Explaining and Designing a Framework for the Phenomenon of Educational Corruption with a Grounded Theory Approach in Universities

Solayman. Solaymani Tabar[1] , Nader. Soleimani[2*] , Hamid. Shafizadeh[2]

[1] PhD Student in Educational Management, Garmsar Branch, Islamic Azad University, Garmsar, Iran
[2] Associate Professor, Educational Management Department, Garmsar Branch, Islamic Azad University, Garmsar, Iran

* **Corresponding author email address**: drnasoleimani@yahoo.com

A r t i c l e   I n f o

A B S T R A C T

Objective: The main goal of this study was to explain and design a framework for the phenomenon of educational corruption using a grounded theory approach in universities.

Methodology: The statistical population of the study consisted of twelve university administrators, faculty members, and staff members from higher education institutions in Tehran. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with them through a snowball sampling method until theoretical saturation was reached. Data analysis was performed in three stages: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding, using the qualitative analysis software MAXQDA. Based on this analysis, the qualitative model of the research was designed.

Findings: The results showed that the paradigm model included causal conditions (organizational commitment, employee job satisfaction, social capital, external factors, political factors, problem-solving mechanisms, structural mechanisms, social factors, internal factors, avoidance of favoritism, negligence, individual and ethical characteristics of employees, religious adherence, inappropriate professional behaviors); the core category (practical solutions for combating corruption, abuse, and unknown activities); strategies (use of information technology, legalism in organizations, effective participation of civil society, trust-building, conflict resolution, administrative integrity, public oversight, existence of monitoring mechanisms); intervening conditions (solutions related to rulers and holders of power, accountability within organizations, justice, feelings of injustice); contextual conditions (ethical orientation, freedom and independence, organizational transparency, attention to livelihood and legal rights and benefits, administrative and economic factors, cultural factors); and outcomes (specialized selective mechanisms, employee training, meritocracy, structural integrity, political integrity). These elements reflect the educational corruption process in universities and the relationships between various dimensions and their components.

Conclusion: Educational corruption is a multifaceted issue with various causes and reasons. To combat it, policymakers can design educational environments in a way that increases transparency, based on the findings of this study.

Keywords: *Educational corruption, grounded theory, universities, higher education institutions.*

1 Introduction

The educational system plays a crucial and fundamental role in the development and transformation of a society, provided that education meets the necessary quality and standards (Asghr, 2025; Assefa et al., 2025). Higher education institutions, given the vital role of education in economic, cultural, and social development, have a determining role in societies (Oulamine et al., 2025; Öztel, 2025).

One of the issues faced by societies and social organizations is corruption. Corruption is a subject that has concerned policymakers and politicians in various societies and has attracted the attention of many researchers (Bagherimajd et al., 2024; Sabharwal & Tierney, 2023). Contemporary studies provide multiple definitions of corruption, each considering a specific aspect, but none can fully explain its complexity. As a result, some definitions are limited and are only applicable in a narrow range of cases, while others are overly broad, thus becoming ineffective (Priputneva, 2022; Rahman, 2022).

Corruption refers to behavior in which an individual acts outside the formal duties of a public role to achieve personal benefits, greater welfare, or a better position (Mugala et al., 2022; Naizabekov, 2021). This issue, in addition to leading companies like Enron to bankruptcy, has affected public organizations, non-profit organizations, NGOs, universities, and even religious organizations (Mohammadian Sharif et al., 2020; Priputneva, 2022). The increase in corruption in recent years has been widely discussed, and the topic has become a public issue, creating concerns in various sectors of society. Universities, like other organizations and offices, are vulnerable to this harm (Danjuma et al., 2018; Duerrenberger & Warning, 2018). Therefore, higher education institutions are neither exempt from corruption nor free of it; they are part of the economy and society, and the corruption that occurs within them is an integral part of the network of corrupt relations that govern society (Bagherimajd et al., 2024; Sabharwal & Tierney, 2023). Corruption in education is more harmful to society than ordinary administrative corruption because it negatively affects quality, access, equity, and social welfare (Bagherimajd et al., 2024; Osipian, 2013). The manifestations of corruption in higher education are diverse and complex (Kirya, 2019), including corruption in appointments, recruitment, and irregular payments, personal use of government vehicles in educational institutions, bribery for grades, cheating, plagiarism, research misconduct, sexual misconduct, etc. (Chapman & Lindner, 2016; Hosseini Hashemzadeh et al., 2016).

