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Research Paper

Futurism of the University Education System: Application of Scenario Writing Approach

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Abstract
This study aims to identify the key factors influencing the future of Iran's higher education system and to develop possible future scenarios using a foresight approach. The research is applied in purpose and exploratory in nature and employs structural analysis based on the MICMAC method. Initially, through a comprehensive review of academic literature, policy documents, and related reports, an initial set of variables affecting the higher education system was identified. These variables were then refined and validated through expert consultation in the fields of higher education, science policy, and futures studies. As a result, 27 key variables were selected for analysis. A 27×27 cross impact matrix was constructed to evaluate the direct influence of each variable on the others using a four-point scale. The data were analyzed using MICMAC software to determine the influence–dependence relationships among variables and to classify them into four groups: influential, strategic, dependent, and independent variables. The results show that variables such as government macro policies, public funding allocation, governance structures, and macroeconomic policies act as the main driving forces of the system. In contrast, variables such as educational quality, research productivity, graduate employability, and student satisfaction are highly dependent on these drivers. Based on these findings, four scenarios were developed to describe possible futures for Iran's higher education system.

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Introduction

Interaction of dynamic ecosystems comprising of government, academia, research institutes, and increasingly educated populations are turning developing countries into hotbeds for innovations (*Umoru et al., 2026*). In recent decades, higher education has become one of the most important pillars of scientific, economic and social development of countries (*Ogunode et al., 2026*). Interaction between governments, universities, research institutions and educated human resources has led to the formation of dynamic knowledge ecosystems and has turned many developing countries into centers of innovation and knowledge production (*Leal et al., 2026*). In such circumstances, the higher education system plays a key role in training human capital, producing knowledge, promoting technology and responding to the complex needs of societies (*Sharif et al., 2026*). However, rapid environmental changes, technological advances, changes in the global labor market and increasing uncertainty in the future have presented policy-making and management of the higher education system with serious challenges (*Bulajeva & Meškauskienė, 2026*). In recent decades, higher education has become one of the most important pillars of scientific, economic and social development of countries (*Chen & Shih, 2025*).

The ambiguity of existing higher education decision-making and the diversity of findings and interests in policy networks ensure that there is no clear connection amongst higher education scholars, decision-makers, and research findings (*Smith et al., 2021*; *Yang Hansen & Gustafsson, 2019*). Decision-makers all around the world have advocated for the demand to follow more participative/cooperative patterns of policymaking over the past couple of years (*Campos-García & Zúñiga-Vicente, 2022*). In Germany and Flanders, three elements highlight the dynamics of a policy: policy styles, key factors, and the participation of non-state actors (*Jungblut et al., 2020*). Meanwhile, development in any country also means increasing productive, physical, and social capacities. Likewise, the role of government policies in economic, cultural, and political development is undeniable, and the country's policymakers are trying to formulate progressive and effective policies for it. Traditional governmental approaches are based on the assumption that policy-making processes should be centralized and hierarchical. This view conflicts with the growing needs of today's advanced governments to involve individuals, groups, and stakeholders in the policy-making process and poses serious and important challenges to educational management (*Sharifzadeh et al., 2018*). One characteristic of the specified strategies in the public sector is that they oversee the uncertain future, which can affect the quantity and quality of the desired future by policymakers. Therefore, decision-makers in this field should be able to obtain the necessary information about trends and events in the future, consider different scenarios, and take the necessary precautions (*Mashali et al., 2019*). Paying attention to policies in the formulation and implementation of education with regard to predicting environmental changes in the future, the need for study and research in the field of university education in Iran seems more important than ever, so

identifying policy indicators in the university education system is important. It has a lot to do for those involved in the field of legislation and implementation because it helps prevent the loss of economic resources and facilitates the realization of the goals of the country's general policies in the future (*Darini & Namdar Joyami, 2018*). For sustainable planning and the adoption of preconceived policies, it is necessary to change the approach from traditional strategic planning to more accurate, comprehensive, and combined methods, which is achieved through strategic futurism. The concept of futurism has emerged from the weakness of forecasting knowledge, policy knowledge, and strategic management knowledge in responding to the specific challenges of policymakers. Hence, it can be said that the most important usage of futurism is policymaking (*Ghazi Nouri & Ghazi Nouri, 2012*). To the best of our knowledge, the experience of developing countries is very valuable for how the university education system adapts to the system of uncertainty and future environmental developments, which highlights the novelty of the article. Furthermore, examining some variables of the university education system can provide a suitable framework for national policymakers in the future. The achievements of this research will be useful for other universities, higher education centers, knowledge-based institutions, industry and university liaison offices, etc. In recent years, numerous studies have examined futures studies in higher education and its role in policymaking and the development of university systems. Some of these studies have specifically focused on the development of futures studies as an academic field within universities. For instance, *Adamiyat and Mehravar giglou (2024)* aimed to identify strategies for developing futures studies in the national higher education system. Using a qualitative approach, they conducted semi-structured interviews with 12 experts in the field of futures studies and analyzed the data through thematic analysis. The findings indicated that the development of this field requires actions such as promoting discourse on the necessity of futures studies, designing specialized educational packages, supporting theoretical research, strengthening interdisciplinary activities, policymaking at the ministerial level, operationalizing futures studies within universities, revising curricula, learning from leading international universities, creating relevant employment opportunities, and institutionalizing a culture of futures-oriented thinking within academia.

