Original Article

# Challenges and obstacles of academic culture in institutionalizing quality culture in higher education: A grounded theory study

Mehdi Ghassabi Chorsi[1*], Mohammd Hassani[1], Hasan Ghalavandi[1], Abolfazl Ghasemzadeh Alishahi[2]

[1] Faculty of Literature and Humanities, Urmia University, Urmia, Iran
[2] Dep. of Educational Sciences, Azarbaijan Shahid Madani University, Tabriz

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***Corresponding author:**
Mehdi Ghassabi Chorsi, Faculty of Literature and Humanities, Urmia University, Urmia, Iran.
**Email**:
mehdi.gassabichorsi@gmail.com

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## Abstract

**Background & Objective:** To recognize the challenges and obstacles of academic culture in institutionalizing the quality culture in higher education, the Grounded Theory research method helped us to provide a conceptual model in higher education. This model would provide a correct understanding of the challenges and obstacles of academic culture for the beneficiaries.

**Materials & Methods:** The present qualitative study was conducted using Strauss and Corbin's Grounded Theory approach and carried out on 20 clinical and basic science faculty members of Iran's medical sciences universities, in 2022. The process of selecting participants was based on the objective method.

**Results:** The results showed that academic culture was recognized as a central category; infrastructures, educational and research challenges, academic independence, and scientific freedom as causal conditions; individual, cultural, and social factors, communication, and global knowledge as intervening conditions; management challenges, monitoring, evaluation, strategy, and leadership as the context of the formation of the most important challenges and obstacles of academic culture in institutionalizing the quality culture in higher education. The strategies to solve the challenges were divided into three levels, namely micro, mid, and macro, each of which with different subclasses.

**Conclusion:** The results of the present study showed a deeper understanding of the direct and indirect challenges and obstacles of academic culture in institutionalizing the quality culture in higher education, which should be taken into consideration by the beneficiaries.

**Keywords:** Academic culture, Challenges, Higher education, Quality culture

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## Introduction

In human societies, the term "higher education" is associated with the accumulation of science, research, and culture. The presence and activity of a university educational institution in a society promise a deep transformation in the development of science and basic research, as well as dramatic changes in various economic, social, political, and cultural fields in any developed and developing society (1). Higher education is the driving force of the knowledge-based economy in the countries. Universities are the sources of science and wealth production in any country (2), and with a history of more than eight centuries, they are a key institution of particular interest to nations and governments (3), which continue to operate. In the meantime, what should not be neglected is the quality of higher education because the health of any society depends on the quality of the educational system of that society (4, 5). Most countries in the world pay special

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attention to aligning higher education programs with developmental needs and improving the quality of higher education systems. This has resulted in an increasing need for paying attention to the quality of universities and other higher education centers in most countries of the world (6).

Quality is a subjective concept because different interest groups or beneficiaries in higher education have different priorities and pay attention to different matters (7). At the base of the quality, pyramid is the quality culture. The foundation of quality is quality culture, which plays a significant role in the durability and consistency of quality. It is with the change and transformation of beliefs, values, approaches, perceptions, concepts, and understanding that we take a step toward the development of quality culture (8). Currently, what has affected the quality of Iran's higher education is the weakness in the components of the academic culture of universities (9), one of the important areas of knowledge creation.

The academic culture of universities mainly includes academic outlooks, academic spirits, academic ethics, and academic environments (9), and its components are categorized into ten subjects, namely academic independence, academic freedom, professional ethics, management, communication, participation, and teamwork, learning culture, trust between members, reward system, and evaluation system (10). The evidence shows that the role of the academic culture of universities has not been paid much attention to as an independent subculture with its special characteristics in the process of scientific development and performance of the higher education system of Iran (11).

The research carried out for culture and higher education in Iran has produced thought-provoking results. The findings of studies by Taiefi (2000), Esmaili and Khalili (2002), Fazeli (2003), Ebrahimi et al. (2015), Kazemi (2017), and Ghasemi (2018) show the characteristics and values that cannot help universities to achieve their goals (10, 12-16). This is while "the university is supposed to attract the most creative and competent young forces and, by educating them, move the wheel of society in the direction of growth and development, along with other institutions and organizations" (17). The role of "academic culture" as an independent subculture with its own characteristics in the process of scientific development and performance of the higher education system in Iran has not only been neglected in higher education studies and scientific research but this concept has not been well recognized in programs and strategies of the country's higher education (18).