Currently, universities and higher education institutions, in terms of personnel (especially teaching staff) and the variety of services they provide, are the second-largest or even the largest sector in public services in most countries. Therefore, corruption in these institutions can affect a large part of the population (Bagherimajd et al., 2024; Sabharwal & Tierney, 2023). Educational corruption has now become a global issue, and governments are aware that corruption causes significant harm and knows no boundaries (Priputneva, 2022). Despite its negative impact and widespread nature, corruption in education has remained an under-researched topic. Higher education researchers have only recently started investigating this issue (Kirya, 2019). An empirical study of 50 countries found that the more a country perceives corruption in education, the worse the outcomes, even after controlling for other variables (Gill, 2013).

The widespread corruption in academic institutions, in addition to causing inefficiency and reducing the quality of educational services, has adverse effects on social capital, trust, and consequently illiteracy (Gholamzadeh et al., 2022). Therefore, when higher education is infiltrated by corrupt and unethical practices, it threatens the foundation on which societies are built (Silova et al., 2007).

Currently, higher education in Iran is at a historical juncture where universities have significantly expanded in terms of quantity, and at the same time, universities are exposed to quality-related challenges. Therefore, studying academic corruption is of great importance today (Mohammadian et al., 2020). The need to study corruption in education arises from the idea that if universities can eliminate corrupt behaviors and students experience integrity, this will become ingrained in them, and such students, who are now free of corruption, will enter organizations and other centers with integrity in the future (Gholamzadeh et al., 2022). As universities are considered a reflection of a country's progress and its human capital, the development of societies relies on the development of

universities (Rahman, 2022). Therefore, planning studies to identify the forms and types of academic corruption, assess the level of academic corruption, and adopt appropriate strategies to combat academic corruption is essential. On the other hand, the expanding higher education system has made these studies even more necessary. Thus, this research aims to analyze the concept of educational corruption and present control strategies within a coherent and comprehensive framework, by identifying the factors influencing the occurrence of educational corruption.

Assessing the health and corruption of academic organizations, as public organizations, has attracted the attention of university managers in recent decades. This is because some believe that corruption in higher education, due to its long-term effects, is often more harmful and destructive than corruption in other sectors (Hosseini Hashemzadeh et al., 2016). Steven Heinman, in his article titled "Education and Corruption," states that educational corruption stems from a broader set of corruption issues and, like in other areas, involves the abuse of power for material gain (Feoktistova, 2014). Educational corruption also leads to the waste of financial resources (Deliversky, 2016). Currently, the prevalence of corruption in higher education internationally has raised growing concerns and has attracted the attention of governments, professors, students, and other academic stakeholders (Chapman & Lindner, 2016). Although there are no precise and specific statistics on the extent and scope of this corruption (Moqaddari & Dahmarde, 2012), studies worldwide show that this phenomenon is not unique to a specific discipline, university, or country, and exists in all countries, continuing to increase (Abbasi et al., 2014). Educational corruption deserves attention for many reasons, especially because of its negative impact on society. For example, an analysis of newspaper articles and TV news programs about the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries shows that educational corruption undermines employers' and the public's trust in the country's colleges and universities (Chronicle, 2002). In this context, the areas and functions prone to corruption include the selection and education of students, research, publications, faculty recruitment and promotion, management of public assets, and public property (Bagherimajd et al., 2024). Educational corruption has serious consequences for higher education institutions and society as a whole. It destroys universities' reputations, blocks access for qualified applicants, and when unqualified graduates are assigned to professional fields

such as construction, medicine, and other duties, it can threaten public health, safety, and welfare (Kirya, 2019).

