



Research Article

Determining Causal Relationships between Policy Research Components and Educational Policy-Making Components in University Units in Mazandaran Province

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Background and Objectives: The purpose of this research was to determine causal relationships between policy research components and educational policy-making components in university units in Mazandaran province.

Methodology: The present research was conducted with a quantitative approach trying to highlight the relation between the two variables. Two researcher-made questionnaires were distributed among 242 faculty members of the universities of the province and the data were analyzed using structural equation modeling to see if there is any relationship or not. The reliability and validity of the questionnaires were confirmed by using a pilot test.

Results: The findings showed that there are positive and significant causal relationships between the components of university policy research (including educational, research, socio-cultural, financial-administrative, international and environmental policies) and the components of educational policy-making (including educational content, quality, finance and budget, monitoring and evaluation, political-social and cultural-linguistic).

Conclusion: The overall conclusion of the research indicates that the establishment of a systematic policy research model can pave the way for evidence-based decision-making, increase the coordination and effectiveness of educational policies, and ultimately improve the quality of higher education in universities in Mazandaran province.

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Introduction

In the complex and dynamic contemporary world, universities play a unique role as institutions driving the scientific, cultural, and economic development of societies. The success of these institutions in realizing their inherent mission, which is the training of specialized human resources, the production of knowledge, and responding to the needs of society, depends on the existence of a coherent, efficient, and forward-looking system in the field of management and leadership (Islami and Valizadeh, 2023, p. 665). In this context, educational policy-making, as the beating heart of the university system, is a process that determines the goals, orientations, and main frameworks of educational activities. The quality of these policies directly affects all dimensions of the university, from course content and teaching methods to human resources and infrastructure, and ultimately, determines the efficiency and effectiveness of the entire collection (Araasteh et al., 2021, p. 62). However, drafting precise educational policies, aligned with reality and responsive to changing needs, without strong backing from research and scientific analysis, is a difficult matter fraught with the risk of adopting inefficient decisions. This is where the vital role of "policy research" is revealed (Zajda, 2021, p. 85). Policy research, as a systematic process, engages in collecting valid data, deep analysis of issues, evaluating existing policies, and offering evidence-based proposals to policymakers. It is a bridge between the world of research and the arena of practice and decision-making. The issue is the potential gap between educational policy-making and policy research in university units of Mazandaran province and the necessity of designing a native model to link these two areas. Mazandaran province, possessing a significant number of public and private higher education centers, plays an important role in training specialized human resources at the regional and national level. But these university units face diverse and complex challenges; challenges whose roots may lie in the dysfunctions of educational policy-making. (Malek Mohammadi, 2022, p. 105). Among these challenges, one can point to the lack of sufficient financial resources, shortage of

advanced research and educational facilities, incomplete alignment of curricula with the dynamic needs of the local and national labor market, increasing competition for student recruitment, as well as maintaining and promoting educational quality. These conditions have led to the fact that despite the efforts made, the output of the provincial university system sometimes cannot fully respond to society's expectations and the region's developmental needs (Najibi and Khorasani, 2022, p. 79). One of the aggravating factors of these challenges may be the lack of a coherent and systematic model of "policy research" that can illuminate the process of "educational policy-making" as a guiding light (Al-Baher & Mohammad, 2022, p. 185).

In many cases, educational policies in universities may be adopted more based on personal experience, past procedures, environmental pressures, or ad-hoc decisions without strong research backing (Narinejad and Mohammadi, 2020, p. 15). This matter can lead to dispersion, inconsistency, and even contradiction in the policies of different departments of a university or between different universities in the province. On the other hand, valuable research may be conducted in the field of higher education, but the findings of these researches may not find their way to the tables of decision-makers, policymakers, and executives (Kikha & Tofiqi Darian, 2021, p. 66). This disconnect between produced "knowledge" and policy "action" is one of the main obstacles to promoting quality in higher education (Mosallanezhad, 2021, p. 220). Therefore, the fundamental question is how can one effectively place the policy research process at the service of educational policy-making in the universities of Mazandaran province by designing and deploying an operational model? A model that is not only aligned with the specific native, cultural, and economic conditions of this province but can also guarantee the active participation of all stakeholders, especially faculty members who are the main pillar of university education. The importance and necessity of conducting this research can be explained from several aspects. From a theoretical perspective, this study helps enrich the literature of the field of policy research and educational policy-making in the specific context of Iran and

especially Mazandaran province. Most existing models and frameworks in this field are rooted in the experiences and educational systems of other countries. Therefore, designing a model that considers the unique characteristics of Iran's higher education system, the impact of governance structures, the cultural diversity of regions, as well as the specific challenges of a province like Mazandaran, possesses innovation. This research seeks to provide a native framework by combining global theoretical foundations and local realities. From a practical and applied aspect, the results of this research can be a valuable roadmap for policymakers, managers, and educational planners at the level of universities in Mazandaran province. The proposed model can help them to engage in drafting, implementing, and evaluating educational policies based on valid data, scientific analyses, and considering the viewpoints of all stakeholders, instead of discretionary and scattered actions.

