



## Original Article (Mixed)

# Investigating the phenomenon of isomorphism in universities; analyzing causes and consequences using the FCM (Fuzzy Cognitive Map) method

Ali Shariatnejad<sup>1</sup> , Nazanin Bazgir<sup>2</sup> , Farnaz Mehdikhani<sup>3</sup> 

1- Associate Professor, Department of Business Administration, Faculty of Management, Lorestan University, Khorram Abad, Iran

2- Graduated from Master of Business Administration, Faculty of Management, Lorestan University, Khorram Abad, Iran

3- Ph.D.Candidate, Faculty of Management, Lorestan University, Khorram Abad, Iran.

**Receive:**

19 October 2025

**Revise:**

01 January 2026

**Accept:**

27 January 2026

**Abstract**

The aim of this research is to analyze the causes and consequences of the phenomenon of isomorphism in universities in the country using the fuzzy cognitive map method. The present research is applicable in terms of data collection, and is classified as exploratory research. This research is also a mixed research type; based on qualitative and quantitative research. The statistical population of the research is university professors selected using a purposive sampling method and based on the principle of theoretical adequacy. The data collection tool in the qualitative part is an interview, the validity and reliability of which was confirmed by content validity and theoretical validity and the method of intra-coder and inter-coder reliability measurement. Also, the data collection tool in the quantitative part is a questionnaire, the validity and reliability of which was confirmed by content validity and test-retest reliability. Qualitative data were analyzed using content analysis and coding with MAXQDA 2020 software, and quantitative data were analyzed using fuzzy cognitive mapping. The findings of this study indicate that the attempt to impose disciplinary functions on the academic sector, the transformation of managers from facilitators of creating an atmosphere of deep learning and deep thinking to administrative controllers, and the university's departure from educational and research axes to administrative and executive axes are the most important factors in the emergence of the isomorphism phenomenon in universities. In addition, the disappearance of the flow of innovation, dynamism, and creative spirit of universities, the transformation of academics into a tool for expanding bureaucracy, and the lack of effective involvement of the academic community in the country's problems were identified as the most important consequences of the isomorphism phenomenon in universities.

**Keywords:**

Bureaucratism,  
Isomorphism,  
Universities,  
Fuzzy cognitive  
map.

**Please cite this article as (APA):** Shariatnejad, A., Bazgir, N. and Mehdikhani, F. (2026). Investigating the phenomenon of isomorphism in universities; analyzing causes and consequences using the FCM (Fuzzy Cognitive Map) method. *Management and Educational Perspective*, 8(1), 1-26.



<https://doi.org/10.22034/jmep.2026.554126.1588>



Authors retain the copyright and full publishing rights.

Published by Research Center of Resource Management Studies and Knowledge-Based Business. This article is an open access article licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0)

**Publisher:** Research Center of Resource Management Studies and Knowledge-Based Business

**Corresponding Author:** Ali Shariatnejad

**Email:** shariat.al@lu.ac.ir

## Extended abstract

### Introduction

The current era is an era of continuous and rapid change (Riahi & Porshams, 2023), and all organizations, considering the changing external environment, must change their performance to adapt or cope with changes for development and survival (Haghani & Hafezian, 2020). On the other hand, today's world is full of complexities that have faced organizations with many problems in terms of growth and progress (Mejia et al., 2020). Although today's organizations have certain characteristics such as rapid changes, scientific and technological advances, they are more dependent on focusing on the environment and environmental changes than on their own organizational values and assets (Bakhsh chenari et al., 2016), and the movement towards coordination among organizations is particularly booming (Safarzadeh, 2021). In recent decades, the configuration of large university systems around the world has been continuously changing in response to numerous external pressures and changing government policies (Croucher & Woelert, 2016), and the sum of these pressures has meant a transformation of the governance and internal organization of the university, as well as the ways in which academic institutions interact with their external environment (Nawaz & Guribi, 2020). Therefore, researchers in recent years have sought to examine the nature of these changes to identify and analyze the patterns of this institutional response. Based on the institutional theory presented by DiMaggio and Powell, the situation where increasing external pressures and uncertain environmental variables in some cases lead organizations, including universities, to exhibit broad convergence characteristics in terms of organizational structures with their environment is called isomorphism (Boxenbaum & Jonsson, 2017). Isomorphism in organizations such as universities has caused these organizations to become trapped in bureaucratic structures and, like other organizations, to go through the bureaucratic process, rather than moving towards their predetermined goals, including education and research, and to pursue the path of growth and promotion of their scientific and research positions (Mejia et al., 2020). Of course, this has happened despite the fact that most governments around the world are seeking greater diversity in the characteristics of providers and missions in their higher education systems (Lewis et al., 2020), which ultimately leads to the loss of employee creativity and lack of flexibility, and prevents the achievement of goals and the progress and excellence of universities on their path of growth (Mejia et al., 2020).