The purpose of the present study is to investigate the relationship between spiritual intelligence, individual factors, and the dimensions of social and educational systems in the development of academic corruption. Therefore, the central question of this study is as follows: What are the factors influencing educational corruption in the context of the university?

2   Methods and Materials

The methodology of this research is qualitative and based on the grounded theory model by Strauss and Corbin. It is also applied in terms of its objective. In this study, 12 semi-structured interviews were conducted purposively with university administrators, faculty members of higher education institutions in Tehran, using a snowball sampling method, until theoretical saturation was reached. To enrich the research, efforts were made to interview individuals with significant knowledge and experience in this field. After explaining the research objectives and data collection process to the participants and obtaining their verbal informed consent, they were reassured about the confidentiality of their responses, their right to withdraw from the study, and the secure storage of interviews. Data collection continued until saturation was achieved. Gradually, coding of the interview transcripts and data analysis led to the categorization and synthesis of the data. Data analysis used three stages of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding, as part of the grounded theory method. In the open coding stage, each interview was analyzed separately, and concepts and categories were extracted. In the axial coding stage, the categories derived from each interview were compared and integrated with those from other interviews. If necessary, subcategories, attributes, and dimensions were defined. In the selective coding stage, the categories and their dimensions were compared and integrated, leading to the final categories, which served as the first step in extracting the model from the data. To ensure the validity and reliability of the research, the interview questions were reviewed and approved by several experts. Lincoln and Guba referred to criteria such as credibility, dependability, transferability, confirmability, and authenticity when evaluating qualitative studies. To achieve these, the following actions were undertaken: conducting interviews and continuous analysis throughout the data collection process, reviewing the coding of interviews by

another expert to ensure accuracy and avoid researcher bias, and ensuring that the researcher's interpretation of interview content was objective. Finally, MAXQDA software was used for qualitative data analysis.

3   Findings and Results

In this study, 12 participants were interviewed, 8 of whom were male and 4 were female. Of these, 2 had master's degrees, and 8 had doctoral degrees. Regarding work experience, 7 participants had 10 to 20 years of experience, and 5 had more than 20 years of experience.

After transcribing an interview, open coding began. Open coding refers to the process of breaking down the collected data into the smallest possible conceptual units. To facilitate open coding, all interviews were entered into MAXQDA software. In the second stage, axial coding, the previously identified concepts were reorganized into new categories. Finally, in the selective coding stage, the main categories were identified.

All the factors obtained from the literature review and the factors identified through the analysis of the interviews, along with the categories and their corresponding semantic codes, are presented in Table 1

