

Original Article (Qualitative)

Design and Leveling of a Sociological Model for the Development of Educational, Research, and Training Capabilities in Islamic Azad University

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Abstract

The present study aims to design and level a sociological model for the development of educational, research, and pedagogical capabilities in Islamic Azad University. The research method is qualitative and applicable in nature. The statistical population of the study consisted of 21 faculty members from the branches of Islamic Azad University in Tehran Province, selected through purposive sampling by the data saturation technique. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The findings were analyzed by thematic analysis and MICMAC software.

The results of the thematic network analysis indicated that six organizing themes, eighteen basic themes, and seventy-eight initial codes constitute the sociological components and categories for the development of educational, research, and pedagogical capabilities in Islamic Azad University. The organizing themes were presented in the form of six dimensions: organizational transformation, macro educational and research policies, environmental characteristics, optimal quality of educational–research and pedagogical knowledge enhancement, value creation, and improvement of educational and research quality management.

Based on the results of the MICMAC analysis, the organizing themes of organizational transformation, macro educational and research policies, environmental characteristics, and optimal quality of educational–research and pedagogical knowledge enhancement were positioned within the linkage factors area, while the organizing themes of value creation and improvement of educational and research quality management were classified within the dependent factors area.

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Extended Abstract

Introduction

In today's world, universities are considered among the most valuable resources available to societies for progress and development, consistently playing a fundamental role in both material and spiritual advancement. Proper investment in this sector plays a crucial role in creating opportunities and facilities for future generations and in guiding comprehensive national development (Ghasemi Gilvaei & Ghorbani Param, 2025). In reality, universities and higher education institutions operate as complex social systems within their environments. On one hand, they influence their surroundings and related transformations from various scientific, educational, service, cultural, social, political, and economic perspectives. On the other hand, they are themselves influenced by environmental conditions and ongoing changes (Tahmasab & Dehghan Mangabadi, 2024). Naturally, it is desirable that this interaction be structured and guided in a way that maximizes its benefits for the development of both society and universities. Accordingly, universities and higher education institutions—particularly Islamic Azad University—are regarded as strategic centers whose outputs in terms of both quantity and quality are directly linked to sustainable social development (Rahmani Lashgari et al., 2024). Universities and higher education institutions, as the most prominent scientific bodies engaged in human development, serve as the driving force and intellectual engine of society and lead the movement toward comprehensive national development (Montella et al., 2022).

One of the most significant indicators of a country's comprehensive development is the existence of universities and higher education institutions. Attention to this matter has a long-standing tradition among nations worldwide, and the Islamic Republic of Iran is no exception (Alexandro & Basrowi, 2024). A brief review of the history of higher education in Iran clearly demonstrates that considerable efforts have been made across different periods to expand higher education, with the current era representing a peak in this attention and development (Jafari, 2022). One of the most important achievements of higher education is providing an appropriate platform for nurturing individuals' potential talents so that, through their development and cultivation, the path toward sustainable national development can be realized (Aljermawi et al., 2024).

Achieving sustainable national development is not possible unless universities and higher education institutions, in addition to producing, transferring, and disseminating knowledge, transform potential talents into actual capabilities (Mousavi et al., 2021). The fundamental mission of universities is to nurture talents and advance knowledge through education and scientific research, as well as to promote and develop sciences in order to provide committed and specialized human resources capable of meeting the legitimate needs of society. Islamic Azad University has taken valuable steps in this regard (Gravand et al., 2022).

This study attempts to examine scientific, educational, research, and pedagogical guidelines from a sociological perspective and to propose an optimal model for Islamic Azad University in Tehran Province. The present research seeks to answer the following scientific question: *How can a sociological model for the development of educational, research, and pedagogical capabilities in Islamic Azad University be designed and hierarchically structured?*

Theoretical Framework

Educational, Research, and Pedagogical Capabilities

From the beginning of human life until today, individuals have continuously progressed by learning various skills. On the other hand, learning any subject requires education. Through education, the skills and techniques necessary for continuing life can be transferred to learners (Zhu et al., 2024).

