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University Good Governance; The study of autonomy and accountability in Islamic Azad University, Qazvin Province

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Abstract

University autonomy and accountability have been playing such a vital role in all aspects of university governance that their importance cannot be over emphasized. Autonomy can be defined as "the right of a group of people to govern itself or to organize its own activities" and being autonomous means "being independent and having the power to make your own decisions". On the other hand, accountability means being responsible for decisions or actions and being required or expected to justify them. The purpose of this study is to examine and assess the degree and sufficiency of university autonomy in the four area of institutional, financial, staff, and academic and also the degree of accountability of universities to their external stakeholders. The instrument for gathering data was a researcher-made questionnaire with a five- point Likert scale and its calculated Alpha was above ./70. This means that the instrument was reliable. Data were obtained randomly from university managers at Islamic Azad University branches in Qaz-vin province. The data were analyzed using percentage and five-point Likert scale to objectively determine the degree of accountability and the sufficiency of the university autonomy for good governance of their branches at the four area of autonomy from the view point of university chancellors, vice-chancellors, Dean and Head of the Departments. The analysis of data in rela-tion to research questions were investigated, using one-sample t-test by means of version 18 of SPSS software. The findings indicate that the degree of autonomy in the four area is not suffi-cient to govern the university well and the University administrators suggest that granting more autonomy from the central administration of Islamic Azad University and Ministry of Science, Technology and Research to the university branches may hold them to be more accountable to internal and external stakeholders.

Key words: *Islamic Azad University, University good governance, Autonomy, Accountability*

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Introduction

In the last two decades higher education in Iran has undergone profound changes and these changes cover the rise of student numbers, types and number of higher education institutions including non-state and non-profit institutions, type of services provided by these organizations such as e-learning, non-academic organization giving academic services and etc. On the other hand, massification of higher education and opening of universities for most of the candidates without giving entrance examination and sifting the qualified ones, all led to the fall of the quality of graduates at even master levels. This is one of the major reason that the output of these institutions do not correspond with the needs of market. Furthermore, the aim of Iranian 20- year-vision for 2025 would be the first country in the science and technology in the region of Middle East, Thus the importance of universities to drive the country to the pick is highly vital. For this reason it is necessary to see whether the current governance of higher education systems and degree of autonomy and accountability is sufficient for the national developmental plan decided by the policy makers and state officials. Adding to these issues, economic stagnation, rate of unemployment among graduates and increasing of non-state students tuition make the road unpaved for the state to move toward the developmental plan.

Owing to the historical, cultural, political and societal reasons, the issue of accountability has not been considered carefully and systematically; therefore, there would be no sufficient insight from the university accountability in Iranian higher education system. Considering the path to evolution and progress of Iranian higher education demonstrates that granting of autonomy to higher education institution has been documented in the fourth developmental plan for the first time and the State was entitled to empower the universities to be able to be responsive and accountable to gratify the needs of the different sections of the country. The ongoing pressure from the society, employers, students and other external stakeholders for more accountability and good governance of the higher education institutions make them to renew and reengineer their structure, mission, function and process [6].

When reviewing the rules of developing trustee boards in Iranian higher education system, one may come to a conclusion that the duties of autonomy and accountability have not been recognized clearly and this does not concern with the needs of academic staff and board members. For the board members, accountability is the last priority [6].

Tofighi argues that, one of the major reasons of university's unresponsiveness is its centralized and strict state control of the governmental agencies over the higher education institutions. He contends that if Universities are not accountable to their stakeholders, this is because of lack of autonomy and authority of university and its governors. Moreover, accountability presupposes autonomy and the accountability does not exist, unless the autonomy is granted to the universities by the State. If this does not occur, university managers will be responsive and accountable to the minister of higher education and the State, not the society and their stakeholders [6].

Ghofrani examines the university governance in Iranian higher education and classifies the governance problem into the institutional, Departmental and supra departmental ones. He argues Iranian higher education institutions has been under the influence of political considerations after the revolution. Moreover, the issue of autonomy in higher education system in Iran has been around the decentralization and there is a far distance with the concept of autonomy and academic freedom in the international traditions. Since university has been imported from the West, it cannot internalize its academic entity and independent culture in the society and owing to this problem the university had been changed into a state administration which can be accountable to the State

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in higher organizational hierarchy. He points to the old traditions of centralized administration of organization, guardian role of State over higher education institutions, scattered organizations and parallel centers for decision making as the problems of departmental level. He concludes that all these problems lead to the abdication of Higher Education Department and changes it to the executor of the Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution and the State cannot govern the higher education system well [5].