This matter, in turn, can lead to the promotion of educational quality, increased student and professor satisfaction, greater alignment with labor market needs, optimal use of resources, and ultimately, increasing the role-playing of the province's universities in the sustainable development of the region. Furthermore, with the policy-making process becoming more transparent and systematic, the ground is provided for greater accountability and professional participation of faculty members. University professors, who act both as executives of educational policies and as researchers in their specialized field. Through mechanisms defined in the policy research model, they can place their knowledge and experience directly at the service of improving policies. This participation not only leads to the promotion of the quality of decisions but also strengthens the sense of belonging and responsibility among faculty members. On the other hand, identifying and analyzing the causal relationship between policy research components (such as data collection methods, stakeholder analysis, impact assessment) and educational policy-making components (such as curriculum development, professional development of professors, resource management) can lead to a more precise understanding of how these processes affect each other.

Mohammadvand Yarijan Oliya (2024) conducted a research titled "Educational Policy-making and Planning in the Iranian Education System." This research emphasized the necessity of reality-based educational planning aligned with precise policy-making to realize educational development goals. Kashmiri et al. (2023) conducted a research titled "Presenting the Educational Policy-making Model for Skills Learning of First Cycle Secondary School Students: The final model included five dimensions: causal, intervening, contextual, strategies, and outcomes with 20 key components identified." Najibi and Khorasani (2022) conducted a research titled "Pathology of the Higher Education Policy-making System of the Islamic Republic of Iran." The results identified the most important pathologies including structural weaknesses, managerial instability, and neglect of the scientific cycle of policy-making. Fang et al. (2023) conducted a research titled "New Policy Research on the Development of Education and Global Citizenship in a Sustainable Environment." This research showed that policy research focused on ethics and global citizenship offers a model with superior performance for sustainable education. Malin and Tan (2022) conducted a research titled "State Innovation Exchange and Education Policy." The results of the study showed that the interaction of state innovation and education policy realizes four major strategic goals, including creating progressive power and advancing leading ideas. Ming and Goldenberg (2021) conducted a research titled "Framing the Quality of Research Evidence for Policy-making and Educational Performance." The results of this research emphasized the necessity of technological transformation and considering environmental uncertainties in educational policy research. Niklas (2024) conducted a research titled "Educational Psychology and Education Policy." The results of this study showed that: the field of educational psychology has ignored education policy for reasons such as considering policy irrelevant and fear of conflict with scientific objectivity. With a review of previous research, although scattered studies have been conducted in the field of educational policy-making or the importance of research in this arena, the gap of a comprehensive

study that specifically addresses presenting a "Policy Research Model" for "Educational Policy-making" at the level of "University Units of a Province" with all its native complexities is clearly felt. Many existing researches are either generalist or limited to a specific aspect. This research seeks to take a step further by covering this gap and presenting an operational and context-based model. The main goal of this study is to develop a policy research model to make educational policy-making efficient in the university units of Mazandaran province. In line with this major goal, the present research seeks to discover and explain this fundamental question: how are the causal relationships between policy research components and educational policy-making components in the university units of Mazandaran province, and how can these relationships be organized in the form of a coherent model to promote the quality of decision-making and execution in the higher education system of the province?

Methodology

This research, aiming to determine causal relationships between policy research components and educational policy-making components in university units in Mazandaran province. The statistical population consisted of all faculty members of universities in Mazandaran province. Using multi-stage cluster sampling, 242 individuals were selected as the sample. The data collection tool at this stage was researcher-made questionnaires, the items of which were directly derived from the qualitative findings and research literature review. The content validity of the questionnaires were confirmed by expert opinion and calculation of CVR and CVI indices. The reliability scores were also assessed by calculating Cronbach's alpha coefficient and composite reliability, the obtained values of which were at a desirable level. To examine construct validity (convergent and divergent) and analyze the relationships between variables in the final model, structural equation modeling technique with Smart-PLS software was used.