In another study, *Modanlou joybari et al. (2021)* sought to identify and rank the dimensions of higher education system development in Iran using a futures studies approach. Employing a mixed-method (qualitative–quantitative) design, their findings revealed that strategic and structural dimensions are among the most significant aspects of higher education development. Within the strategic dimension, components such as university strategy and internationalization were identified as highly important, while in the structural dimension, organizational agility and university infrastructure played key roles. The study emphasized that higher education systems must continuously adapt to scientific, cultural, and social environments and that policymakers should create appropriate conditions for

implementing university strategies in alignment with global trends such as internationalization and knowledge commercialization.

Similarly, *Mehravar Giglou and Nazemi (2023)*, using a meta-synthesis approach, identified the components of futures studies development in the national higher education system. Reviewing 29 studies published between 2001 and 2021, they extracted 220 open codes, which were categorized into eight main themes: education, entrepreneurship, internationalization, technology, research, human resources, organizational structure, and environmental adaptability. Their findings suggest that the development of futures studies in higher education requires curriculum revision, promotion of entrepreneurial universities, expansion of educational technologies, strengthening applied research, and establishing flexible organizational structures to enable universities to respond effectively to environmental changes and future societal needs.

Some studies have also addressed the future of the education system through scenario planning and driver analysis. In this regard, *Mirzaei Fathabad et al. (2025)* employed futures research methods such as the Futures Triangle, Causal Layered Analysis, structural analysis, and key actor analysis to design future scenarios for Iran's education system following the initial implementation of the Fundamental Transformation Document. The results indicated that the implementation of this document faces challenges such as misalignment with the actual needs of schools, weak stakeholder participation, infrastructural deficiencies, and inequitable resource allocation. Key actors including the government, teachers, and technology-oriented private sector were identified as influential in shaping the future of the education system. Moreover, discourses such as knowledge-based development, skill orientation, and justice orientation were recognized as foundational elements in future educational policymaking. At the international level, research has also explored the role of emerging technologies in shaping the future of education. For example, *Antonio and Sison (2026)* conducted a meta-analysis to examine the impact of artificial intelligence (AI) on teacher education. Their findings demonstrated that AI-based interventions have a significant and positive overall effect on cognitive, affective, and psychomotor learning outcomes of pre-service teachers. However, the magnitude of these effects varies depending on contextual factors such as country, duration of implementation, and type of learning outcome. The study also highlighted the importance of ethical considerations, pedagogical principles, and contextual sensitivity in implementing AI technologies, indicating that emerging technologies can play a transformative role in shaping the future of education and teacher preparation. Overall, the review of the literature indicates that futures studies has gained increasing importance as a strategic approach to analyzing transformations in higher education and educational systems. Nevertheless, many existing studies have primarily focused on identifying components, dimensions of development, or future scenarios. There remains a need for more comprehensive research aimed at identifying key variables and analyzing the relationships among them within

the university education system. Therefore, conducting studies that adopt a futures-oriented approach to identify influential factors and strategic variables in higher education can significantly contribute to more effective policymaking and long-term planning in this sector.

According to research, there is still a lack of research on education system policies and future estimates. This study can clarify the factors that are most involved in achieving this goal. Thus, defining the parameters in the system of university education, using the foresight and scenario writing method, is the goal of this research. In order to achieve this goal, the following four questions will be answered:

1. What are the key strategic variables in the university education system?

2. What are the influential variables in the university education system?

3. What are the independent variables in the university education system?

4. What are the dependent variables in the university education system?

Materials and Methods

This study is applied in terms of purpose and exploratory in nature, employing a foresight approach based on structural analysis. The primary objective of the research is to identify and analyze the key variables influencing the future of Iran's higher education system and to develop plausible future scenarios for this system. In the first stage, a comprehensive review of academic literature, policy documents, and relevant reports on higher education was conducted using documentary analysis. Based on this review, an initial set of variables affecting the future of the higher education system was identified. These variables were subsequently refined and validated through expert consultation in the fields of higher education, science policy, and futures studies. Ultimately, 27 key variables were selected as the core research variables.

