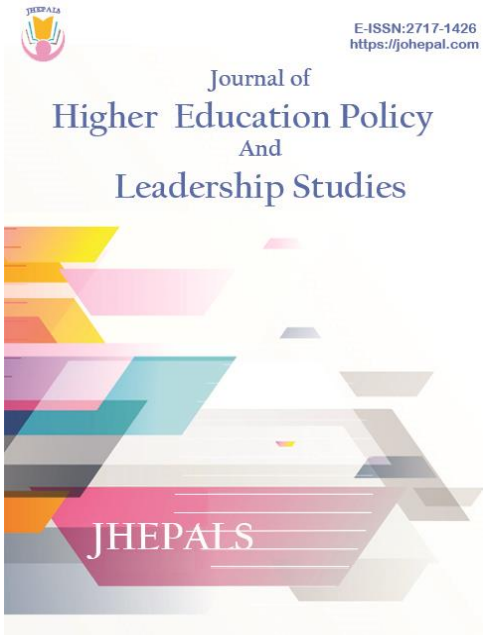
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The Future of Academic Governance: Key Scenarios for Iranian Higher Education

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Highlights

- Universities need a new approach towards governance and foresight to adapt to rapid changes and environmental complexities, as well as to address emerging challenges. This approach enables them to identify emerging trends, anticipate future needs, and develop effective strategies to actively shape their future.
- Two key drivers, "globalization of higher education" and "international interactions and political relations," were identified as the primary forces shaping the logic of future scenarios.
- Four future scenarios for academic governance were developed: Infinite Horizon (Open), Short Horizon (Regional), Visible Horizon (Limited), and invisible Horizon (Closed).

Keywords: Academic Governance; Higher Education; Scenario Writing; Futures Studies; Iran

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Introduction

Universities need a new approach towards governance and foresight to adapt to rapid changes and environmental complexities, as well as to address emerging challenges. This approach enables them to identify emerging trends, anticipate future needs, and develop effective strategies to actively shape their future. Higher education institutions (HEIs) are obliged to move further in terms of their social, political, cultural, economic, and environmental duties and responsibilities, as well as globalization and internationalization of higher education; than their clichéd teaching-research-admin daily activities. According to Altbach et al. (2009, p. 44) “Universities serve as key intellectual centers, providing a forum for social, cultural, and often political issue”. In this regard, university governance is becoming a core policy issue in many countries. Considering growing pressures from globalization, universities need effective leadership and a strategic vision at the institutional level to achieve world-class status demands.

> Over the recent decades, the rapid expansion of the knowledge economy around the world has implied stronger responsibility for Higher Education Institutions on producing talent and being suppliers of knowledge. Thus, given the centrality of universities in a knowledge society, the relevance and analysis of governance in HEIs assumes particular importance" (de Lurdes Machado-Taylor & Matias, 2022, p. 4).

Therefore, any decision or policy affecting university activities and outcomes has gained increasing importance. In recent decades, higher education worldwide has undergone significant changes, and the key to fulfilling the roles and responsibilities of higher education in the face of these changes is effective governance that better meets the growing expectations of stakeholders. Leadership and guidance in the academic sphere are closely tied to the concept of “academic governance”.

> Academic governance refers to a set of systems and rules designed by academic stakeholders around academic affairs, based on the laws of academic development, for academic production. It includes the overall framework and operational mechanism of academic governance. As the main venue for academic activities, universities are filled with two completely different types of power. They are academic and administrative powers. The main goal of optimizing the academic governance structure of universities is to achieve the resonance between academic power and administrative power in the same direction. (Junfeng, 2024, p. 23)

Given the role of higher education in national development and the importance of academic governance, this research aims to explore and identify future scenarios for academic governance in Iran's higher education. The main research questions are:

1. What are the key factors influencing academic governance in higher education?
2. What are the future scenarios for academic governance in higher education?

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Research Methodology

This research is qualitative in nature and adopts a futures studies approach using the Global Business Network (GBN) scenario writing method. The GBN method was chosen because it is currently the most widely used and credible scenario writing method globally. In this method, scenarios are developed based on two factors with the highest impact and the highest critical uncertainty. To identify key factors, semi-structured interviews were conducted with presidents of universities in Tehran (including public universities, medical sciences universities, Islamic Azad University, non-profit universities, and Farhangian University) and experts in the field of higher education. After conducting 18 interviews, the researcher concluded that the codes had reached theoretical saturation, meaning that responses became repetitive, and no new data emerged. To guide the interviews appropriately, an interview protocol was prepared and used. The protocol was designed to ensure that all relevant topics were covered (Patton, 2015). Initially, environmental scanning using the STEEPV model (Social, Technological, Economic, Environmental, Political, and Values) categorized the drivers (Loveridge & Saritas, 2012, p 753). To score the extracted key findings, a questionnaire was used to determine the degree of importance and uncertainty on a Likert scale. The research findings were shared with five scholars in futures studies (3 professors and 2 Ph.D. students) and their feedback was used to validate the results. The GBN scenario writing method was then used to develop the scenarios. The steps of GBN scenario writing are as follows: 1. Defining the main issue or problem; 2. Identifying key forces; 3. Analyzing the main driving forces; 4. Determining critical uncertainties; 5. Creating the scenario framework; 6. Developing scenarios; 7. Examining the implications; 8. Identifying indicators and warning signs (Schwartz, 1991).

