields like military, nanotechnology, and engineering* [P6]. The study also discusses the influence of global university rankings on the globalization and internationalization of HE, which may drive universities toward more market-driven approaches. This aligns with the finding that *private universities in Iran emphasize market-driven approaches in their educational planning* [P8].

### Theme 7: Quantifying Policies in Iran's HEIs

The seventh theme identified in this study relates to quantifying policies in Iran's HEIs. These policies are characterized by governance based on numbers, result-oriented approaches, and the objectification of HE (Slaughter and Gary, 2004). Several measures were identified in the research findings that exemplify these quantifying policies in Iran's HEIs. Firstly, there is an emphasis on *increasing the percentage of student admissions for master's and Ph.D. programs* [P4, 6th development plan]. Additionally, there is a focus on *doubling the number of journals and articles published in domestic scientific journals* [P12], *increasing the share of skills-driven training* [P13, 6th development plan], *expanding the admission of students in Technical and Vocational Universities (Applied Science)* [P1], and *broadening the range of disciplines and sub-disciplines of study* [P7]. These measures reflect the push toward quantifying and expanding various aspects of HE.

However, participants raised concerns about the massification of HE regarding the growing number of students, colleges, and institutions. They noted that *some institutions were licensed without sufficient program development and in-depth studies, resulting in potential negative consequences for the quality of education* [P4]. There were also observations about *professors competing to produce many articles, sometimes disregarding the qualitative impact of their research findings on society and the country's needs* [P11].

These quantifying policies have led to a significant increase in the number of master's and Ph.D. students enrolled in Iranian universities, particularly under the policy of quantification and privatization of HE. Statistics indicate a fivefold increase in master's degree students and a more than sixfold increase in Ph.D. students between 2008 and 2019 (Institute of Research & Planning in HE 2021). Private and semi-private universities account for a substantial share of student enrollment, while public universities represent a smaller percentage [Ibid]. However, implementing quantifying policies without specific criteria and needs assessment has been associated with negative consequences. According to Mirzamohammadi and Hamdollah (2017), these include reduced education quality, high unemployment rates, and the migration of highly educated Iranians. Dar and Asad (2022) also noted the pressures to produce quantifiable results, as well as academic fraud and gender discrimination. This aligns with the current investigation on Iranian HE, highlighting the emphasis on measurable outcomes and the challenges it presents.



## Theme 8: New Public Management (NPM) Techniques in Iran's HEIs

The eighth theme explored in this study focuses on implementing New Public Management (NPM) techniques in Iran's HEIs. NPM techniques refer to external controls imposed through government contracts, which directly or indirectly impact academic values and harmony (Marginson, 2007). The findings reveal that NPM techniques are evident in Iran's HEIs through practices such as *selecting individuals for university boards of trustees and university presidents based primarily on political commitment* [P8]. Participants also expressed concerns about *the lack of institutional independence and freedom within universities* [P13], indicating the influence of NPM techniques on the governance and decision-making processes of Iran's HEIs. These findings are consistent with previous studies that highlight the top-down implementation of NPM techniques, resulting in a power shift where administrators and non-academic leaders gain influence at the expense of academics (Andersen and Farley, 2006; Blakely *et al.*, 2011; Diem, 2004, 2008).

The analysis of the newest development plans, specifically Iran's seventh development plan (2023), reveals the consideration of various policies for the new management of universities. These policies include promoting economic independence, implementing budget-based economic incentives, pricing and selling outputs, monitoring and measuring outputs, establishing quality control systems, conducting performance evaluations, and monitoring research and teaching activities while adopting a mission-driven approach. It is worth noting, however, that none of the study participants mentioned these specific policies, suggesting that they may not have been fully implemented in the universities at the time of the research.

## Theme 9: Accountability and Transparency in Iran's HEIs

The ninth theme explored in this study focuses on the characteristic and policies of AC related to accountability and transparency in Iran's HEIs. Several practices and policies have been documented in Iran's HE IUED, including *the establishment of monitoring and evaluation systems* [fifth development plan], *the development of a Comprehensive Scientific Map (CSM 2010)*, *performance monitoring*, *quality assurance institutions*, *accreditation*, *needs assessment*, *research information management*, and *standardized tests* [sixth and seventh development plans & CSM 2010]. However, the study reveals that these policies and practices have not been effectively implemented in Iranian universities. Participants expressed concerns about *the lack of attention from the MSRT in standardizing HE* [P2]. There is also a recognized need for universities to be *linked to global standards to ensure transparency in their functions, which is currently lacking* [P13].