It seems that the weakness in the functions of the university is caused by the weakness in the academic culture; the weakness of that culture that has been unable to systematically socialize and culturize its members and has not been able to create a common understanding between academic people about the university field and its habits. In the last decade, academic culture has been one of the influencing factors in the success of academic organizations, attracting the attention of the intellectuals of organizational and management sociology. In the age of knowledge, the administrative staff of academic affairs is expected to play an active role by investing in the field of academic culture while identifying the challenges and obstacles of academic culture and creating methods of science production to promote the problems of society and industry. The mentioned cases raise the question that "What are the challenges and obstacles of academic culture in institutionalizing the culture of quality in the higher education system?", which would be discussed in this research.

## Methodology

### *Type of Study*

The current research was qualitative in nature. In this study, the Grounded Theory approach (Strauss and Corbin, 2008) was employed to build a theory about the challenges and obstacles of academic culture in institutionalizing the quality culture in the higher education system (universities of medical sciences) (19).

### *Participants*

The eligible subjects were the professors who had experience in managing educational groups of medical sciences universities and could share their experiences. The samples were selected using the purposive sampling method. Theoretical sampling was used to reach the theoretical saturation of new concepts. After collecting data from 20 participants, we reached theoretical saturation. Data saturation was achieved when no additional subjects were found from consecutive data reviews. The characteristics of the participants are shown in (Table 1).

### *Data collection tools*

The required data were collected through semi-structured interviews from June 2021 to March 2022.

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Twenty video calls were conducted by the researcher, each lasting 60-120 min with an average of 90 min. The researchers sought to obtain maximum diversity in the samples, including participants from both genders, different age groups, and different educational groups (medical and basic sciences).

**Table 1.** Categories related to causal conditions

| The main components | Main dimensions | |
|---|---|---|
| Educational facilities | Substructure challenges | Causal factors |
| Non-educational facilities | | |
| human resources | | |
| Education culture | Educational challenges | |
| Learning culture | | |
| Education Management | | |
| Student culture | | |
| Quantitative | | |
| Socialization of education | | |
| Ethics in research | Research challenges | |
| Skill weaknesses | | |
| Lack of facilities | | |
| Structural problems | | |
| Sociability of research | | |
| Organizational independence | Academic independence | |
| financial independence | | |
| Scientific independence | | |
| Headquarters independence | | |
| Scientific freedom | Scientific freedom | |

***Methods and data collection***

The required data were collected through online semi-structured interviews. Before the interview, an interview protocol was sent to the participants for making arrangements and obtaining informed consent. During the interview, a brief introduction was given to introduce the main executive of the program and explain the objectives of the study. The interviews were conducted with a focus on perception and desired indicators for academic culture, quality culture, and challenges and obstacles of academic culture in institutionalizing quality culture in the higher education system. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed.

***Data analysis***

Strauss and Corbin's approach was used to analyze the data. A variety of techniques (including questioning, constant comparison, and paradigm models) were employed to extract data for concepts, context, and process. The theory was developed during this process by writing notes, which were investigated to discover mutual relationships between concepts and categories. Data collection and analysis were performed by the first author under the supervision of the other colleagues. The data collection process was monitored by the research team in periodic meetings. Data analysis and interpretation (coding, categorization, and data retrieval) were performed by the research team using MAXQDA software (version 20).

***Reliability or trustworthiness***

Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria, namely credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability were used to ensure the reliability of the study (20). To increase credibility, we used member checking, in which the codes and categories extracted from the data were reviewed and approved by the participants. To improve the reliability of the results, the maximum diversity in sampling was considered for the participants' gender and field of study (basic sciences and medicine). An external audit was used to increase dependability and confirmability, during which the accuracy of the analysis was confirmed by two researchers experienced in qualitative research. In addition, for transferability, participants and study context was described in detail.

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## Results

**First question:** What are the challenges and obstacles of academic culture in institutionalizing quality culture in higher education? To answer this question, the qualitative data collected through interviews were analyzed based on the process of the Grounded Theory.