Regarding the issue of autonomy and accountability as two important components of good governance in higher education and the fact that the problem under the investigation has not been studied by Iranian researchers and also owing to the significant role of the universities to achieve The Iranian vision 1404, the conduct of this research is highly paramount.

Review of Related Literature

University governance are of different models in which their discrepancies are under the national context, historical heritage, and other cultural, political and economic factors [3].

Governance is a central issue in higher education because it determines the manner in which colleges and universities function, and in the case of public universities, it also defines the relationship with the state. Governance encompasses the internal relationships, the external relationships, and the intersection between the inner world of the university and its larger environment, including the state government. This suggests that higher education governance has an internal and external component; internal campus governance and external governance. External governance is about the roles that actors and policymakers outside of the university play and the influence they have, through boards and councils, on the institution. These groups and persons are called external stakeholders. Internal governance is characterized by faculty and administration roles, responsibilities and authority. These persons are also referred to as internal stakeholders. Internal stakeholders are groups or individuals with an interest in higher education but are not members of the academy. These include business sector individuals, influential members of public, parents, the state, and nowadays international organizations [1].

Creating successful universities requires a supportive governance structure in which universities or colleges have autonomy to achieve objectives, whether research or teaching, with the appropriate level of accountability. Evidence of tertiary education sectors around the world suggests that, at least on paper, countries have been modifying their system wide governance structures to develop management and oversight of their universities to achieve these goals of autonomy with accompanying levels of accountability. Increasingly tertiary education sectors are shifting from being state controlled to state supervised systems across the world [4].

The key policy question seems to be getting the right balance between autonomy and accountability of universities. The challenge is to determine how much accountability is optimum. Too much accountability can lead to stagnation of innovation and potential rent-seeking, as well as potentially undermine the goal of autonomy itself. However, accountability remains important, especially as government continue to be significant financiers of tertiary education. With the decision to increase institutional autonomy, government also have to reassure tax payers that these institutions are held accountable [7].

Institutional autonomy essentially is the degree of freedom of the university to steer itself or alternatively the condition where academia determine how its work is carried out. Essentially, institutional autonomy means that the state increasingly exist from the day management of the tertiary sector allowing universities to determine their own path. Understanding the notion of autonomy is to encourage TEIs to have the freedom to make choice, given ideally existing market driven incentives [7].

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Institutional autonomy is distinguished into two: substantive and procedural autonomy. Substantive autonomy covers the sphere of academic and research, specifically autonomy over areas related to curriculum design, research policy, awarding degree, etc. Procedural autonomy covers the non-academic areas which overlap with many financial matters. These include budgeting, purchasing, entering into contracts, etc. Anderson and Johnson build on Neave and Van Vought's classification and look at issues of autonomy in the following grouping of countries: Anglo-American, European, and Asian [7].

Governments across the board interfere substantially on procedural issues but vary in terms of their interference in substantive issues. For the most part, Anderson and Johnson found that Anglo-American countries are more autonomous, especially on substantive issues, as compared to other region. For instance, in the USA there has always been substantive autonomy, but individual states within the federation vary vis-vis procedural autonomy. In Asian countries, both areas of institutional autonomy are limited. However, worldwide there is a push towards institutional autonomy across the board as innovation in substantive areas require resource and in order to generate those resource, procedural autonomy is necessary. There is also a view that relaying less on state funding increases institutional autonomy [4].

Higher education institutions are facing greater scrutiny from government, industry, the general public, and various other stakeholders. One mechanism used to monitor higher education performance is to hold universities more accountable. Consequently, a new accountability culture has engulfed higher education globally. For example, in Italy the state attempted to make universities more responsive to changes in the socio-economic system. In the Netherland, the accountability demand resulted in the government shifting its attention from ex ante control by means of regulation to ex post control in which the onus is placed on the universities to create measures and procedures to demonstrate quality in their programs. Using this approach, the government only intervene if there is a need to do so [4].