The analysis of the documents further confirms a gap between policy intentions and the implementation of accountability and transparency measures. For example, the Parliament (Majlis) Research Center (2021) reported sporadic internal and external evaluations conducted by education groups and the Ministry of Science's Office of Monitoring and Evaluation. Additionally, Mirzamohammadi and Hamdollah

(2017) found issues with establishing evaluation and quality assurance systems based on university missions, hindering the effectiveness of performance-based budgeting. The study argues that the lack of a precise and clear evaluation mechanism leads to insufficient utilization of evaluation outcomes. For example, assessment results have not been widely utilized in HEIs, and budgets or credits have often been assigned regardless of assessment outcomes. This indicates a deficiency in comprehensive evaluations and inadequate utilization of evaluation information.

Comparing the research findings on accountability and transparency in Iran's HEIs with Jessop's work (2016) on changing governance in East Asian societies, both emphasize the significance of accountability and transparency in HE governance. While the Iranian study reveals a gap between policy intentions and implementation, Jessop underscores the demand for greater accountability to state systems and business interests. Additionally, a comparison with McGee's document (2015) on HE challenges shows similarities in struggling to answer outcome-related questions and the importance of addressing economic concerns and conveying the value of education. Overall, all sources stress the increasing demand for accountability from stakeholders and the need to shape regulatory oversight in the HE context.

### **Theme 10: Changing Governments' Political Approaches to Universities in Iran's HEIs**

The tenth theme explored in this study examines the characteristic of AC related to changing governments' political approaches to universities. One notable shift has been a decline in state support for HE over the past five decades, driven by neoliberalism policies (Slaughter and Larry, 1997). The findings reveal that Iran's HEIs have not been exempt from these developments, as evidenced by participants' perspectives. They highlighted *the education and research budget decrease during Rouhani's presidency, indicating a decline in state support for HE* [P3]. They also emphasized *the government's role in providing infrastructure and conditions for universities* [P13] while criticizing its policies that *restrict academic freedom and institutional independence* [P10]. This indicates a complex relationship between the government and universities in Iran, where *state regulations govern universities and budget allocations have shifted from per capita-based to performance-based* [P10].

### **Theme 11: Globalization of Education and Knowledge in Iran's HEIs**

The 11th theme explored in this study focuses on the globalization of education and knowledge within AC in Iran's HEIs. Globalization refers to integrating individual and collective actors in HE, states, and markets across national borders (Slaughter and Rhodes, 2004; Kauppinen, 2012). This globalization process in AC parallels the broader trends of global capitalism (Robinson, 2001). Consequently, HEIs in developed economies often commercialize education by admitting fee-paying students from rapidly developing regions due to globalization (Demin, 2017).

The participants and the IUED emphasized the necessity of embracing this phenomenon and aligning HEIs with new epistemology. Policy shifts toward

globalization and the recognition of its effects were evident. Participants discussed the *entry of universities into global free-market competition* [P15], *the adoption of international standards of education* [P1], and *the acknowledgment of structural adjustments influenced by international bodies such as the World Bank (WB)* [P13] and *the World Trade Organization (WTO)* [P14]. Iran's development plans also highlight the goal of increasing the share of science and technology in the economy and national income and the production of knowledge-based products and services. This reflects a strategic alignment with both Global North and South trends—toward marketization (Jamshidi *et al.*, 2016).

## Theme 12: Economic Roles and Workload Challenges of Academic Staff in Iran's HEIs

This study's 12th theme examines the dual roles of academic staff as educators and economic actors within Iran's HEIs under the AC framework. A key finding is the substantial workload professors face, primarily due to the prioritization of teaching responsibilities in public universities [P14]. This excessive workload is a significant hindrance, affecting the quality of education and limiting academics' ability to engage in industry-related discussions and entrepreneurial activities [P15, P7]. The lack of dedicated funding for innovative projects further constrains the ability of academic staff to utilize their expertise in economic pursuits.

Additionally, the research highlights a significant language barrier, with the weakness in English proficiency among academic staff impeding their participation in global scientific communication [P15]. This language challenge is intricately linked to the broader economic role of academics, as it affects their ability to collaborate internationally and contribute to research and development.

While these findings primarily focus on workload and economic contributions, a notable associated issue is the gender disparity in academic positions. Although not the central focus of this theme, the underrepresentation of women in academia [P8], particularly in leadership roles, has indirect implications on the economic activities and research output of HEIs [P10, Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology of Iran (MSRT), 2019, World Economic Forum, 2021]. This aspect, though secondary to the main focus on workload and economic roles, adds an essential dimension to understanding the challenges faced by academic staff in Iran's HEIs.