**A. Data analysis (coding)**

In the current research, the recorded interviews were transcribed and then using the content analysis method were line-by-line analyzed, conceptualized, and categorized. Afterward, the concepts and categories (a class of concepts) were identified based on similarity, conceptual connection, and common characteristics between open codes. Sub-categories and categories related to causal conditions, contextual conditions, intervening conditions, central phenomena, strategies, and consequences are presented in tables 1-6.

**Table 2.** Categories related to the central phenomenon

| The main components | Main dimensions | A central phenomenon |
|---|---|---|
| Demographic factors | Individual factors | Challenges and obstacles of university culture |
| Intrapersonal factors | | |
| Organization Structure | Organizational factors | |
| Organization management | | |
| Organizational Culture | | |
| Political factors | Environmental factors | |
| Ideology | | |
| Financial issues | | |
| Social culture | | |

**Table 3.** Categories related to Context conditions

| The main components | Main dimensions | |
|---|---|---|
| Reward system | Management challenges | Context |
| Punishment system | | |
| Promotion system | | |
| Satisfaction | | |
| Monitoring and Evaluation | Monitoring and evaluation challenges | |
| Strategy and leadership | Challenges of strategy and leadership | |

**Table 4.** Categories related to mediation conditions

| The main components | Main dimensions | |
|---|---|---|
| Individual situations of professors | Individual factors | Intermediaries |
| Individual situations of students | | |
| Ethics | | |
| Teamwork | Cultural factor | |
| Participation | | |
| Request | Social factors | |
| Social culture | | |
| Interaction | Connections | |
| Exchange | | |
| The field of technical knowledge | Global knowledge | |
| The field of general knowledge | | |
| The field of political knowledge | | |
| The field of cultural knowledge | | |
| The field of education | | |
| Changes of the day | | |

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**Table 5.** Categories related to strategies

| The main components | Main dimensions | |
|---|---|---|
| Improvement of physical infrastructure | Micro level strategies | Strategies |
| Promotion of educational culture | | |
| Promotion of learning culture | | |
| Promotion of student culture | | |
| Improve communication | Middle level strategies | |
| Promotion of a healthy organizational atmosphere | | |
| Promotion of management culture | | |
| Promotion of ethics in research | | |
| Reform of strategy and leadership | Macro level strategies | |
| Improving academic independence | | |
| Amendment of the rules | | |

**Table 6.** Codes, categories related to consequences

| The main components | Main dimensions | |
|---|---|---|
| Education growth | Improve situation | Consequences |
| Research development | | |
| Human resource development | | |
| Scientific planning and management | | |
| Development of student culture | | |
| Development of professional ethics | | |
| Purposeful communication | | |
| Sociability | | |
| The optimal strategy | | |
| Development of resources and facilities | | |
| Academic independence | | |

**B. Selective coding (theorizing stage)**

In this stage of coding, the theorist of the Grounded Theory writes a theory of the relationships between the categories in the axial coding model. The paradigm model of the research is depicted in Figure 1.