In its general sense, research includes any type of effort aimed at discovering truth or carefully examining a subject. This broad definition encompasses all forms of inquiry, ranging from daily and informal investigations to deep and scientific studies. In a more specific sense, however, research refers to systematic scientific investigations conducted according to a defined plan and using standard methods. In such research, questions are precisely formulated; data are collected and analyzed; and the results are presented accurately and in a documented manner. As a purposeful and systematic process, research not only plays a role in the production of knowledge but also serves as a powerful tool for solving complex problems and providing creative solutions. This scientific activity is considered the foundation of innovation and progress in all areas of life (Quan & Zhang, 2024).

Research activity is a dynamic and scientific process that involves discovery, exploration, and careful investigation to find answers to questions or solve problems. This activity is carried out by individuals who seek to expand the boundaries of knowledge and offer innovative solutions. Research can be considered a skill, a profession, or even a way of life that relies on critical thinking, curiosity, and perseverance (Sigahi & Sznelwar, 2023).

Rad (2024) conducted a study titled *Designing a Research Literacy Curriculum Model for Students of Islamic Azad University*. The results indicated that Islamic Azad University, based on the seven identified dimensions, can pursue two main approaches: first, the agency of the university in observing relevant considerations in strategic programs and daily activities; and second, the integration of academic issues within the domains of education, research, and technology in the university. Through these approaches and by utilizing the capacity of student-teachers, the university can play a valuable role in promoting a research-oriented culture within society.

Taheri Mashari (2024) conducted a study entitled *Designing a Multicultural Teaching Model for Professors*. The results showed that designing a multicultural teaching model for professors can be beneficial and effective in guiding and managing university classroom environments for students.

Research Methodology

The present study employs a qualitative and applicable research method. The statistical population consists of 21 faculty members from the Islamic Azad University branches in Tehran Province, selected through purposive sampling using the data saturation technique. The data collection instrument was semi-structured interviews.

Research Findings

To analyze the findings, thematic analysis and MICMAC software were used. The results of the thematic network analysis revealed that six organizing themes, eighteen basic themes, and seventy-eight initial codes constitute the sociological components and categories related to the development of educational, research, and pedagogical capabilities in Islamic Azad University.

The organizing themes were identified in the form of six dimensions: Organizational transformation, Macro educational and research policies, Environmental characteristics, Optimal quality of educational–research and pedagogical knowledge enhancement, Value creation, Improvement of educational and research quality management

According to the results of the MICMAC analysis, the organizing themes of *organizational transformation*, *macro educational and research policies*, *environmental characteristics*, and *optimal quality of educational–research and pedagogical knowledge enhancement* were located in the area of linkage factors, while the organizing themes of *value creation* and



improvement of educational and research quality management were classified as dependent factors.

Conclusion

The present study was conducted with the aim of designing and leveling a sociological model for the development of educational, research, and pedagogical capabilities in Islamic Azad University. The results of this study are consistent with the findings of previous studies conducted by Rad (2024), Taheri Mashari (2024), Zhu et al. (2024), Deus et al. (2022), and Jafari (2021). Rad (2024) demonstrated that Islamic Azad University, based on the seven identified dimensions, can pursue two main approaches: first, emphasizing the agency of the university in observing relevant considerations within strategic programs and daily activities; and second, integrating academic issues within the domains of education, research, and technology. Through these approaches and by utilizing the capacity of student-teachers, the university can play a valuable role in promoting cultural development within society.

In explaining this issue, it can be stated that the relationship between universities and industry, along with the development of education and research, represents one of the most essential interactions within any society and contributes significantly to innovation and economic growth in countries. This relationship can be interpreted as the flow of academic knowledge through the veins of society and the practical utilization of knowledge. The historical development of universities shows that they have evolved through three generations. First-generation universities were primarily educational and focused on teaching activities; second-generation universities concentrated on research and investigative activities; and third-generation universities emphasize entrepreneurship and solving societal problems through systematic and scientific approaches. Consequently, universities inevitably face demands for creating added value for society, and the production of wealth from knowledge has emerged as a new paradigm in higher education.