Discussion of Findings

Among the key factors, experts identified "globalization" and "international interactions and political relations" as having the highest uncertainty. These two factors are heavily influenced by global and political developments, and predicting their future is fraught with challenges. Changes in foreign policies, sanctions, and diplomatic relations may significantly impact scientific and cultural interactions between universities. Additionally, global competition and the effects of political inequalities can make this factor one of the riskiest. Other factors also have some degree of uncertainty, but less so than globalization and international interactions. For example, "strengthening the innovation ecosystem and knowledge-based society" and "a culture supporting creativity, innovation, and risk-taking" were less uncertain due to their greater dependence on domestic policies. "Political security and stability" and "economic stability and development" also have some uncertainty, as these factors are more influenced by domestic decisions. Therefore, "globalization" and "international interactions and political relations" were identified by higher education experts as the main drivers for scenario development. The four scenarios resulting from the combination of extreme states of the two factors with the highest critical uncertainty are described as follows (Figure 1):

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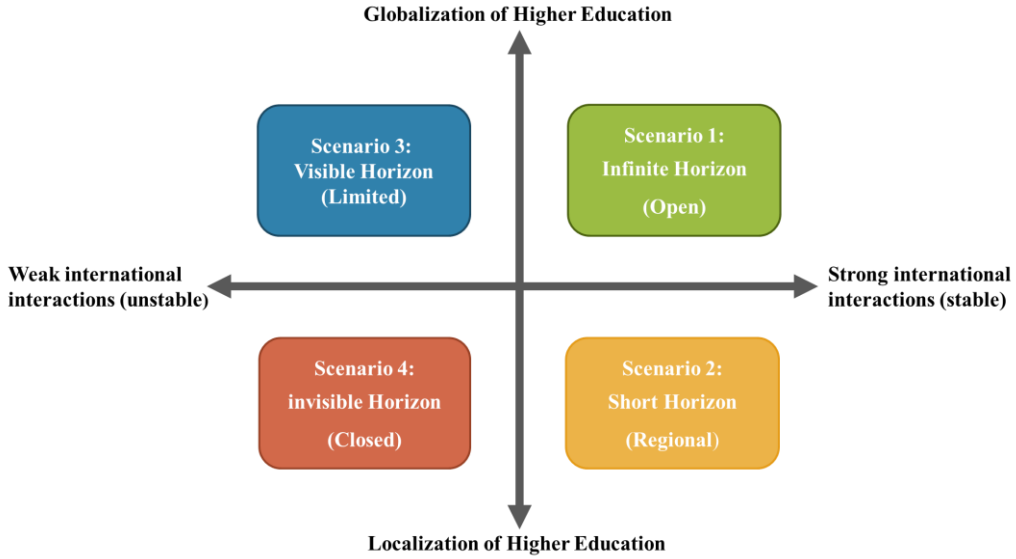


Figure 1. Four Scenarios for Academic Governance in Iranian Higher Education

Infinite Horizon (Open)

This scenario symbolizes the possibility of action, such as flight, which can be a metaphor for the movement of an individual or organization. Academic governance is influenced by conditions like globalization and the new world orders, and strong, stable international interactions and the networking of higher education play a prominent role in this regard. University governance, by providing physical, technological, and innovative infrastructure, communication networks, and trust-building, allows for freedom of action. The Boundless Horizon represents open systems exchanging information and energy. This scenario paints the most optimistic future for academic governance in Iran's higher education. By 1410 (2031), Iranian universities have become key players in global knowledge and innovation exchange. Extensive international collaborations have strengthened diplomatic relations, including student, faculty, and researcher exchanges. Universities, as hubs of innovation, have aligned their educational programs with societal and industrial needs, promoting a culture of creativity and innovation. Increased alignment among academic actors has led to greater political participation and university autonomy, contributing to knowledge-based economic growth.