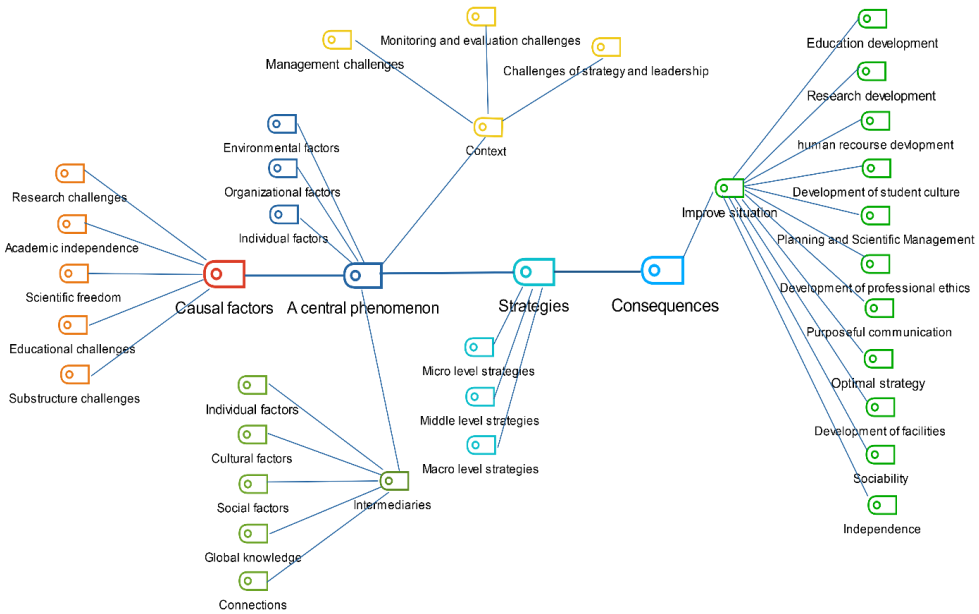


**Figure 1.** The paradigm model of the research



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**Second question:** What is the appropriate conceptual model for the challenges of academic culture in institutionalizing quality culture in higher education?

To answer this question, after studying the existing theoretical foundations and interviewing faculty members, the main and subcategories related to the challenges of academic culture in institutionalizing the quality culture in higher education and the final conceptual model were compiled as follows (Figure 2).

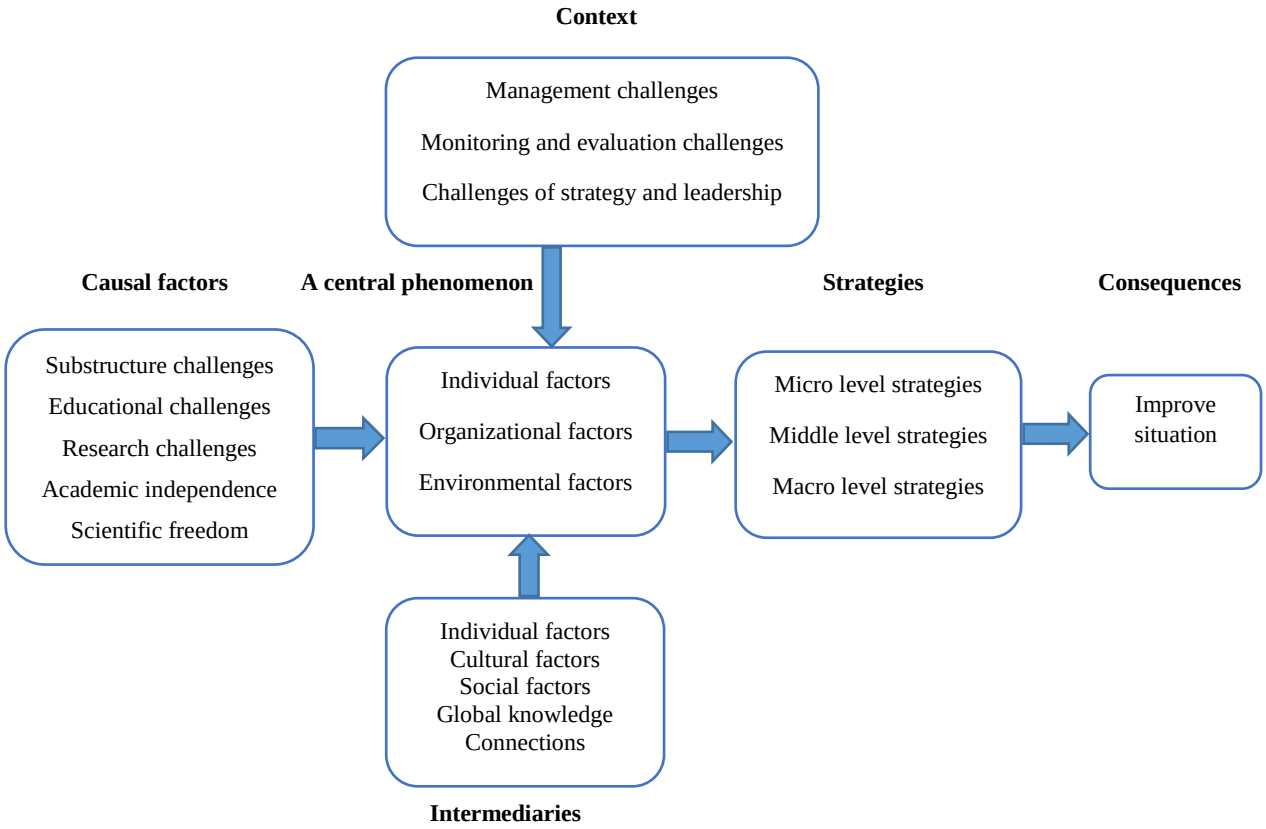


**Figure 2.** Final model of the main dimensions and components of the challenges and obstacles of academic culture in institutionalizing quality in the higher education system using the conceptual model of Strauss and Corbin