Generally, Institutional autonomy refers to constantly changing of relationship between higher education institutions and the State. The amount of the governmental controls over universities depends on the national context of the countries. The association of European Universities categorizes the autonomy of universities in to four types of institutional, financial, staff and academic [2].

In the USA, the demand for greater accountability has been driven by the state s and their desire for greater responsiveness from higher education to market demands and productivity measures. Additionally, public oversight agendas are now more committed to the use of policy tools to improve the alignment between the performance of higher education and public expectations. To create such an alignment, higher education institutions have had to adjust to new environmental demands in which more accountability is required while, at the same time, funding is decreasing [1].

A common global policy trend is a decline in government spending and the use of lower tax regimes. Slaughter and Leslie describe academic capitalism as the growing practice of universities creating commercial enterprise and selling research services in their quest for alternative revenue streams. Therefore, in addition to universities having to operate in a new competitive environment, they now operate in an environment where governments have been forced to reduce public spending on higher education and universities, feeling the effects of these spending cuts, are seeking alternative sources of funds. This is causing higher education institutions to make major organizational changes to be financially more self-sustaining and maintain their educational programs [1].

Many of these changes have resulted in the restructuring of governance systems, In the USA, for example, there were more than 100

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initiatives to restructure higher education governance system between 1985 and 2000. Advocates of the neo-liberal ideology in Europe believe that the traditional governance models, such as the British and Continental models, have become obsolete and do not fit a rapidly changing environment. Many European countries share this view and have engaged in governance restructuring during the last two decades [1].

Research Method

Does institutional autonomy suffice for the good governance of the university branch? Does financial autonomy suffice for the good governance of the university branch? Does staff autonomy suffice for the good governance of the university branch? Does academic autonomy suffice for the good governance of the university branch? Are university branches (officials) accountable to their external stakeholders? The research method used for this study is a mixed method using both quantitative and qualitative data. At the first step questionnaire surveys were carried out to understand the degree of autonomy in the four area of institutional, financial, staff and academic and also the degree of university branches' accountability to their external stakeholders. The surveys were also the means to find answer regarding the four questions. It is worth mentioning that the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of the measurement scale results is 0.86. According to the factor analysis, all the questions are relevant and the reliability is shown to be high, since alpha is higher than 0.45 for each. Respondents indicate their choice of responses on the five-point Likert scale. Five alternatives were given to the each question of the survey which were" (1) very high, high, median, low, and very low. Likewise, the same questions were used in the interviews and comments of the experts were taken into account. The researcher tallied, scored and tabulated all the responses in the provided survey questions. The researcher conducted the survey personally with the respondents. Further library research using books, journals, magazines and university rules and regulations was carried out to see whether they support the primary data collected to show a clearer picture of degree of university branches' autonomy and accountability in Islamic Azad University. At the second phase, a semi- interview based on the questions of the surveys was conducted to learn of the desired autonomy in the four area and the degree of accountability from the views of the experienced experts selected among the university administrators with at least five years of managing experience and also to confirm the survey results at the first step of the study.

Sampling Design

The sampling design of this study is random sampling; the sample includes the chancellors, vice-chancellors, Deans and Head of Departments from the all branches of Islamic Azad University in Qazvin province. According to the Morgan Table, The size of the sample for the survey was 118 members from 9 university branches and for the interviews were 6 experts. The expert's selection was not random, rather on the base of their expertise and managerial experience.

Results and Discussion

In this part, by means of version 18 of SPSS Software, the statistical description of the responders' demographic characteristics and subsequently the analysis of the data in relation to the research questions are investigated. Survey of the research questions has been done by means of the one-sample t-test. Also, in order to analyze the normal distribution of the data of the research variables, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov and the Shapiro-Wilk tests are used.

Data Analysis regarding the Research Questions:

Before using statistical hypothesis tests, the normality of the data obtained is primarily investigated.

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Analysis of Normal Distribution of the Variables:

In order to analyze the normal distribution of the data of the research variables, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov and the Shapiro-Wilk tests were used. If the level of significance of these tests is over 0.05, it can be concluded that distribution of the data related to the variable does not have a significant difference from normal distribution. Null hypothesis and alternative hypothesis for this test are as follows:

Null hypothesis (H0): There is no difference between the observed distribution and the theoretical distribution (the distribution is normal).