Table 1

Analysis of Data Collected from Interviews

Code	Core Code	Concept
Central Phenomenon	Practical solutions to combat corruption	Requests from colleagues to observe principles such as enjoining good and forbidding evil, avoiding tribalism in the organization, creating an environment for the spiritual growth of human resources, optimizing and improving their specialized knowledge and skills, structuring administrative relations based on psychological, social, economic, and cultural security, streamlining and rationalizing the administrative structure to achieve the goals of the vision, knowledge-based and meritocratic promotion of managers based on Islamic ethics, organizing training programs on corruption, justice-based recruitment, promotion, and employee continuity, institutionalizing work ethics and social discipline, self-control culture.
	Abuse	Personal use of organizational resources and facilities, wastefulness, bribery, embezzlement, fraud, and collusion, leaking and selling confidential information, forgery, and destruction of documents, bribery, stealing organizational materials and supplies, evading laws, misuse of organizational positions, and false reporting.
	Unclear Activities	Unclear transactions, issuing unclear licenses, and unclear contracts.
Causal Factors	Organizational Commitment	Rule of law, promoting a culture of administrative and social responsibility, valuing membership in the organization, a sense of belonging to the organization, dedication to work, and attention to client needs.
	Job Satisfaction	Relationship between managers and subordinates, independence and initiative in work, staying in the job and profession, satisfaction with the internal conditions of the organization, cooperation, and consensus.
	Social Capital	Interaction and cooperation, shared norms.
	External Factors	Legal effectiveness, strengthening the role and position of independent and free press and media.
	Political Factors	Degree of political freedom, particularly the power to criticize the ruling system, political stability, and how political power is divided.
	Resolving Mechanisms	Equal, non-discriminatory, and swift treatment of corruption offenders, punishment of wrongdoers.
	Structural Mechanisms	Competence matching the organizational position, changing managers' attitudes toward responsibility, accountability for actions and duties, a systemic approach to matters, transparency in administrative laws and regulations, and rule-based management.
	Social Factors	Unequal wealth distribution in society, consumerist and materialistic attitudes of employees, lack of commitment to religious principles by employees.
	Internal Factors	Psychological safety in the workplace, performance evaluation system, job insecurity for employees and managers, hierarchical control instead of decentralized control, employee participation in decision-making, organizational discipline mechanisms.
	Avoidance of Special Privileges	Avoid granting special privileges, avoiding monopoly and cronyism, preventing gossip and sycophancy.
	Negligence	Discontent among clients, negligence in duties, handling complaints, failure to identify lawbreakers, negligence in safeguarding organizational property.
	Individual and Ethical Characteristics of Employees	Individualistic tendencies, greed, lack of work ethics.
	Religious Adherence	Adherence to religious duties, avoidance of forbidden acts, frequency of Quran recitation, and participation in communal prayers.
	Inappropriate Job Behaviors	Delay, hasty actions, absenteeism, neglecting primary tasks, and low performance.
Contextual Conditions	Ethical Orientation	Valuing professors and employees, strengthening the ethics of public service, mutual respect culture within the organization, integrity, generosity, and forgiveness.
	Freedom and Independence	Right to free speech for employees to reduce inequality, more freedom of information and public disclosure.
	Transparency in the Organization	Clear declaration of roles and responsibilities of executives and non-executives, timely and transparent information on technical and operational matters, commitment to transparency in decision-making and resource utilization, clear communication of goals, plans, financial contracts, and general organizational information to employees.

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	Attention to Livelihood, Rights, and Benefits	Compensation system based on employees' capabilities and needs, rewards, and incentives system.
	Administrative and Economic Factors	Perception of economic inequality between government employees and other sectors, disparity between inflation growth rate and employees' salary increases, lack of job security for employees, lack of fringe benefits for employees.
	Cultural Factors	Social discipline and disregard for societal values, low awareness of duties and activities in different organizations, ineffective social security systems, particularly for civil servants.
Intervening Conditions	Strategies for Leaders and Power Holders	Integrity of administrative and governmental officials, non-discriminatory treatment of corruption, social oversight.
	Accountability in the Organization	Accountability to superiors, organizational accountability to stakeholders, providing adequate explanations to clients.
	Justice	Providing appropriate services to clients while disregarding personal gains, equal access to the legal system, fair promotion to higher positions based on standards.
	Perception of Injustice	Equitable distribution of income and resources, perception of legal inequality, ethnic, linguistic, or religious injustice, perceived disparity between work and pay.
	Legal and Regulatory Factors	Complexity of laws and regulations, clients' lack of awareness of laws, employees' lack of familiarity with laws.
Strategic Conditions	Use of Information Technology	Use of modern technologies, conducting work through portals, the ability of IT to monitor and control employee behavior.
	Government Support	Role of democratic institutions such as an independent judiciary and impartial media, decentralization of power to local elected authorities.
	Rule of Law in the Organization	Employee awareness of the law, proper enforcement of laws, interpretability of laws, enforcement of anti-corruption laws, adequacy of laws.
	Effective Participation of Civil Society	Recognizing and facilitating the role of civil society organizations in monitoring government performance, ensuring precise oversight of governmental bodies, and fostering political will to fight corruption.
	Building Trust	Trust in employees and empowering them in decision-making and activities based on information, testing and challenging suggestions through managers, establishing a reference for handling complaints and objections.
	Improvement of Goods and Services Quality	Purchasing necessary equipment for units, reducing outsourcing, ensuring the availability and suitability of service locations, and properly designing processes and products.
	Conflict Resolution	Resolving conflicts swiftly among employees, addressing emotional and cognitive disputes, avoiding conflicting relations with the organization.
	Health of the Administrative System	Organization's ability to adapt to the environment, manager's ability to influence superiors, friendly, supportive, and collaborative behavior, duty-bound and situation-aware behavior.
	Public Oversight	Oversight by unions, associations, and political parties, media oversight, employee oversight, and oversight by entities related to the executive, legislative, and judiciary branches.
	Presence of Supervisory Mechanisms	Raising awareness of public oversight on managers' performance, comprehensive performance evaluation system for employees, lack of effectiveness in disciplinary systems, skilled evaluators, proportional response to misconduct, awareness of public oversight culture.
Outcomes	Specialized Selection Mechanisms	Integrity, confidentiality, foresight, establishing meritocratic systems in appointments, commitment, specialization, creativity, and innovation.
	Employee Training	Increasing employees' supervisory capabilities directly and indirectly, empowering the organization to rationally utilize human resources, ensuring all employees receive comprehensive training.
	Meritocracy	Promotion based on merit, ensuring managers possess sufficient experience, hiring based on standards without nepotism.
	Structural Health	Efficient administrative structures, clear and transparent laws, effective incentive, punishment, and monitoring systems, reduction of discrimination, effective and efficient managers, organizational structure aligned with the organization's philosophy and goals.
	Political Health	Attending to employee requests and oversight in decision-making, recognizing employees' dignity and status, creating a participatory and open atmosphere.