## Discussion

In addition to being responsible for the three main missions of education, research, and providing professional services (21), the higher education system tries to prepare the context for the implementation of developing programs through training specialist forces. Meanwhile, everyone expects the higher education system, as the highest level of education in society, to influence the economic and social developments of society more than any other institution and to play an important role in improving its various sectors (22). Therefore, their quality and improvement are a must, being neglected with the quantitative expansion of universities.

Causal conditions: These categories, which are the result of causal conditions or antecedent conditions, refer to incidents, events, and occurrences that lead to the occurrence or growth and expansion of phenomena (23). Based on the findings obtained from the participants, the state of infrastructures, educational challenges, research challenges, academic independence, and scientific freedom, along with their sub-components, were stated based on the causal conditions of the existing situation. These results are in line with those of studies conducted by Dari and Talebnejad (2008), Ebrahimi et al. (2015), and Ghasemi (2019) (10, 24, 25).

The educational environment at the university level should have the appropriate facilities for the courses it

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offers. Although theoretical training can be provided with minimum standards and not so many facilities, when it comes to technical, clinical, and skill training, appropriate facilities are also expected. Meanwhile, human resources are the main basis of providing administrative and educational services; however, some issues, such as the generational gap between professors and students, the sense of responsibility, the ratio of the number of professors to students, loyalty, and commitment, have raised challenges. The challenge of non-educational facilities, such as physical space, welfare and sports facilities, self-service dining room, and service is also significant, especially because the increase in the number of students has made these challenges more apparent.

Among the other causal conditions presented as the challenges of academic culture were the learning culture, educational management, student culture, quantity orientation, and socialization of education. Findings were indirectly consistent with the results of studies by Kazempour et al. (2021), Pashaei (2019), Ghonchi et al. (2012), Turkzadeh and Mohtaram (2012), Matlabifard et al. (2011), Shabani Vorki and Gholizadeh (2006), Hamiati et al. (2015), and Hebakova (2015) (26-33). Education happens in the process of the educational system; if this system suffers from appropriate input and challenges in the education process, the quality of output will certainly not be appropriate since the methods of selecting students and providing a context for professional growth, as well as student satisfaction, have an effect on the education quality (34, 35).

Research challenges are among other causal conditions, among which one can mention how much serious effort there is to produce science. Moreover, due to the weakness in implementing research projects, the lack of knowledge in theoretical strategies, as well as the deficiencies in financial resources and laboratory and workshop equipment, administrative obstacles, the insularity of research, not recognizing a negative answer as an answer, utilizing ready cultural and scientific material, and plagiarism, researches have become routine and the production of science has lost its applicability and audience.

Among the other presented causal conditions is academic independence, meaning that how much higher education in the organizational sector is affected by the political thoughts and wills of governance and the presence and intervention of foreign beneficiaries, as well as that it is not free in allocating budgets to be spent in different sectors, the education and research environments are affected by the political attitudes of university managers and officials, and the assignment of students to universities is carried out by the government. According to the findings of a study by Jalali and Ghanbari (2020), the desirable criteria of academic independence include structural independence, content independence, financial independence, comprehensiveness of accountability, and independence in decision-making (36).

It has been found that various factors destroy the fields of competition over quality, including the status of academic staff members, the use of scientific and practical criteria for selecting professors, and providing a context for their professional growth and development (34, 35), as well as the failure of universities and higher education centers in providing sufficient financial resources and investment compared to other scientific fields (37), and the excessive dependence of the university on per capita and limited government budgets and its provision through political bargaining (38).

Scientific freedom is among the other presented causal conditions, meaning that whether there is conservatism, concealment, and lack of clear expression of findings, which can lead to labels, numerous mental restrictions, and numerous restrictions on performance and speech, along with controlling and forced silence. In their research, Aalipor et al. (2020) reported the dimensions of scientific freedom as educational freedom, research freedom, freedom of thought, freedom of speech, and freedom of learning, which were consistent with the findings of the present study (39).