In the next stage, the relationships among the variables were analyzed using the structural analysis method and MICMAC software. A 27 × 27 cross-impact matrix was constructed to assess the direct influence of each variable on the others. The degree of influence was evaluated by experts using a four-point scale (0 = no influence, 1 = weak influence, 2 = moderate influence, 3 = strong influence). The collected data were entered into MICMAC software to calculate the influence–dependence scores and to map the variables within the influence–dependence diagram. Based on the outputs of the MICMAC analysis, the variables were classified into four categories: influential variables, dependent variables, independent variables, and linkage (strategic) variables. Subsequently, drawing upon the identified key drivers and critical uncertainties, plausible scenarios for the future of Iran's higher education system were developed and analyzed. The study population consisted of experts in higher education, science policy, and futures studies, who were selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected using a cross-impact matrix questionnaire, and data analysis was conducted using MICMAC software.

Research Finding

The findings of the study address the first research question: "What is the future outlook of the higher education system in Iran? "In response to this question, the researcher identified the variables that influence the future of Iran's higher education system through the Delphi technique, based on the opinions and judgments of the study's panel of experts. Through this process, the key factors affecting the future development of the higher education system were extracted and finalized. To analyze the relationships among these variables and determine their positions within the analytical quadrants of influence and dependence, the MICMAC software was employed. This structural analysis enabled the classification of variables into four categories according to their levels of influence and dependence within the system. The results of this analysis and the classification of variables into the four analytical quadrants are presented in Table (1).

Table 1. Classification of Variables in the University Education System

(Quadrant)	Abbreviation in software	Full scientific name
(Influential)	Government	Government macro-policies in higher education
	Public fun	Public funding allocation
	Overall go	Overall governance structure
	Global tec	Global technological developments
	Global sci	Global science and technology trends
	Political	Political stability
	Legal	Legal and regulatory frameworks
(Strategic)	National	National higher education strategy
	Digital	Digital transformation and AI integration
	internati	Level of internationalization
	Innovation	Innovation culture
	Macroecono	Macroeconomic policies
	Higher edu	Higher education regulations
	University	University governance and autonomy
	Sustainabl	Sustainable funding model
	Talent	Talent attraction and retention policies
	Curriculum	Curriculum alignment with future labor market needs
(Dependent)	Educationa	Educational quality
	Research	Research productivity
	Graduate e	Graduate employability
	Institutio	Institutional reputation
	patents	Patents
	satisfacti	Student satisfaction
	Brain	Brain drain
(Independent)	Demographi	Demographic trends
	Social cap	Social capital
	Labor mark	Labor market conditions

Direct influence/dependence map is set starting from the matrix of direct influences MDI. Influence/dependence map is shown in figure 1.