After identifying the categories and concepts and placing them within the factors outlined by the researcher, they must be positioned within a usable framework that includes causal conditions, contextual conditions, intervening conditions, action/interactions strategies, and consequences. The relationships between these factors are also indicated with arrows. According to the paradigm model of Grounded Theory, the following description applies:

Causal conditions include: organizational commitment, job satisfaction of employees, social capital, external factors, political factors, solving mechanisms, structural mechanisms, social factors, internal factors, avoidance of favoritism, negligence, individual and moral characteristics of employees, religious adherence, and inappropriate work behaviors.

Contextual conditions include: ethical behavior, freedom and independence, organizational transparency, attention to livelihoods and legal rights and benefits, administrative and economic factors, and cultural factors.

Core conditions include: practical solutions for combating corruption, abuse, and unknown activities as the central phenomenon in the design of the educational corruption phenomenon model at the university.

Intervening or mediating conditions include: solutions related to rulers and power holders, accountability in

organizations, justice, the feeling of injustice, and legal and regulatory factors.

Strategies that intensify or weaken the context include: the use of information technology, government support, legal adherence in organizations, effective civil society participation, trust-building, improvement of goods and services quality, conflict resolution, administrative system health, public supervision, and the existence of monitoring mechanisms.

Consequences include: specialized selective mechanisms, employee training, meritocracy, structural health, and political health.

In this research, the obtained data were classified into 44 categories across 17 groups, with the consensus of experts and specialists. From all the indicators derived from qualitative data analysis of the interviews, 171 indicators were selected for the educational corruption phenomenon model at the university. The figure below represents the paradigm model of the educational corruption phenomenon model at the university.