Alternative hypothesis (H1): There is a difference between the observed distribution and the theoretical distribution (the distribution is not normal).

The response of both tests shows that the level of significance of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov and the Shapiro-Wilk tests is larger than 0.05 for all the variables. As a result, the observed distribution is equal to the theoretical distribution and there is no difference between these two. Therefore, it can be said that the data have normal distribution.

The Data Analysis regarding the Research Questions

In order to determine the state of the variables, the one-sample t-test was used in order to compare the mean per component in the current state and the expected mean, and in this method the observed mean per component is compared with the expected mean (scale mean, i.e. 3). As the research questionnaire has been regulated in a 5-point Likert scale, the scale mean of which is 3, the expected mean has been considered as 3. Null and alternative hypotheses for this one-sample t-test are as below:

H0: There is no difference between the observed mean and the expected mean (3).

H1: There is a difference between the observed mean and the expected mean (3).

The data analysis regarding question 1: How is the state of organizational self-governing for good governance according to the directors of the academic units under study? As can be seen in table 4, the mean difference of "organizational autonomy" with the theoretical scale mean is significant ($p<0.05$ and $t=-12.69$). Thus, the observed mean of "organizational autonomy" (1.58) is smaller than the expected mean (the score of 3) (the mean difference is negative). This means that the state of organizational autonomy for good governance is unfavorable and below average according to the directors of the academic units under study.

The data analysis regarding question 2: How is the state of financial autonomy for good governance according to the directors of the academic units under study?

As can be seen in table 4, the mean difference of "financial autonomy" with the theoretical scale mean is significant ($p<0.05$ and $t=-10.76$). Thus, the observed mean of "financial autonomy" (1.78) is smaller than the expected mean (score of 3) (the mean difference is negative). This indicates that the state of financial autonomy for good governance is unfavorable and below average according to the directors of the academic units under study.

The data analysis regarding question 3: How is the state of human resource autonomy for good governance according to the directors of the academic units under study?

As can be seen in table 4, the mean difference of "human resource autonomy" with the theoretical scale mean is significant ($p<0.05$ and $t=-11.85$). Thus, the observed mean of "human resource autonomy" (1.73) is smaller than the expected mean (score of 3) (the mean difference is negative). This means that the state of human resource autonomy for good governance is unfavorable and below average according to the directors of the academic units under study.

The data analysis regarding question 4: How is the state of academic autonomy for good governance according to the directors of the academic units under study?

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Level of significance	Degree of freedom	t-statistic	Mean difference	Standard deviation	The observed mean	Variables
0.000	36	-12.69	-1.42	0.68	1.58	Organizational autonomy
0.000	36	-10.76	-1.22	0.69	1.78	Financial autonomy
0.000	36	-11.85	-1.27	0.65	1.73	Staff autonomy
0.000	36	-10.21	-1.19	0.71	1.81	Academic autonomy
0.001	36	-3.57	-0.40	0.68	2.60	Accountability

Table 1. Summary of the one-sample t-test for analysis of the state of the variables (n=37) 3= The expected mean

As can be seen in table 4, the mean difference of "academic autonomy" with the theoretical scale mean is significant ($p<0.05$ and $t=-10.21$). Thus, the observed mean of "academic autonomy" (1.81) is smaller than the expected mean (score of 3) (the mean difference is negative). This indicates that the state of academic autonomy for good governance is unfavorable and below average according to the directors of the academic units under study.

The data analysis regarding question 5: Are the managers and directors of the academic units under study accountable for the external stakeholders of the university?

As can be seen in table 4, the mean difference of "accountability" with the theoretical scale mean is significant ($p<0.05$ and $t=-3.57$). Thus, the observed mean of "accountability" (2.60) is smaller than the expected mean (score of 3) (the mean difference is negative). This indicates that the level of accountability of the managers and directors of the academic units under study for the external stakeholders of the university is below average.