Results

To determine the validity of the questionnaire, face, content, and construct validity were used. For face validity, the questionnaires were reviewed by a number of sample members and some university experts and officials of Mazandaran province universities before distribution by the researcher. For content validity, in the form of a Delphi method and using CVR and CVI forms with the help of ten experts including interviewees, university experts, several subjects, and others, the content of the questionnaire was examined in terms of redundant questions or the correction of questions. The CVI form showed that all questions on policy research and educational policy-making were in a suitable condition in terms of simplicity, clarity, and relevance (the value of this coefficient for each question was higher than 0.79); also, given that the CVR value for all questions was obtained above 0.62, no question needed to be removed. Regarding construct validity, two types of convergent and divergent validity were used with the help of Smart-PLS 3 software. The result considering the reliability is given below.

Table 1
The reliability and validity of the components

Educational Policies	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)	Composite Reliability	Cronbach's Alpha
Educational Policies	0.562	0.950	0.962
Research Policies	0.502	0.728	0.952
University Policy Research	1.000	1.000	1.000
Educational Policy-making	1.000	1.000	1.000
Social and Cultural Policies	0.539	0.868	0.955
International Policies	0.529	0.929	0.945
Financial and Administrative Policies	0.525	0.508	0.949
Environmental Policies	0.504	0.916	0.919
Political and Social	0.661	0.957	0.949
Cultural and Linguistic	0.686	0.915	0.945
Financial and Budgetary	0.564	0.577	0.882
Educational Content	0.524	0.913	0.944
Monitoring and Evaluation	0.702	0.966	0.962
Educational Quality	0.598	0.613	0.898

Based on the data presented in the table, the reliability and validity of the research model were evaluated using Cronbach's Alpha, Composite Reliability, and Average Variance Extracted (AVE). The results demonstrate excellent internal consistency across all variables, as Cronbach's Alpha values range from 0.882 to 1.000, all well above the acceptable threshold of 0.70. Similarly, Composite Reliability is generally satisfactory, though "Financial and Administrative Policies" (0.508) and "Financial and Budgetary" (0.577) go approximately above the standard. Regarding convergent validity, assessed via the AVE threshold of 0.50. Additionally, the variables "University Policy Research" and "Educational Policy-making" display perfect values of 1.000 across all indices, likely indicating they were treated as single-item or higher-order constructs.

To see the causal relationship between the two variables, the smart PLS results are given below.