Figure 1

Paradigm model of the educational corruption phenomenon model at the university
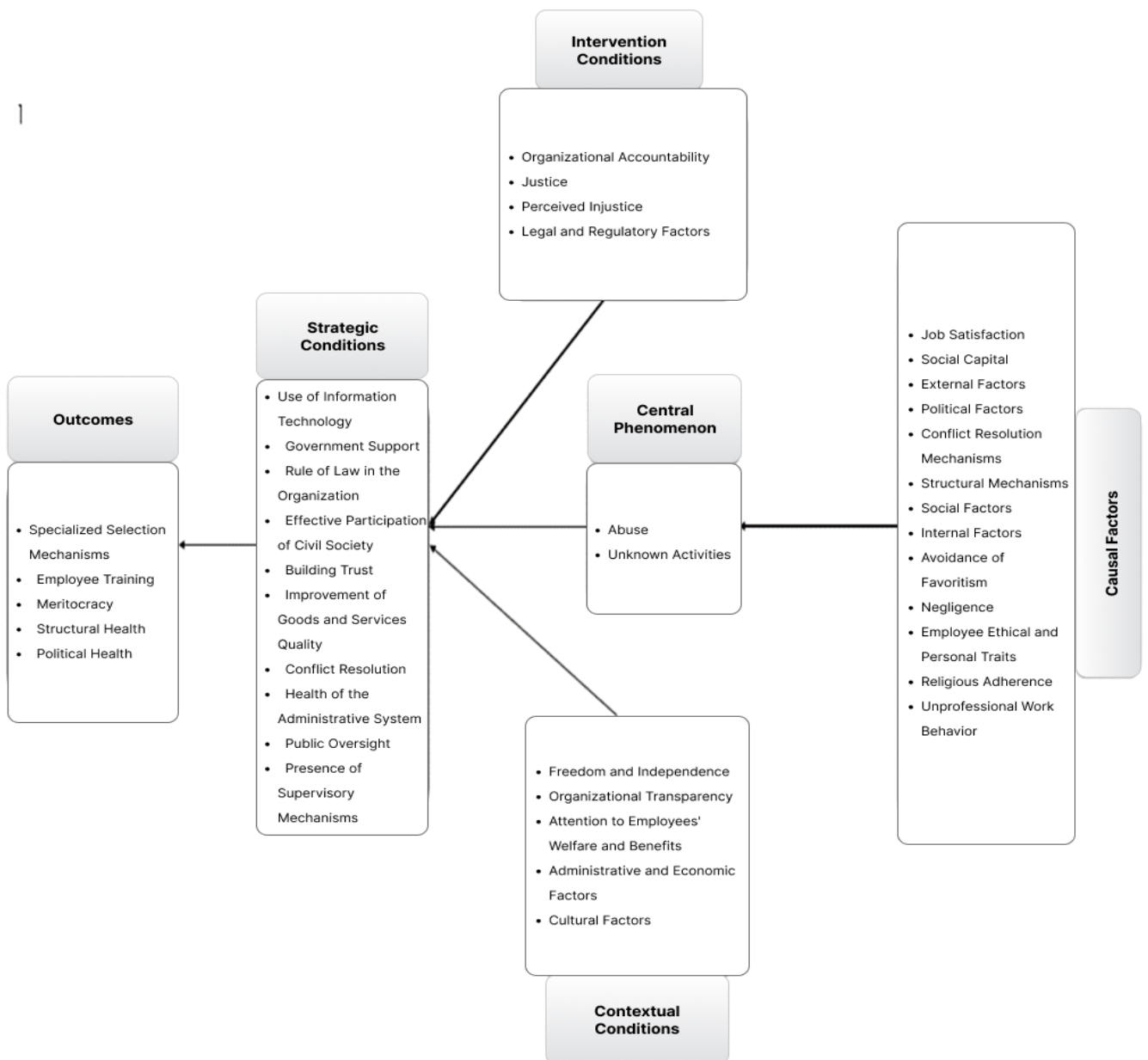
4   Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of this research was to explain and design a framework for the phenomenon of educational corruption from a Grounded Theory approach at the university. The findings showed that after coding the interview texts, by eliminating synonymous and repetitive criteria, and ultimately categorizing and grouping the final criteria, 44 main categories and 171 items were identified. The main categories identified are: organizational commitment, employee job satisfaction, social capital, external factors, political factors, solving mechanisms, structural mechanisms, social factors, internal factors, avoidance of favoritism, negligence, individual and moral characteristics of employees, religious adherence, inappropriate work behaviors, ethical behavior, freedom and independence, organizational transparency, attention to livelihoods and legal rights and benefits, administrative and economic factors, cultural factors, solutions related to rulers and power holders, accountability in organizations, justice, the feeling of injustice, legal and regulatory factors, practical solutions for combating corruption, abuse, unknown activities, the use of information technology, government support, legal adherence in organizations, effective civil society participation, trust-building, improvement of goods and services quality, conflict resolution, administrative system health, public supervision, the existence of monitoring mechanisms, specialized selective mechanisms, employee training, meritocracy, structural health, and political health.