Short Horizon (Regional)

Academic governance in this scenario represents a situation where movement is possible, but the potential for excellence is limited. In this scenario, globalization diminishes, and international systems gradually fade, meaning Iran shifts from global approaches toward greater nationalism and internal independence. However, Iran's international interactions remain strong and stable. Academic governance strengthens connections and interactions between society, universities, government, and industry, facilitating inter-institutional collaboration. This approach allows universities to exchange knowledge and technology with other countries while maintaining their local identity, moving toward bilateral or regional collaborations.

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Visible Horizon (Limited)

The Visible Horizon (Limited) represents a horizon that is partially closed and has limitations. Globalization occurs, universities become networked, but economic, social, and political conditions do not support them, limiting their ability to "fly" within a constrained horizon. Despite the expansion of globalization in higher education, political instability and international tensions create barriers to global collaboration. In this context, academic governance focuses more on developing regional collaborations. This instability may stem from political, diplomatic, or economic issues. As a result, Iranian universities cannot fully capitalize on the opportunities of globalization and face obstacles in international interactions. Iran is experiencing globalization but is not fully utilizing its potential. The use of online platforms for conferences and workshops can help reduce geographical and cultural barriers. Additionally, academic governance, by creating knowledge-based companies and commercializing university research, can contribute to the growth of a knowledge-based economy.

Invisible Horizon (Closed)

Academic governance in this scenario is metaphorically represented by a "closed horizon," symbolizing stagnation and blockage. Due to limitations and unstable conditions, academic governance is confused, and the ability to "fly" is restricted to a closed space. Weak and unstable international interactions and political relations limit creativity and innovation. Academic governance in Iran's higher education faces significant challenges. Globalization, due to political instability and international tensions, has not been able to effectively operate in this domain. Academic governance focuses on self-sufficiency and internal development, strengthening national and cultural identity and regional collaborations. Despite numerous challenges, universities, while responding to political and economic instability, seek solutions to achieve sustainable development and strengthen their national and cultural identity. In this scenario, innovation and scientific development are severely impacted, and universities' competitiveness on the international stage declines. The focus shifts to local resources, internal development, and self-reliance. Universities move toward isolation and internal self-sufficiency, playing a diminished role in global innovation.

Conclusion

Understanding and awareness of the future conditions of Iran's higher education are essential for policymakers and decision-makers in this field, and futures studies can provide some answers. The findings of this research, including the drivers and key variables of the future of academic governance in higher education, as well as the four scenarios presented, can be used by managers and decision-makers in higher education to make informed decisions and adopt appropriate strategies. Each of the proposed scenarios offers different concepts for strategic planning in Iran's higher education. These scenarios were carefully developed based on the reasoning of higher education experts, and the opportunities or responses related to them were identified, examined, and outlined. According to the reasoning of experts and futurists in higher education, the first scenario is considered the most desirable future for academic governance in higher education. By 1410 (2031), Iranian universities have become key players on the global stage, significantly influencing

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knowledge and innovation exchange in the global arena. Academic governance, as the main facilitator of this process, has enabled the growth and transformation of higher education institutions. Globalization and international interactions have deeply penetrated academic governance in Iran's higher education. According to this scenario, a strong and transformative educational policy is in place, based on which universities see themselves as obligated to compete globally and, accordingly, must engage constructively with the world to achieve a worthy position on the global stage. To realize this scenario, the following recommendations are proposed:

- Creating collaborative spaces for discussion and exchange of ideas among university community members.
- Addressing societal and industrial needs and designing educational programs aligned with labor market demands.
- Strengthening political participation of stakeholders through meetings with government officials and parliament representatives.
- Supporting scientific and technological diplomacy and developing diplomatic relations.
- Establishing and expanding international networks for knowledge and technology exchange.
- Forming strategic partnerships with reputable universities and research institutions globally.
- Developing data-driven policies and evidence-based decision-making.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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Human Participants

All ethical guidelines corresponding to participants are in alignment with Allameh Tabataba'i University (ATU), Tehran, Iran. This study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee at ATU (IR-ATU-REC-1400.010).

Originality Note

The author confirms that the manuscript is their original work, and if others' works are used, they are properly cited/quoted.

Use of Generative AI/ AI-assisted Technologies Statement

The author(s) claimed that there is "No Use of Generative AI/ AI-assisted Technologies" in preparing this research.

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As this manuscript is co-authored by the one of the editors-in-chief, the following issues are considered:

- Two members of the editorial team were working on the manuscript (on behalf of editors-in-chief) in its initial editorial screening.
- Two other members of the editorial team (while the authors' identifying information was kept as anonymous) joined the team to pursue further review of the research.
- Potential reviewers were identified and they received the revised version based on the comments.
- Another round of review was administered to maximize the scientific merits of the research and avoid biased editorial decision-making.

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