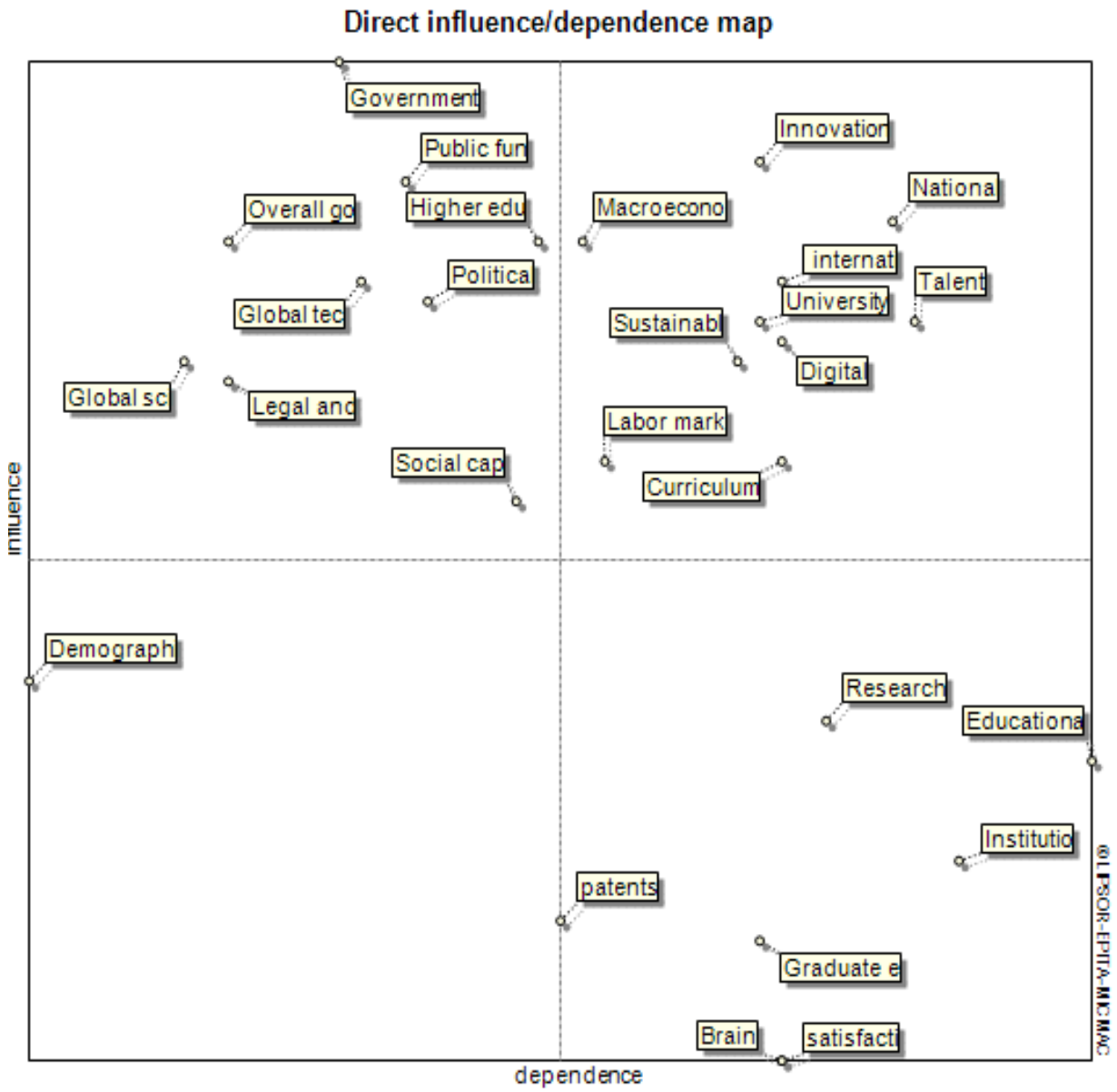

Figure 1. Influence/dependence map

Indirect influence graph is set starting from the indirect influence matrix MII. Indirect influence graph is shown in figure 2.

