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Analysis of the strategic plan documents of Iranian universities based on the components of sustainable development

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Abstract

Aim: This is an applied descriptive-exploratory study. Strategic plan documents of 22 Iranian public universities were selected by sampling with maximum diversity. Also, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 11 faculty members participating in the development and implementation of the strategic plan of the studied universities. Interviewees were selected using a combination of purposive techniques. Data were analyzed by qualitative content analysis. The findings show that universities in the development of strategic planning paid unequal attention to the components of sustainable development.

Keywords: Sustainable Development, Iranian Universities, Strategic Plan

Introduction

Universities, as the most prominent scientific institutions that deal with human processing, are the brain of the society and are at the helm of the movement towards sustainable development (Mousavi, Ghourchian and Jafari, 2021). According to Amral, et al. (2015), universities, as a powerful institution, have the ability to train future world leaders by pursuing appropriate approaches and policies, and can have a tremendous impact on the creation and dissemination of sustainability components. However, the success of universities in fulfilling their role and mission requires orientation and planning in accordance with environmental conditions and requirements. Such an orientation requires a rational plan to help the internal cohesion of universities and to help the components work effectively to achieve the goals of the strategic plan of universities. Furthermore, a good relationship should be established between universities and their environment. In the present era, the orientation and future vision of universities, like all important and effective organizations, are reflected in their strategic document as a comprehensive and complete plan. Keller introduced strategic planning in higher education in the late 1970s, and Iranian universities have been developing and implementing a strategic plan since 2001. A strategic plan reflects the attitude of managers and planners, and shows the direction of the university in the short and long term. Therefore, it is an important tool for analyzing and evaluating the orientation of the university towards various issues, including sustainable development. In this study, the strategic plan documents of Iranian universities were reviewed and analyzed based on the components of sustainable development, and also the challenges and obstacles of universities for optimal attention to the dimensions of sustainable development were identified.

Methodology

This research is qualitative, and its results can help university administrators, planners and researchers in the field of sustainable development. The research population was the strategic plan documents of public universities in Iran, studied based on the components of sustainable development. Accordingly, the strategic plan documents of 22 public universities in Iran were purposively selected with maximum diversity or heterogeneity. This sampling method was selected to collect a diverse sample in terms of geography and local conditions of the strategic plan documents of public universities in the country. Due to the ambiguities and questions raised during the research and after reviewing the strategic plan documents of universities, interviews were conducted with people specialized in developing strategic plans of universities including managers of assessment centers, performance monitors, members of the strategic council of universities. In this section combined purposive sampling was used. First, a number of managers of the university performance evaluation and monitoring center were selected for interviews using the intensity sampling method as informants of the strategic plan documents of the university. Then, other faculty members aware of the strategic plan documents were selected for interviews using the snowball sampling method. The data collection tool was the review and analysis of the strategic plan documents of the universities, as well as semi-structured interviews with the key informants of the strategic plan of the universities. The interviews continued until the concepts were repeated, that is, reaching theoretical saturation. Data were analyzed through thematic analysis.

Results

The first research question was how the components of sustainable development were reflected in the strategic plan documents of universities. The strategic plan documents of the universities were examined based on the social, economic, cultural, environmental and political dimensions of sustainable development.

Analysis of the strategic plan documents of universities led to eight categories and 222 subcategories related to the social dimension of sustainable development (Table 1).

Table 1. The social dimension of sustainable development in the strategic plan document of universities

	Category	Number of subcategories	Sample strategy
1	Comprehensive, effective and quality education	61	Reviewing the comprehensive education system, expansion and diversity of the audience of university educational programs
2	Purposefulness and improvement of the quality of scientific research	49	Improving the comprehensive research system of the university;
3	Scientific management of organizations and improving organizational structure and process	39	Expanding applied research with global standards Establishing a sustainable system of planning, implementation and evaluation;
4	Gender justice and attention to women's rights and issues	1	Designing and implementing information-based management system Achieving scientific authority in the study of women and the family
5	Physical and mental health of people in the community	13	Expanding the supportive environment and promoting the health of university residents, promoting the health of students and defining healthy living
6	Effective communication of institutions with one another and with the society	24	Upgrading the social capital of the university; Attracting material and spiritual participation of non-governmental sector in the implementation of university programs
7	Improving the quality of society, social life and increasing the well-being of the community members	29	Improving the quality of university welfare services; Special attention to educational and research activities to solve local problems and improve people's quality of life
8	Attending to the elite as the intellectual capital	6	Defining, identifying, supporting and enhancing the capabilities of the top talents

As per the economic dimension of sustainable development in the strategic plan document of universities, four categories and 110 subcategories were identified (Table 2).

