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Adopting the Academic Capitalism Approach in Non-Neoliberal Background: Iran as a case study

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Research Domain: Higher education policy (HEP)

Abstract:

This study examines the scope and radius of the penetration of academic capitalism in the Iranian higher education system -with non-neoliberal background- by analyzing strategic or upstream documents. The textual contents of documents as communication strategies, using qualitative content analysis and the inductive approach analyses, were analyzed. Content analysis of six selected HE upstream documents and their binding statements for universities suggested evidence of academic capitalism. The extracted content is categorized into twelve main concepts: Commercialization, Commodification, Globalization, Customer-Oriented; Privatization, Transparency and Accountability, Competitiveness and Quantification, New Public Management, Internationalization, Changing University Funding Policies, and Designing Interstitial Organizations.

In general, the results suggested a paradigm shift in Iranian HE toward academic capitalism. The movement towards executing aspects of this phenomenon in the HE system has seriously damaged the country's HE and has left significant consequences on universities. Because neoliberalism/market-oriented reforms not only are in contrast strikingly with the principles of religious value in an Islamic society but even, overlooks some of the considerations of the Iranian-Islamic model in the management of academic institutions. And conditions and infrastructures, the country's educational goals are not compatible with the neoliberalism structure and ideology.

Paper:

National higher education systems (HEs) around the world are changing steadily and are under pressure to change and adapt to the global trends and environment (song, 2019. Williams, Windle, & Wharrad, 2020). These changes in the HE environment such as globalization, marketization and competition, the spread of neoliberalism and new public management, and increasing emphasis on universities' economic roles in society, resulted in a market-oriented model of governance (Chow & Leung, 2016). Despite the relatively stable essential functions of universities as institutions, universities as organizations have changed^[1] under many global trends (Välimaa, 2019).

One challenge for HE that requires attention and has gained a great deal of research interest globally is the concept of “Academic Capitalism (AC)” (Siekkinen, 2019). AC is described by Slaughter and Leslie (1997) as the universities' engagement in the market and Quasi-market behaviors. The emergence of the entrepreneurial university, the rise of managerial rationales in HE, the worship of performativity, marketization, branding strategy, and the obsession with international rankings are all aspects of this approach (Ramezani, 2019).

But such market-oriented reforms may not be consistent with the educational goals of some countries, which are not necessarily grounded in neoliberalism mechanisms. For instance, in Iran's HE systems, such market-oriented reforms not only are in contrast strikingly with the principles of religious value in an Islamic society but even, overlooks some of the considerations of the Iranian-Islamic model in the management of academic institutions (Ramezani, 2020). At the same time, striving for such an approach in the country is in obvious contrast to the Islamic view, which emphasizes the original moral and human values and the observance of justice. Additionally, a market orientation in higher education is in clear contrast with the macro policies on Iran's political system. It is obvious that both ideologically, and politically, the deepening of a paradox in words and deeds can provide many consequences for the country's senior policymakers. It causes neglect of many of the high Islamic and revolutionary ideals of the country (e.g., Focusing on social justice as the main goal, the intrinsic value of knowledge, cooperation and convergence, self-sacrifice, and devotion).

However, in this regard, this study investigated the following question: How are the philosophical and cultural foundations of the academic capitalism approach and the Iranian-Islamic model in contradiction to one another in Iranian higher education.

Methodology

The research method used was qualitative content analysis. The specific method was a Summative inductive approach. The unit of analysis was included words, phrases, themes, sentences, and paragraphs related to academic capitalism in the six strategic documents in the field of higher education.

Finding

In general, the results suggested a paradigm shift in Iranian HE toward academic capitalism. The extracted content from the strategic document was categorized into twelve main concepts: Commercialization, Commodification, Globalization, Customer-Oriented; Privatization, Transparency and Accountability, Competitiveness and Quantification, New Public Management, Internationalization, Changing University Financing Policies, and Designing Interstitial Organizations. but this new approach is in contrast with the education goals.

The movement towards executing aspects of this phenomenon in the HE system has seriously damaged the country's HE and has left significant consequences on universities. Because

neoliberalism/market-oriented reforms not only are in contrast strikingly with the principles of religious value in an Islamic society but even, overlooks some of the considerations of the Iranian-Islamic model in the management of academic institutions. And conditions and infrastructures, the country's educational goals are not compatible with the neoliberalism structure and ideology. The following table shows some contradictions:

Table 1) the aspects contradiction between the principles of academic capitalism and educational goals

Objectives of the academic capitalism approach	Iranian-Islamic educational goals
Privatization and competition	Focusing on social justice as the main goal
Transforming the student-professor relationship into a producer-customer relationship	Emphasis on the intrinsic value of education and the moral superiority of teachers
The spread of consumerism in theory and practice	Opposition to consumerism as a cultural invasion of capitalism
Reducing the independence of university professors in the process of new public management and mandatory accountability	Improving the professional dignity and competencies of university professors
Nuclear education, self-interest, and competitive entrepreneur (economic man)	Strengthening the culture of cooperation and responsibility in the scientific and academic era and the realization of educated, elite, and good people
The instrumental value of knowledge as a commodity	The intrinsic value of knowledge

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