## Discussion

Adopting AC in HE Iranian highlights a shift toward market-driven models. These models are characterized by a strategic shift within Iranian HEIs toward creating new knowledge circuits such as parallel education, evening programs, and English language centers. This shift mirrors similar initiatives in Kurdish public universities in Iraqi Kurdistan (Back, 2016), which could reflect a broader regional response to AC principles. While these initiatives expand access to the HE and generate revenue, they raise concerns about maintaining academic standards and equitable

access. This trend reflects global shifts observed in both the Global North and South (Kazemi and Safari, 2020), where universities increasingly prioritize revenue-generating activities over traditional academic values (Slaughter and Larry, 1997), prompting a need for regulatory measures that balance financial objectives with educational integrity.

However, in the context of this study, the findings illuminate a complex interplay between extended management capacities and ideological constraints within Iranian universities, underpinned by the country's distinctive theocratic governance system. As evidenced by the research, the prioritization of political and ideological perspectives in management appointments suggests a potential discord with AC principles, which typically advocate for efficiency and innovation (Costa and Goulart, 2018). This ideological influence, deeply intertwined with religious doctrines due to the principle of Velayat-e Faqih (Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist), could hinder collaboration and stifle academic freedom, raising concerns about the long-term viability and integrity of academic pursuits in such a politically and religiously charged environment. Mirzamohammadi and Hamdollah, (2017) and Kazemi and Safari's findings (2020) further corroborate the integration of religious ideology in Iranian's university governance, which could lead to tensions or challenges, particularly in aligning religious directives with the market-driven principles of AC. Consequently, this necessitates a nuanced approach to governance within Iranian HEIs that thoughtfully balances religious considerations with the imperatives of modern, market-oriented academic management. Such a balanced approach is crucial in potentially affecting curricular decisions, research priorities, and international collaborations, ensuring that religious and ideological influences coexist with the evolving demands of a market-oriented academic landscape.

The hybridization evident in Iranian HEIs, merging financial autonomy with state-imposed ideological and political constraints, prompts a closer examination of the government's role in a privatized educational landscape. This unique model has profound implications for academic freedom and institutional autonomy. This is in contrast to the Global North, where HE often emphasizes secularism and liberal ideologies, and differs from parts of the Global South, where secularism may also prevail but without the same level of ideological integration seen in Iran (Abazari and Zakeri, 2018). Specifically, as Khorsand *et al.* (2022) and our research participants indicate, this model leads to a heightened environment of self-censorship and pervasive government control within university settings. This influence is observable in several dimensions. Firstly, appointing critical academic and administrative personnel often reflects a blend of market-driven competencies and alignment with governmental ideologies. Secondly, the curriculum development and research agendas are subtly steered by political and religious doctrines alongside market needs, resulting in a distinctive academic culture that often prioritizes compliance over innovation.

Moreover, the financial autonomy granted to HEIs does not extend to complete operational independence. Governmental oversight, albeit less direct in economic matters, remains pronounced in politically or ideologically sensitive areas. This results in a nuanced landscape where HEIs must carefully maneuver between advancing academic pursuits and adhering to the overarching state doctrines. Thus, Iranian HEIs operate in a complex matrix, constantly balancing market forces,

political ideologies, and religious doctrines. This balancing act not only shapes the educational sector's direction but also presents unique challenges in maintaining academic rigor and integrity amidst external influences.

Implementing New Public Management (NPM) techniques in Iranian HEIs, particularly the top-down approach in governance, aligns with global trends in university administration (Andersen and Farley, 2006; Blakely *et al.*, 2011). While aiming to increase administrative efficiency, this approach could impinge on institutional independence and academic values, raising concerns about the need to reevaluate governance models to balance administrative efficiency and academic freedom. Despite these global trends, the research reveals a unique dimension in the Iranian context. Managers within Iranian HEIs are often recruited through a 'top-down' approach, with a clear emphasis on ideological alignment rather than a focus on free-market, profit-driven agendas. This implies that individuals with specific ideological and political attitudes, when in control of appointing managers and leaders within HEIs, may prioritize certain funding sources or management approaches that align with their beliefs. Consequently, this can lead to a top-down management approach steeped in ideological considerations, creating a conflict of visions. Such a scenario could potentially cancel out the stimulus of more accessible market policies and privatization with the restriction imposed by managers who create ideological limitations. This juxtaposition highlights a critical challenge within Iranian HEIs, where the pursuit of modern management practices intersects with and is often constrained by prevailing ideological and political currents.

In the face of the challenges presented by the interplay of ideological constraints and management practices, Iranian universities have increasingly turned to internal income generation methods. This includes relying on tuition fees, quantifying products, and establishing new knowledge circuits such as parallel and evening programs. Such strategies, however, highlight the challenges in generating income from external sources, both domestically and internationally, thereby presenting barriers to fully realizing the potential of AC in Iran's HEIs. To address these challenges, efforts are needed to foster a more conducive environment for collaboration between universities, industries, and markets. This may involve revising state regulations to encourage industry-university partnerships, improving internet access and connectivity, and promoting a more open and inclusive internationalization strategy.