Central phenomenon: this idea refers to the incident or the main event for which a series of related actions/interactions are directed to control and manage it (23). According to the participants, although the phenomena of academic culture and quality culture are caused by causal factors and influenced by contextual and intervening factors, the role of individual factors, organizational factors, and environmental factors should not be ignored.

A person has different physical and non-physical dimensions that shape his personal and professional life. Undoubtedly, a person cannot be considered independent of his/her age, gender, race, nationality,

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education, religious and political beliefs, work experiences, attitude, motivation, understanding, values, beliefs, convictions, risk-taking behavior, and flexibility. In today's world, online presence should also be added to the mentioned list; the fact that a person is faced with a lot of information every day, which definitely affects his/her personal and professional life. According to Bazargan (2011), the quality culture in a university can be seen as a set of beliefs, relationships, tendencies, values, and common affairs that the faculty members, administrators, and other university employees do to improve and ensure the quality of the university's activities (40).

Every organization has such elements as structure, management, and culture. In an educational environment such as a university, the degree of freedom of action of educational groups, the rigidity or flexibility of administrative bureaucracy and rules, the organizational atmosphere, the organizational culture, the degree of concentration of the structure and delegation of authority, and the coordination of formal and informal factors play fundamental roles in academic culture and culture quality. There are challenges in implementing the strategy of spreading the quality culture, including the creation or strengthening of a suitable organizational structure for planning and implementing continuous quality assessment in the university (40).

The concept of quality is manifested in the competitive market. In the structure of modern and industrial economies, they have an economic view of knowledge, so in return, they ask for such demands as quality specialized and research services, as well as quality graduates. However, in an economy based on oil or salary system and in the condition of government budgeting with unfair distribution of resources, quality loses its meaning and its harmful effects are imposed on society. In societies like Iran, where the government plays an important role in the formation of environmental conditions due to historical and structural reasons, the structural-functional characteristics of the government, which often have the role of interventionists and friendship and affinity, can have a negative or positive effect on the academic culture and the quality culture.

Contextual conditions: These categories, which are known as contextual categories, indicate a series of special conditions that affect the strategy (23). The causal factors of academic culture are formed in a specific context, requiring a reward system, a punishment system, a proportional and unambiguous promotion system in terms of benefits, as well as the satisfaction of the beneficiaries, proper monitoring and evaluation of the activities of professors and students, and strategies and principled leadership without plans are based on slogans. The quality of the university depends on the quality of the educational groups because the quality of the performance of the university is dependent on the performance of the educational groups. However, the performance of the educational group requires professional competence and the enthusiasm of the faculty members for continuous learning.

On the other hand, at the university level, only if the human resources management system has the necessary quality it would be possible to strengthen the enthusiasm of faculty members and other employees for continuous learning. Through this system, it is possible to strengthen the process of people's understanding of the common goal and provide the necessary motivation for more efforts to achieve the desired performance of educational groups. In addition, it is possible to appreciate the collective effort to improve the quality of educational groups.

It is worth mentioning that if the system of the promotion of the faculty and other university employees does not show the distinction between hardworking and non-hardworking individuals, the quality culture will be damaged. Regarding individual skills for learning, people should be encouraged to set goals for the desired efforts, and also help them to understand the current situation correctly and then guide them in the path of trying to move from the current situation to the realization of the educational group's goals, in the form of the mission and ideal of the university. These findings are consistent with those of studies by Ardakani et al. (2019), Seyed Kilan et al. (2018), and Bazargan (2011) (40-42). According to Durisova et al. (2015), evaluation is an effective means of preparing students for their future careers and forming their personalities, and there is a strong connection between evaluating teaching in higher education and the quality of higher education (43).

Intervening conditions: these are general and broad conditions that affect the way of interaction and proposed strategies (23). Based on the analyses,

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intervening conditions in this research included individual factors, cultural factors, social factors, communication, and global knowledge. If these categories are accompanied by challenges in the university, the proposed strategies will be problematic.

Individual factors, including the individual states of professors and students, as well as professional ethics, were expressed by the participants in such terms as their familiarity with the university, students, and science, sufficient and stable motivation, busyness, the learnability of students, frustration due to the status of graduates, and common beliefs and value, along with mastery in teaching content and adherence to scientific norms in the dimension of professional ethics. These findings are in line with the results of studies by Khadivi et al. (2018), Ghonchi et al. (2012), Turkzadeh and Mohtaram (2012), Matlabifard et al. (2011), Shabani Varki and Golizadeh (2006), Hamiati et al. (2015), and Hebakova (2015) (26-31, 44). There is no consistent perception, clear interpretation, and coordination of the concepts of professional ethics, academic culture, and examples of each of them (10).