Conclusion

Autonomy can be defined as "the right of a group of people to govern itself or to organize its own activities" and being autonomous means "being independent and having the power to make your own decisions". University autonomy composes of two types; substantive and procedural autonomy. The former is based on the assumption that universities should have some authority and autonomy to act within their mission. This area of autonomy includes some issues such as curriculum design, research policies, awarding degree, entrance standard, academic staff appointment and introducing new programs etc. owing to the centralized Iranian higher education system, parts of the authorities cannot be exercised by Islamic Azad University, where as this is more restricted for Islamic Azad university branches. Since the Central Administration of this university has kept some autonomy which Ministry of Higher Education has endowed to all the universities all around Iran. At the first step. It is vital the Central Administration of Azad University to gradually delegate the autonomy to their branches and this should be done on the base of the capability and ranks of the branches. The second type of autonomy is procedural autonomy which includes budgeting, purchasing, entering in to contracts and specifically non-academic affairs of university. One of the very important matter in this regard in which the researcher realized during the interview with financial managers

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and accountancy staff is about the financial management of the branches. As one of the interviewee says "there is no systematic and cohesive budgeting system in the branches". University chancellor governs his institution on the base of student's fees and that is why the university officials tend to register many students for each semester. It goes without saying that with no sound and transparent financial system, any planning will be useless. Islamic Azad University officials should take this vital issue in to account by recruiting skillful financial managers and administer the branches in accordance with the budget which has been set up. At the present time, one may claim that the branches set up budget yearly, but the chancellors do not bound to it strictly. One of the biggest challenges which university faces is the sole income of university earning. In this regard it is highly important that university should take some steps toward diversifying its incomes. This would not occur as long as the university does not change its strategy of increasing student's fees. To overcome the problem, it is needed to reconsider the appointment procedures and budget planning. The issue is tied with the educational leadership and efficient management in university too. To me, this can be resolved by the prominent roles in which the board of trustee in provinces may acct. Dating back to the philosophy of trustee establishment and the history of non-state and non-profit universities in the world, one can realize that the essential role of the members of trustees in the higher education institutions is fundraising. Popular and well-known trustee members in the local areas may help the branches by gathering money, gifts and endowments administer the institution. To get the most out of the trustees' role, Islamic Azad University should renew and reengineer the construction of trustees' members in the provinces. At a very short glance, one may recognize that the number of trustee in Islamic Azad University in Provinces compared with the peer institutions in the many countries is less than expected. Engaging some state men and political figures may help the institution to resolve the problems, but this does not suffice for the conduct of good governance in Islamic Azad University. It is rational for the university to represent as many as the stakeholders in the board. To interact mutually and to link with the industry and Labor market, and to get the potential competency of the graduates, it is fruitful and effective to have some representatives from the above mentioned stakeholders in the board. This not only make the earing for the university, but also improve legitimacy of the university. Accountability means being responsible for decisions or actions and being required or expected to justify them. Accountability put emphasis on the question that who is responsible, for what and through which means one is responsible? On the other word, accountability deals with the behavior, operation, individual, groups and organization and the way they are evaluated. While responsibility suggests an empowerment of officials to undertake certain function, it includes an acceptance of the assignment of the responsibility and discretion to act on that authority (Dunn, 2003). In this study, the acceptance of the assignment of responsibility refers to the requirements of university's managers, academic staff and trustee's members to provide information needed for the justifications of their actions and decisions, whereas the discretion to act on the authority insist on the fact that officials of Islamic Azad University who are accountable to their stakeholders can punish those staff, managers and academic staff for their wrong doings or any illegal action, or compensate the wrong actions of their employees. Autonomy is a pre-requisite for accountability. Granting universities some autonomy is an essential condition to holding administrators accountable for their actions and decisions. Without authority, it is meaningless to speak of accountability. Since most of the strategic decisions for higher education system are to be made centrally and outside the univer-

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sity by some bodies such as Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution, Parliament, Ministry of Higher Education and Central Administration of Islamic Azad University, in practice the branches are executor of the decisions made by these bodies. For this kind of system, the branches may be accountable to the top hierarchy of itself rather than to be answerable and accountable to the large numbers of their internal and external stakeholders. To make long story short, If Islamic Azad University plan to move toward the good governance, the officials should stick to the principles of rule of law, equity, transparency, consensus orientation, participation, efficiency and effectiveness, accountability, academic freedom, anti-corruption and autonomy. For the governing of the university, the board members of Islamic Azad University as key figures should not underestimate the roles of stakeholders and to review the construction of board specifically in provinces and to put the educational leadership in the center of their decisions. Similarly the financial management of the branches and also diversifying the income is the other vital factor that should not be forgotten by the practitioners of Islamic Azad University.

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