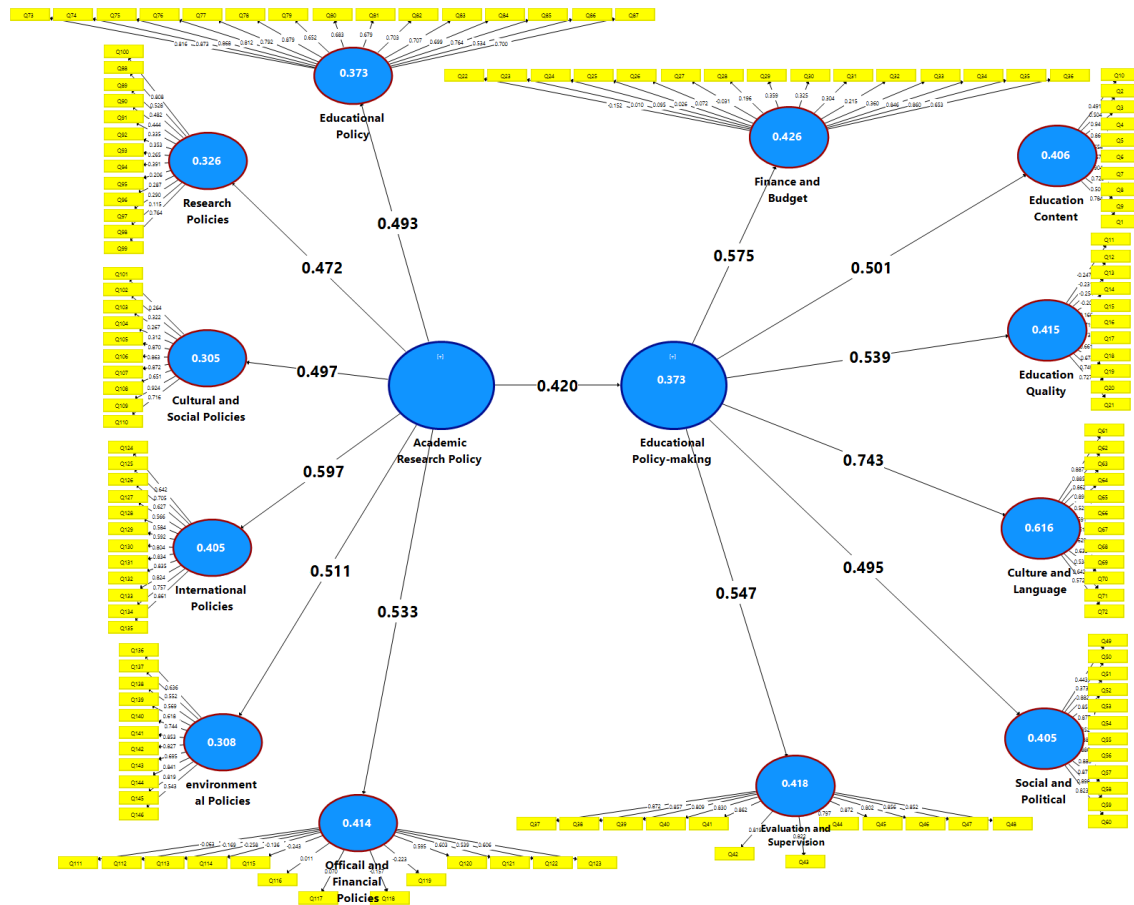


Figure 1. The causal relationship between the two variables

The presented structural model elucidates the causal relationship between the independent variable, "Academic Research Policy," and the dependent variable, "Educational Policy-making," within the context of higher education institutions. The analysis of path coefficients and R-squared (R^2) values provides critical insights into how specific dimensions of research policy influence the formulation and execution of educational policies. The data reveals a robust and significant predictive relationship, where the components of academic research policy collectively explain a substantial portion of the variance in educational policy-making.

The independent variable, Academic Research Policy, is operationalized through five distinct components: Cultural and Social Policies, Educational Policy, International Policies, Official and Financial Policies, Environmental Policies, and

Research Policies. The path coefficients originating from these components towards the overarching "Academic Research Policy" construct are all positive and statistically significant, ranging from 0.472 to 0.597. Among these, International Policies exhibit the strongest path coefficient (0.597), suggesting that global orientations and international research frameworks are the most influential driver in defining the scope and direction of academic research policy. This is closely followed by Official and Financial Policies (0.533) and Environmental Policies (0.511). The high weight of financial and administrative policies underscores the critical role of resource allocation and governance structures in enabling research activities. Similarly, the emphasis on environmental policies indicates a growing alignment of research agendas with sustainability and ecological concerns. Educational Policy (0.493) and Cultural and Social Policies (0.497) also show strong influence, while Research Policies (0.472), though slightly lower, remains a vital pillar. The R^2 value for Academic Research Policy is reported as 0.420, indicating that approximately 40% of the variance in this construct is explained by its underlying dimensions, confirming a well-structured model.

The dependent variable, Educational Policy-making, comprises five components: Finance and Budget, Culture and Language, Education Quality, Education Content, Evaluation and Supervision, and Social and Political. The path coefficients for these components are notably high, ranging from 0.495 to 0.743. The most striking finding is the overwhelming influence of Culture and Language, which has a path coefficient of 0.743. This suggests that cultural considerations and linguistic frameworks are paramount in shaping educational policies, likely reflecting the necessity of aligning educational outputs with local values and societal needs. Education Quality follows with a coefficient of 0.539, indicating that research-driven insights are heavily utilized to enhance standards and quality assurance. Evaluation and Supervision (0.547) also shows a strong link, implying that research methodologies are integral to developing robust monitoring systems. Finance and Budget (0.575) and Education Content (0.501) further demonstrate that research policy directly informs how financial resources are allocated for

education and how the curriculum is designed. The R^2 value for Educational Policy-making is approximately 0.405 (or 0.414), meaning that about 40% of the changes in educational policy-making can be predicted by its specific components

The core of this analysis lies in the relationship between the two main variables. The path coefficient from Academic Research Policy to Educational Policy-making is 0.497. In statistical terms, a coefficient of this magnitude (approaching 0.5) represents a strong positive effect. This signifies that Academic Research Policy acts as a powerful determinant of Educational Policy-making. Essentially, this validates the hypothesis that a systematic, evidence-based approach to research (policy research) is fundamental for effective educational governance.