Table 2. The economic dimension of sustainable development in the strategic plan document of universities

	Category	Number of subcategories	Sample strategy
1	Developing and growing industry, trade and agriculture; Expanding employment	22	Strengthening the necessary infrastructure to form the idea to product chain; Launching and developing knowledge-based companies
2	Optimal management of human resources in order to increase productivity	38	Empowerment of faculty members and staff; Facilitating the growth and flourishing of students' creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship
3	Diversification of sources of income	27	Attracting public participation and forming a foundation for charities and university supporters; Managing resources and diversifying financial resources and efficient management
4	Managing financial resources and increasing resource productivity	23	Improving and organizing the budget system based on the goals and plans of the university; Preparing a comprehensive plan to prevent waste of resources and optimal allocation of resources; Identifying revenue-generating resources based on opportunities

The cultural dimension of sustainable development in the strategic plan document of universities led to five categories and 83 subcategories (Table 3).

Table 3. The cultural dimension of sustainable development in the strategic plan document of universities

	Category	Number of subcategories	Sample strategy
1	Strengthening morals, values and improving people's attitudes and lifestyles	26	Promoting cultural activities to deepen and expand religious teachings, national identity and values of the holy system of the Islamic Republic of Iran; Improving altruism and conscientiousness in academics
2	Cultural and scientific interactions in the international arena	19	Developing international, regional, national and academic communications and establishing international scientific communication channels; Developing cooperation and increasing the international participation of the university
3	Development and expansion of scientific, cultural and artistic centers and institutions	13	Expanding and improving library services; Developing and expanding the university; Promoting the scientific status of the faculties of humanities and arts
4	Effective cultural management	20	Organizing student and cultural affairs of the university; Developing research-centered policies, decisions and actions in the field of culture. Developing physical space based on university architecture with emphasis on aesthetics and cultural-indigenous components;
5	Preservation of national and indigenous cultural heritage	5	Disseminating and strengthening indigenous and local culture

As per the environmental dimension of sustainable development in the strategic plan document of universities, four categories and nine subcategories were identified (Table 4).

Table 4. The environmental dimension of sustainable development in the strategic plan document of universities

	Category	Number of subcategories	Sample strategy
1	Green management	2	Developing green university programs with a sustainable development approach; Preserving the environment, and moving towards a green university
2	Environmental development	3	Developing an environmental reform program, implementing environmentally friendly projects, and collaborating to develop relevant standards and involve students; Developing environmental affairs
3	Protection of natural resources	1	Establishing a water research institute, providing consulting services in the field of water engineering, creating interdisciplinary scientific disciplines in the field of water in colleges, completing relevant laboratories, achieving the position of providing licenses for water-related projects and related products and equipment
4	Protecting the oceans and seas	3	Focusing on scientific, research and technological activities to introduce the Persian Gulf; Developing scientific activities based on the Persian Gulf

Further investigation of and involvement with research data and interviews revealed the role of the political dimension in sustainable development and this dimension was examined independently from other dimensions of sustainable development. In the strategic plan documents of universities, three categories and 35 subcategories were identified in relation to the political dimension of sustainable development (Table 5).

Table 5. The political dimension of sustainable development in the strategic plan document of universities

	Category	Number of subcategories	Sample strategy
1	Development of international relations	19	Promoting and improving communication support in the regional, national and international arenas; Active participation in international events
2	Democracy and the participation of individuals	14	Facilitating criticism and questioning of students, faculty members and staff with the approach of good debate; Analyzing processes, identifying flawed and bureaucratic procedures and improving them
3	Political influence in society in the direction of political development	2	Striving for mutual coordination between regional economic development policies and educational, research and technology policies; Political development and preventing politicization of universities

Discussion and conclusion

In this study, the strategic plan documents of universities were reviewed based on the components of sustainable development, including social, economic, cultural, environmental and political dimensions. Rarely has research addressed the political dimension of sustainable development while it is an important component in creating the context for implementation and helping to achieve the other components of sustainable development, sustainable development is not complete without addressing the political dimension. The findings of this study show that different dimensions of sustainable development are not equally addressed in the strategic plan document of universities. The strategic plan documents of universities have addressed Iran's social, cultural, economic, environmental and political dimensions in respective order. In this regard, it is suggested that training courses on sustainable development components be held for strategic planners of universities, and the strategic plan documents of universities be revised based on integrated attention to the components of sustainable development.

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