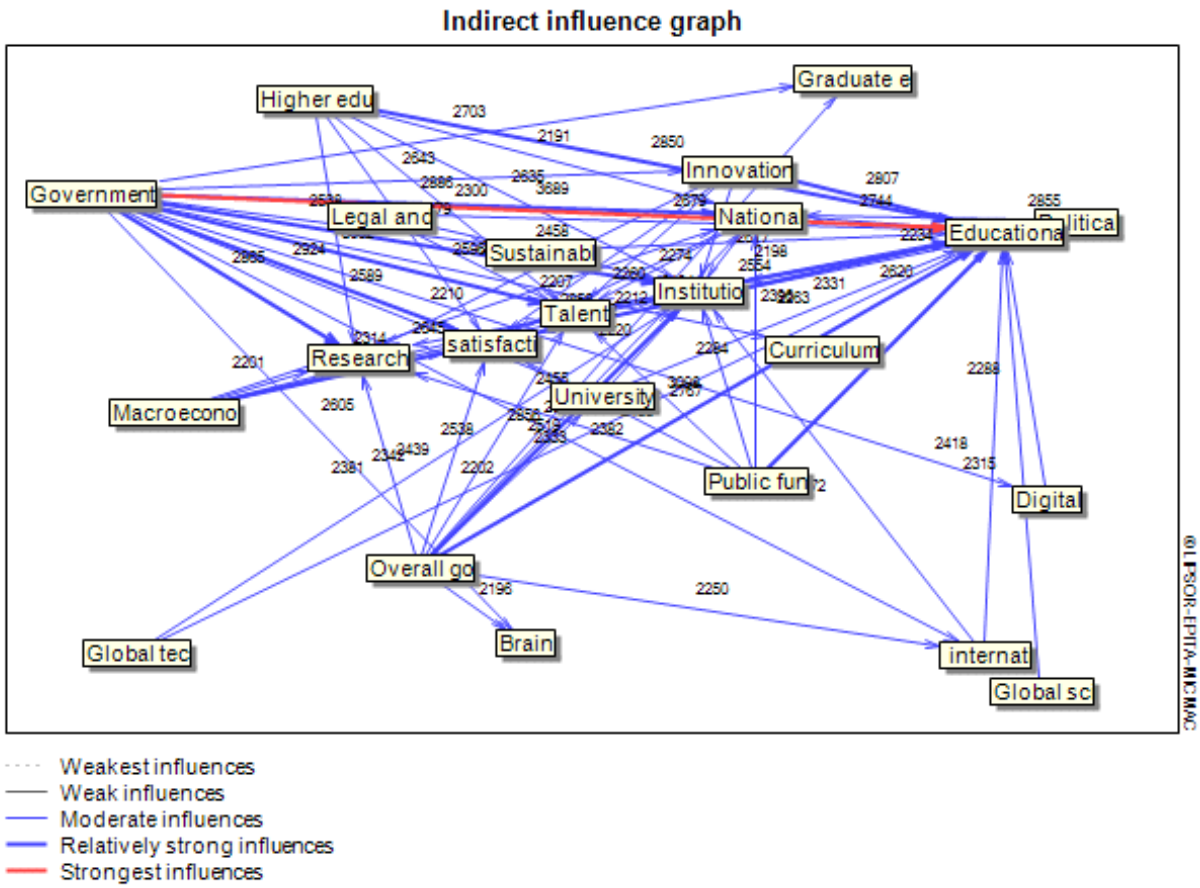

Figure 2. Indirect influence graph

Discussion & Conclusions

The present study aimed to explore the future of the higher education system in Iran by identifying the key variables influencing its development and analyzing their interactions through structural analysis using MICMAC. The findings revealed that several policy-related, governance, and economic variables play a dominant role in shaping the future of the system. In particular, government macro-policies, public funding allocation, national higher education strategy, and macroeconomic policies were identified as the most influential driving forces within the system.

The analysis also showed that outcome-oriented variables such as educational quality, institutional reputation, research productivity, graduate employability, and student satisfaction are highly dependent on other structural and policy variables. This indicates that improvements in the performance of the higher education system largely depend on effective governance, strategic policymaking, and sustainable financial support.

- Influential Variables

This quadrant includes variables with high influence on the system and low dependence on other variables. According to the findings of this study, factors such as *government*

macro-policies in higher education, public funding allocation, the overall governance structure, legal and regulatory frameworks, political stability, and global trends in science and technology fall into this category. These variables represent the primary driving forces shaping the higher education system. Any change in these factors can produce widespread effects across the entire system. Therefore, policymakers should pay particular attention to these variables, as decisions in these areas largely determine the overall direction and development of higher education.

- Strategic Variables

Variables in this quadrant exhibit both high influence and high dependence simultaneously. In the present research, variables such as *national higher education strategy, digital transformation and the integration of artificial intelligence, internationalization of higher education, innovation culture, university governance and autonomy, sustainable funding models, talent attraction and retention policies, and curriculum alignment with future labor market needs* are located in this quadrant. These variables constitute the core dynamic and sensitive components of the system. Even small changes in these factors can trigger a chain of interactions across the entire system. Consequently, they hold critical importance in strategic planning, and their effective management plays a decisive role in shaping the future of the higher education system.

- Dependent Variables

Variables in this quadrant demonstrate high dependence but relatively low influence, and they essentially represent the outcomes or outputs of the system. The findings of this study indicate that variables such as *educational quality, research productivity, graduate employability, institutional reputation, patents, student satisfaction, and brain drain* belong to this category. These variables are strongly affected by the influential and strategic variables identified in the first two quadrants. Changes in policies, governance structures, and strategic orientations can directly improve or weaken these outcomes. Therefore, these variables can be considered key indicators for assessing the performance and effectiveness of the higher education system.

- Independent Variables

This quadrant consists of variables with relatively low influence and low dependence. In this research, factors such as *demographic trends, social capital, and labor market conditions* are placed in this category. These variables function mainly as contextual and environmental factors that lie largely outside the direct control of the higher education system. Nevertheless, they can influence the long-term direction, demand, and structural evolution of higher education. Although their immediate impact on the internal structure of the system is limited, considering these variables is essential in long-term policy analysis and future-oriented planning.