The model of the educational corruption phenomenon at the university consists of five components: causal conditions, contextual conditions, intervening conditions, strategies, and consequences. In the Grounded Theory paradigm model, causal conditions influence the core phenomenon, and the core phenomenon influences strategies and actions. On the other hand, contextual and intervening conditions affect strategies and actions. Furthermore, since strategies and actions lead to consequences, strategies and actions impact the outcomes.

Based on the data obtained from interviews with participants and continuous and comparative analysis, it can be stated that the weaknesses in the country's administrative structure have led to the phenomenon of credentialism and the lack of meritocracy in government institutions and departments. The Iranian administrative system, despite its modern appearance, is unable to perform the functions of a modern institution in society and the inefficiency and unhealthy nature of the administrative system is a social problem. This is felt well by managers, employees, and clients. In such an environment, the absence of meritocracy is fostered, leading to a decrease in the efficiency and effectiveness of the society. Therefore, this corruption in the country's administrative structure is one of the factors disrupting the delivery of public services by other institutions, including universities. This finding is also consistent with previous results (Assefa et al., 2025; Bagherimajd et al., 2024; Chronicle, 2002; Danjuma et al., 2018; Deliversky, 2016).

The weaknesses and deficiencies in achieving a knowledge-based economy prevent industries from having the capacity to attract and utilize the knowledge of university graduates. Since specialized labor is not cultivated based on market demand, industries view themselves as independent of universities, and the necessary synergy between them has not been established. As a result, industries do not invest in research, nor are universities encouraged to conduct research that aligns with industry needs. Universities have been forced to turn to evening courses, non-profit, and distance learning programs to cover their budget deficits, which has created potential opportunities for corruption. The quality assessment criteria for students have become more flexible, and the output of these universities has lower quality. The prevalence of credentialism, the quantity-driven approach in higher education, and the decline in quality, as well as the lack of motivation among students, unemployment of graduates, waste of investments made in higher education, increasing work pressure on professors, and generally, the loss of university identity and societal skepticism about the functioning of the higher education system were factors pointed out by the participants.

One limitation of this research was that the researcher was unable to use a mixed-methods approach to assess the qualitative findings. The research method was qualitative, and interviews were conducted in a specific region. Another limitation was that, given that the tool used was interviews, there is a possibility that participants may have provided superficial responses to the research questions.

Based on the results of this study, the following recommendations can be suggested:

- Design a new institutional mapping with the aim of separating tasks and integrating redundant and parallel higher education policy-making bodies, creating dynamic and purposeful interaction between these institutions, and ensuring

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accountability to the official legislative and supervisory bodies.

- Grant sufficient managerial, financial, and administrative independence to higher education to pursue rational policy regimes and adhere to unified policies that are not altered with changes in government or political, social, and economic conditions.

- Activate institutions closer to the higher education space and involve them in proposing and drafting laws and regulations, such as the Supreme Council of Science, Research, and Technology, the Board of Trustees, or the Central Council of Universities, which could be revitalized.

- Establish intellectual property offices in universities (as in many developed countries) that provide necessary training to students, monitor their theses, and ensure scientific integrity. Additionally, draft laws to facilitate and clarify the reciprocal rights of producers, transmitters, and users of knowledge and technology.

- Create effective demand for knowledge-based services through a shift toward a knowledge-based economy and strengthen postgraduate programs by utilizing the latest human knowledge, prioritizing industry and labor market needs to attract research funding in this sector.

- Reform the full-time faculty member pyramid of universities and higher education institutions, both public and private, by creating the necessary conditions and emphasizing meritocracy.

- Assist the government in ensuring the financial independence of universities by facilitating their connections with executive bodies, such as industries, science and technology parks, and growth centers, through these bodies for universities to generate income from industry.

- Provide the necessary conditions for implementing the higher education development program with the goal of limiting the quantitative expansion of lower-level higher education in favor of higher-level education and improving the quality of higher education institutions and centers.

Authors' Contributions

All authors have contributed significantly to the research process and the development of the manuscript.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

Ethical Considerations

In this research, ethical standards including obtaining informed consent, ensuring privacy and confidentiality were observed.

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