The other challenges that affect the quality culture in the university include communication in the form of low interaction between students and professors, weak interaction between professors and the university, isolation of professors inside the country, lack of communication and a common understanding between managers and decision-makers, interdisciplinary interactions, and lack of coherent and organized communication between universities and research centers, the university's relationship with society and the government, and scientific communication at the national and international level.

University quality, on the other hand, depends on its extroversion and closer interaction with the world of the profession and the changing and diverse demands of society. A demand-oriented and customer-oriented university deals with institutional and continuous interaction with graduates as well as their employers, and this interactive context provides a basis for quality evaluation. Moreover, it is with the development of interactive functions that universities and groups voluntarily expose themselves to external evaluation by specialized peers or become members of the international quality assurance organization and invite the auditors of foreign professional and specialized institutions to conduct knowledge-enhancing workshops. In fact, globalization is a keyword that affects academic culture (45). The four factors of globalization, internationalization, managerial innovation, and entrepreneurship in higher education have a positive and significant effect on the quality of education in the university (46).

Strategies: The desired strategies in the Grounded Theory refer to providing solutions to confront the studied phenomenon; in other words, the purpose of strategies is to manage, deal with, accomplish, and show sensitivity to the phenomenon (23). The participants of the present study considered various strategies essential, such as improvement of physical infrastructure, improvement of educational, learning, and student culture, improvement of communication, healthy organizational atmosphere, management culture, ethics in research, strategy and leadership, improvement of academic independence, and amendment of laws.

Strengthening the positive aspects and correcting the shortcomings and weaknesses of educational facilities can be effective steps in improving the quality of education, especially clinical. Therefore, improving facilities and equipment (Library facilities and up-to-date books in the university, having suitable laboratories and workshops with their equipment, having a green space and a fresh academic environment, and standardization of the physical space of the classroom is one of the most important tasks of university officials for the advancement of theoretical and clinical education, as well as the scientific and practical improvement of students (34, 35, 44, 47). It is especially important to integrate technology into the teaching and learning process (29, 31). The correct use of the capacity of academic culture in virtual education requires a transformation in the context and virtual space artifacts for its audience (33).

Consequences: Consequence categories are the result and outcome of strategies in dealing with the phenomenon or mutation of managing and controlling the phenomenon (23). According to the participants of the present study, the institutionalization of quality culture in higher education had the consequences of the growth of education, research, human resources, student culture, scientific planning and management, professional ethics, purposeful communication, sociability, optimal strategy, resources and facilities, and university independence in different dimensions. In

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the field of education, one can mention committed and sensitive education to relevant and useful issues, interaction and collaboration, dynamic curriculum, defined educational indicators, quality of education, fundamental changes in the methods of providing educational services, sustainable and student-centered functional and skill learning, and attention to the student's interests and expectations.

Today, the reason for a decline in the moral authority and hegemony of the academy should be sought in the weakness of the foundations of academic culture (45). If the quality culture is spread and institutionalized, the continuous improvement of quality in general and the value creation of the university in society will be achieved (42). This finding is in line with the findings of the European University Association (2006, 2010, 2012) and those of studies conducted by Kottmann et al. (2017) (48-52).

## Conclusion

In conclusion, nothing happens in a vacuum, rather special conditions are necessary for it. Academic culture and quality culture in higher education are no exceptions to this rule. The prevailing academic culture in Iran has not been able to fulfill its duties, including the institutionalization of the quality culture, which requires academic culture from the beginning to the realization. According to most theorists, academic culture emerges from the social, political, economic, and cultural structures and relations of that society; as a result, each society forms its own academic culture.

### Ethical considerations

Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and they were informed of the right of voluntary withdrawal from the study at any research stage. All data were anonymized by assigning codes to the participants. The interviews were transcribed verbatim. This study was approved by the Ethics Committee of Urmia University, Urmia, Iran (IR.URMIA.REC.1401.017).

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### Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest in any of the stages of the research.

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