Overall, the results of the MICMAC analysis indicate that the higher education system is shaped by a combination of

structural driving forces, strategic variables, and performance outcomes, and coordinated management across these levels can facilitate the sustainable development of the system.

In futures studies, alternative scenarios are typically constructed based on the interaction of key driving forces and critical uncertainties. Drawing on the findings of the MICMAC analysis in this research particularly the role of strategic variables such as digital transformation, national higher education strategy, sustainable funding, internationalization, and talent attraction the following four scenarios can be outlined for the future of the higher education system in Iran:

- Scenario 1: "Transformative Leap"

In this scenario, macro-level policymaking in higher education moves toward structural reform, sustainable investment, and the systematic development of advanced technologies. Digital transformation and the integration of artificial intelligence are widely implemented in teaching, learning, and research processes. Universities gain greater managerial autonomy and institutional flexibility. International academic collaboration expands, with increased joint programs and research partnerships with reputable global institutions.

As a result, educational quality and research productivity improve significantly, graduate employability increases, and the rate of brain drain declines. Under this trajectory, Iran's higher education system evolves toward a model of entrepreneurial and innovation-driven universities, playing a more effective role in national economic growth and social development.

- Scenario 2: "Gradual and Conservative Progress"

In this scenario, change within the higher education system is incremental yet stable. Reforms in curriculum design, digitalization of education, and university–industry collaboration are introduced, but they occur in a limited and gradual manner. Macro-policies and governance structures remain largely unchanged, and financial resources continue to face constraints.

While universities experience moderate improvements in educational quality and research performance, no deep or structural transformation takes place. This scenario represents a form of continuity with modest enhancements, where the system adapts slowly without undergoing fundamental change.

- Scenario 3: "Structural Stagnation"

In this scenario, the higher education system faces significant challenges in funding, policymaking coherence, and governance effectiveness. Financial limitations, misalignment between macro-policies and societal needs, and weak implementation of digital transformation hinder universities' ability to respond effectively to rapid scientific and technological change.

Consequently, educational quality and research output decline, the gap between universities and industry widens, and the rate of brain drain intensifies. Under these

conditions, higher education plays a diminished role in scientific and economic development, and the university system experiences a state of structural rigidity and systemic inefficiency.

- Scenario 4: "Fragmentation and Institutional Divergence"

In this scenario, environmental pressures and socio-economic constraints lead to the emergence of a heterogeneous and fragmented higher education landscape. A limited number of leading universities leverage internal capacities and selective international collaborations to advance in innovation and technology. In contrast, many other institutions struggle with resource shortages and infrastructural weaknesses. This divergence results in widening disparities in educational quality, research opportunities, and institutional reputation across universities. The higher education system no longer operates as a cohesive whole; instead, developmental trajectories become uneven and polarized, with increasing inequality among institutions.

Together, these four scenarios represent a spectrum of plausible futures for Iran's higher education system ranging from comprehensive transformation and innovation-driven advancement to stagnation and structural fragmentation. They provide a strategic framework for anticipatory policymaking and long-term planning in the higher education sector.

Like other foresight studies, this research is subject to several limitations. First, the data used to construct the cross-impact matrix were derived from expert judgments, which means that the results may partially reflect the subjective perspectives and experiences of the participating experts. Second, the number of experts involved and the diversity of their expertise may influence the robustness of the findings, as a larger and more diverse expert panel could provide more precise assessments of the relationships among variables. Third, the MICMAC analysis examines interactions among variables at a specific point in time and therefore may not fully capture long-term dynamic changes and evolving environmental conditions. Furthermore, political, economic, and technological uncertainties may alter the significance or influence of certain variables in the future. Consequently, the findings of this study should be interpreted within the temporal and contextual boundaries of the research. Based on the research findings and the identification of key and strategic variables in the higher education system, the following practical recommendations are proposed:

Higher education policymakers should revise and update national higher education strategies and macro-policies using a forward-looking approach aligned with global scientific and technological developments.

The development of digital transformation and the integration of artificial intelligence in teaching and research should be prioritized within university planning and policy frameworks.

Establishing sustainable university funding models through diversified financial

resources, stronger industry partnerships, and the expansion of the knowledge-based economy is essential.

Enhancing university autonomy and effective governance structures can foster innovation, flexibility, and improvements in educational and research quality.

Strengthening university–industry collaboration and labor market alignment is necessary to improve graduate employability and ensure that curricula reflect future workforce needs.

Expanding international academic cooperation and partnerships with leading global universities

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