Moreover, Iranian HEIs' reliance predominantly on internal market activities for revenue generation marks a divergence from the interconnections between markets, states, and HE institutions observed in contexts such as those described by Kauppinen and Kaidesoja (2014). Political and cultural constraints further limit the scope of internationalization efforts in Iran, impacting its ability to engage in global academic collaboration and potentially hindering its integration into the global knowledge economy. This situation is compounded by the fact that research cooperation in Iran is heavily dominated by ideologically aligned nations and neighbors, which limits the potential for genuinely globalized collaboration. This approach contrasts the globalized, open-competition ethos associated with AC, where research is expected to compete in a global marketplace of ideas. Iran's strategy mirrors that of Global South countries like China, which balance state control with just enough openness, drawing from AC in function but not wholly in terms of culture and

overriding mechanism. The research findings on Iran's internationalization in HE parallel studies on China's efforts (Li and Xue, 2023; Hou and Astillero, 2022) illustrate a nuanced approach to engaging with global academic norms while navigating unique domestic constraints.

Within a broader structural context, Slaughter and Cantwell (2012) and Rhoades and Slaughter (2004) propose that a neoliberal state and the globalization of the knowledge economy generally incentivize universities to adopt AC. However, the Iranian context presents a somewhat different scenario. Here, the shift toward AC seems less driven by a neoliberal state ethos and more by the economic necessity of leveraging HE as a mechanism for economic growth. This perspective suggests a pragmatic approach to AC, where economic imperatives, rather than ideological alignments with global neoliberal trends, primarily drive the evolution of HE practices.

This trend in Iran also resonates with Jessop's (2016) broader analysis of the growing importance of HE in economic development and competitiveness. It suggests parallels with funding variations and structural changes observed in other Global South societies, where economic considerations and evolving political approaches to universities significantly influence HE policies and practices. This comparative perspective underscores the complex and multifaceted nature of HE's role in national development, highlighting the unique ways in which different societies integrate global educational trends within their specific socio-economic and political contexts.

In summary, Iran's approach to HE, characterized by its blend of market-driven strategies and profound ideological influences, mirrors specific global trends in both the Global North and South. However, its unique non-participation in international economic frameworks and the integration of religious and political ideologies distinctively shape its AC. These factors set Iran apart, presenting unique challenges and opportunities that impact the quality of education and its alignment with national objectives.

## Conclusions

Iran's approach to AC, influenced by distinctive socio-cultural, economic, and political realities, showcases how the model manifests uniquely compared to prevalent Global North practices. A drive toward global competitiveness characterizes this divergence, navigated within the constraints of local bureaucracy, thereby broadening our understanding of the global-local interplay in AC.

Theoretically, this research enriches the AC discourse by providing a nuanced perspective from a context like Iran, where neoliberal practices in HE coexists with solid state control and ideological integration. This hybrid model challenges the conventional dichotomy of neoliberal versus non-neoliberal frameworks, illustrating a complex interplay of market-driven reforms within a centrally managed and ideologically driven educational system. This study contributes to the theory of AC by highlighting the need for context-specific models that accommodate diverse cultural,

economic, and institutional landscapes. It enriches the theory's universality and applicability, underlining this phenomenon's complexity and multifaceted nature.

While this study has endeavored to capture a comprehensive picture of AC in Iranian public universities, there are still certain limitations to consider. First, the findings' generalizability may be limited as the study concentrates on the Iranian HE sectors. This specific socio-cultural and economic context may shape the implementation and outcomes of AC in ways that differ from other settings. Second, the study's focus, primarily on universities, could cause the experiences and responses of different educational institutions, such as technical and vocational institutes, to be overlooked.

Despite these limitations, the research significantly enhances our understanding of AC in a context that illustrates the dichotomy between neoliberal and non-neoliberal practices. Hence, future research could aim to extend this work by including a comparative perspective and studying AC in various national and institutional contexts. Expanding the study to encompass other education sectors, such as vocational and technical education, could provide valuable insights. Researchers might also analyze the impacts of AC at the individual level, examining the experiences of other university members, such as students or non-academic staff. Further, a longitudinal study focusing on the long-term effects of AC on the quality of education, research outcomes, equity, and social justice would be a worthwhile endeavor. The intersection of AC with other critical HE issues, such as digitalization and internationalization, also presents fertile ground for future research.

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## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author. The author declares no non-financial interests directly or indirectly related to the work submitted for publication. This includes, but is not limited to, personal relationships, affiliations, knowledge, beliefs, and opinions that could be perceived to bias the work.

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