The phenomenon of isomorphism sometimes leads to the blind imitation of each other's bureaucracy, in such a way that it looks attractive and modern but is empty in terms of desirable performance and efficiency (Mejia et al., 2020). As societies and their institutions progress, there is a tendency towards bureaucratization in the long term, and each organization, based on the type of activity and organizational structure, gradually follows it in a process of growth and adaptation, and universities are no exception to this rule (Ahanchian & Aref, 2013). Ultimately, bureaucracy, by emphasizing more on laws and regulations, causes the professional role of organizations to be diminished, and it also minimizes the size and complexity of organizations such as universities and the extensive responsibilities they have, although it requires a high degree of delegation (Delkhosh & Barghi, 2022). On one hand, universities are the main pillar of science and research (Sepahvand et al., 2022) and the foundation of the political, economic, and social growth of any society. Therefore, university managers and presidents must always pay special attention to issues related to their organization (Babaei & Rahimi, 2020). Considering the aforementioned and the necessity and importance of paying attention to this issue, and on the other hand, it was also revealed by reviewing the research that no independent study has been conducted on the phenomenon of organizational isomorphism, which indicates the novelty of the research topic. Therefore, the present study seeks to reduce this gap and seeks to answer the question of why universities are



trapped in bureaucracy and resemble institutions with bureaucratic structures rather than having structural similarities to research institutes and scientific institutions, and to explain the consequences of this isomorphism phenomenon in universities. Based on what has been said, the main question of the present study: is what are the causes and consequences of the isomorphism phenomenon in universities?

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Isomorphism**

This process of homogenization in organizations is known in the literature as isomorphism (Dimaggio & Powell, 1991) and explains the causes of rapid and sudden changes in developing countries to resemble developed countries (Pricope, 2016). Isomorphism, which is a limiting process, states that unit A with a given population is bound to be similar to other units with the same set of environmental conditions (Dimaggio & Powell, 1983). Isomorphism emphasizes social and political pressures as drivers of change (Scapens, 2006). As Weber previously stated, the iron cage of rationality and competitive forces in society pressure organizations to be similar in structure and practice (Boxenbaum & Jonsson, 2017) and its purpose is to explain why some organizations are similar to each other in a particular context (Scapens, 2006). Isomorphism characterizes organizational functions and policies in a given environment (Dimaggio & Powell, 2004), therefore it provides a very useful approach to identify how organizations tend to conform to what they have from the expectations of their surrounding environment (Dimaggio & Powell, 1983). So, if an organization wants to succeed or a government wants to increase its legitimacy and enhance its authority, it must respond quickly to such issues (Dimaggio & Powell, 1991).

### **Research Methodology**

This research is a mixed data type and is based on qualitative and quantitative research, classified as inductive deductive research in terms of research philosophy. Therefore, the present research is applicable in terms of purpose, and exploratory in terms of data collection. The statistical population of the present research is university administrators in the country along with university professors, which was conducted using a purposive sampling method and a number of 48 people. The data collection tool is an interview in the qualitative part and a questionnaire in the quantitative part, whose validity and reliability were confirmed using content validity and theoretical validity and intra-coder and extra-coder reliability methods for the interviews, respectively. Content validity and test-retest reliability for the distributed questionnaires have been confirmed. It is necessary to explain that since the present study is a mixed research with an exploratory approach, a qualitative study must be conducted prior to a quantitative study. Therefore, qualitative data were examined using the opinions of 48 experts and until information saturation and theoretical adequacy were achieved. Qualitative data were analyzed with MAXQDA 2020 software and content analysis method, and quantitative data were analyzed with fuzzy cognitive map method.

### **Research findings**

Research findings indicated that the imposition of academic regulatory functions was identified as the most important factor in the emergence of the isomorphism phenomenon. After that, the transformation of managers from the state of facilitators of creating a deep learning and deep thinking environment to administrative controllers was identified as the second factor in the emergence of the isomorphism phenomenon. The university's departure from educational and research axes to administrative and executive axes was also identified as the third factor. Also, the loss of innovation, dynamism, and the spirit of creativity in

universities was identified as the most important consequence of the isomorphism phenomenon. The transformation of academics into a tool for the expansion of bureaucracy was identified as the second consequence of the isomorphism phenomenon. Also, the lack of effective involvement of the academic community in the country's problems was identified as the third consequence of the isomorphism phenomenon.

### **Conclusion**

The present study was conducted with the aim of identifying the causes and consequences of the isomorphism phenomenon in universities. The results of this study are consistent with the results of Mejia et al. (2020), Dimaggio & Powell (1991), Boxenbaum & Jonsson (2017), Pricope (2016), and Croucher & Woelert (2016). Dimaggio & Powell (1991) showed that isomorphism determines organizational functions and policies in a given environment. Therefore, this approach is very useful for identifying how organizations tend to conform to what they expect from their surrounding environment. So, if an organization wants to be successful or a government wants to increase its legitimacy and enhance its authority, it must respond quickly to such issues.

According to the research results, the following suggestions were made:

The selection of university administrators should be done with the direct participation of professors, trainers, researchers and investigators and without non-scientific interference from local factors and governments so that scientific centers and universities are protected from environmental damage.

Senior and university administrators should improve the quality level (scientific and executive capacity) and quality of life of human capital of faculty members and staff and seek continuous development and improvement of staff skills and expand the multiple skills of human capital; finally, evaluations should be made on this basis.