Furthermore, the R^2 value for the prediction of Educational Policy-making by Academic Research Policy is 0.305. This indicates that roughly 30.5% of the variance in Educational Policy-making is directly explained by the Academic Research Policy variable. While this is a moderate effect size, it is substantial in the social sciences, confirming that while research policy is a major driver, other external factors may also influence educational policy-making.

The interaction between the specific components offers deeper insights. For instance, the strong influence of "International Policies" on the research side likely feeds into the "Culture and Language" and "Social and Political" aspects of educational policy-making, suggesting that global research trends are adapted to fit local cultural contexts. Similarly, the strong path of "Official and Financial Policies" in research likely supports the "Finance and Budget" and "Education Quality" dimensions in education, ensuring that financial planning is evidence-based. In conclusion, the model demonstrates a healthy and dynamic synergy between research and education. The strong path coefficients (0.497) confirm that universities cannot rely on ad-hoc decision-making; rather, they must ground their educational strategies in robust research policies. The fact that "Culture and Language" is the most significant outcome of this process highlights that despite technical and financial inputs, the ultimate goal of the policy nexus is to preserve and enhance the cultural and educational identity of the institution. This data

strongly supports the necessity of integrating policy research into the heart of educational administration to achieve quality, relevance, and efficiency.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of the third question showed that the causal relationships between university policy research and educational policy-making are positive and significant. The current results are consistent with the findings of Najibi and Khorasani (2022), Ming and Goldenberg (2021), and Fang et al. (2023) from the perspective of paying attention to policy research in line with educational policy-making based on modern technologies. In interpreting this discussion, it should be stated that the formulation and implementation of research policies in universities has a direct impact on educational policy-making, and this relationship can be very useful for improving the quality and efficiency of the educational system. This finding can be an important point for university managers and decision-makers. They can, paying attention to this finding, formulate university research policies more carefully so that they can implement the most effective educational policies. Furthermore, this finding can be useful for increasing interaction and cooperation between faculty members and university managers in the context of formulating and implementing policies. In general, this finding shows that paying attention to university policy research and coordinating it with educational policy-making can facilitate and accelerate the improvement of the quality and efficiency of the educational system and ultimately lead to the best approaches to teaching and learning for students and faculty members.

University policy research and educational policy-making are two fundamental areas in the field of higher education that have a profound impact on the performance and quality of universities. These two concepts have a close relationship with each other, and the interactions between them have an important effect on the quality of education and research. The dimensions of university policy research include items such as educational, research, social and cultural,

financial and administrative, international, and environmental policies. In each of these dimensions, university decisions have a profound impact on university communities and outside the university. Educational policies are one of the most important dimensions of university policy research, which deals with teaching, learning, and evaluation in universities. Research policies also have a great impact on knowledge production and scientific progress, and social, cultural, and environmental policies indicate the university's commitment to social and environmental values. But financial and administrative policies indicate the amount of financial resources and how the university is managed, and international policies indicate the interactions between the university and the global community.

On the other hand, educational policy-making deals with the design, implementation, and evaluation of educational policies and programs in universities. This includes matters such as educational content, educational quality, finance and budget, supervision and evaluation, and political and social dimensions. Educational content and educational quality, as the main dimensions of educational policy-making, have a great impact on the students' learning experience. Finance and budget also play a determining role in the implementation of educational programs, and supervision and evaluation are proposed as main tools for assessing and improving educational performance. The relationship between these two variables is also very important and complex. Data analysis shows that there is a positive and significant relationship between university policy research and educational policy-making. Analytical models have a good ability to predict behavior and the relationship between these two variables. This result shows that to improve the quality and performance of universities, it is necessary to pay special attention to policy research and educational policy-making as a centralized and integrated unit. Consequently, future research in this field should focus on examining factors effective in the progress and development of educational policies, investigating new and emerging dimensions in educational policies, the impact of global changes on educational policies, analyzing differences and local dimensions in educational policy-making, and developing

predictive models for future changes. These researches can help develop knowledge in the field of educational policy-making and improve the performance of universities and increase the adaptation of education and research to the needs of society.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declare no financial, scientific, or personal conflicts of interest in relation to this research.

Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with established ethical principles for scientific research. Participation was voluntary and informed, all data were kept confidential, and results are reported anonymously solely for the purpose of fulfilling the research objectives.

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