



Factors Affecting Educational Justice in Iranian Universities of Medical Sciences: A Review Study

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Article Type: Review Article	Educational justice is a fundamental principle in academic systems; however, numerous challenges hinder its realization in Iranian Universities of Medical Sciences. This narrative review was conducted in 2024 to identify the key factors influencing educational justice in these institutions. A comprehensive literature search was conducted in the international (SCOPUS and PubMed) and national (SID and Magiran) databases. The inclusion criteria encompassed Persian and English-language articles that addressed educational justice in Iranian Universities of Medical Sciences, with relevant keywords appearing in the title or abstract. The exclusion criteria were the lack of access to full-text articles and editorials. Based on the findings of seven eligible studies, the factors affecting educational justice were categorized into two main groups: facilitators (e.g., the absence of discrimination between faculty and students) and barriers (e.g., exposure to unfavorable clinical realities). In conclusion, to promote educational justice in Iranian Universities of Medical Sciences, policymakers and academic leaders must incorporate these influencing factors into strategic planning and educational reforms. Keywords: Educational justice; Medical science universities; Narrative review
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Introduction

Justice is linguistically defined as fair and impartial treatment. More specifically, it refers to the observance of equality and the elimination of discrimination among individuals who possess equal talent and rights [1]. The implementation of justice is considered a fundamental and innate human need, and throughout history, its

presence has provided a foundation for the development of human societies [2]. In other words, justice represents the highest human value and the ultimate aspiration of all individuals [3].

The pursuit of justice is also among the core slogans and objectives of political and social systems worldwide, as it serves as a key indicator of societal progress and development [4,5]. While justice is

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relevant to all domains of social values, its relationship with education goes beyond a unidimensional interaction. The educational system is uniquely positioned to serve as both a mechanism for achieving justice and a means of cultivating justice-oriented citizens [6]. Therefore, justice in education is of exceptional importance [7], and one of the most effective pathways to social justice is the provision of equal educational opportunities [8].

Educational justice is one of the foundational dimensions of organizational justice, providing a framework for the development and expression of individual talents and capabilities at the highest level [9]. This refers to creating equal conditions for all learners and removing barriers that hinder equitable access [2]. In practice, educational justice emphasizes fair interactions, unbiased behavior, impartial treatment, guidance tailored to students' abilities, and fairness in evaluation and grading [9]. Justice-oriented education can lead to positive changes in individual behavior and contribute to broader efforts to promote social justice [3]. When educational justice is upheld in higher education systems, it fosters intellectual growth and creativity, enabling all individuals to develop their potential equally [7]. Accordingly, establishing educational justice is recognized as a key objective of academic systems worldwide [4].

Among the wide range of universities and academic disciplines worldwide, medical science universities occupy a strategic position because of their direct impact on public health and societal well-being [4]. Therefore, promoting educational justice within these institutions is critical. Evidence suggests that educational justice is essential for enhancing the quality of education, fostering professional development, and ensuring medical student competence [10]. Moreover, adherence to educational justice positively influences students' morale and academic performance [3]. It plays a significant role in boosting the motivation and enthusiasm for learning [7]. Educational justice has been identified as a key variable affecting academic burnout and student achievement [9]. In addition, a meaningful and positive relationship has been observed between educational justice and students' civic and academic behavior [11].

Despite its importance, the concept of educational justice in medical education has received limited attention. Given the Islamic Republic of Iran's efforts to establish a comprehensive management system grounded in religious and cultural values, the country must take a leading role in this domain and serve as an international model for educational equity [4].

Despite the numerous advantages of promoting justice in education—particularly in medical education, where graduates are directly responsible for human lives—only a limited number of studies have

addressed the challenges that hinder educational justice in Iranian Universities of Medical Sciences. One such study was conducted by Sanagoo et al. at the Golestan University of Medical Sciences. The findings revealed that the primary concerns of medical students regarding educational justice included the absence of favoritism among students based on gender, ethnicity, academic discipline, appearance, and social behavior. Additional concerns involve the fairness of evaluation methods and the quality of teaching practices [10].

Another study by Mousavi et al. at the Guilan University of Medical Sciences explored the factors influencing educational justice in clinical education. These factors were categorized into two groups: facilitators and barriers. Facilitating factors included equal access to facilities and equipment, the use of competent instructors, goal-oriented educational planning, integration of theory and practice, and alignment between education and clinical care. In contrast, barriers included exposure to unfavorable clinical realities, a shortage of experienced clinical instructors, interpersonal communication issues, and inconsistencies in the evaluation processes [12].

Given these findings, achieving educational justice requires academic administrators to reform the structures and practices that perpetuate inequality. Therefore, identifying the factors that influence educational justice is of critical importance [9]. Accordingly, the present study was conducted as a narrative review to determine the key factors affecting educational justice in Iranian Universities of Medical Sciences.

Materials and Methods

Study Design

This study was conducted as a narrative review in 2024. This study aimed to identify the factors influencing educational justice in Iranian Universities of Medical Sciences.

Search Strategy

A comprehensive literature search was performed using both international and national databases. International databases included SCOPUS and PubMed, while national databases included SID and Magiran. The search strategy incorporated English keywords such as “educational equity,” “educational justice,” “equity in medical education,” “justice in medical education,” and “medical sciences universities,” along with their Persian equivalents.

The inclusion criteria were Persian- or English-language articles that examined factors affecting educational justice in Iranian Universities of Medical

Sciences, with relevant keywords in the title or abstract. The exclusion criteria were lack of access to the full text and articles published as letters to the editor.

Selection Process

Two researchers independently reviewed the titles and abstracts of the retrieved articles. In cases of disagreement, a third expert was consulted to achieve consensus. The initial search yielded 22 relevant articles. After screening the titles and abstracts based on the study objective, 13 articles were excluded. Of the remaining nine articles, two were excluded because of the lack of access to the full text. Ultimately, seven articles met the eligibility criteria and were included in this review. The article selection process is shown in Figure 1. Owing to the heterogeneity of the studies included in this review, a quantitative synthesis was not performed. Instead, data analysis was conducted through a comprehensive narrative review, qualitative aggregation, and interpretation of findings.

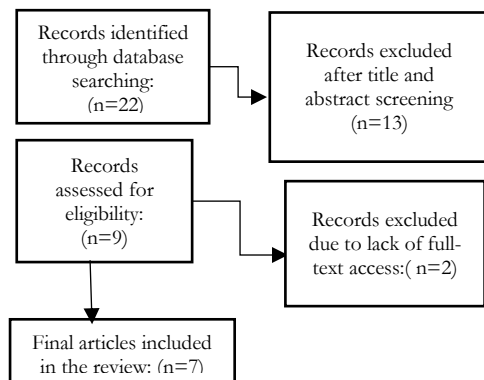


Figure 1. Article Selection Flowchart

Results

Seven articles met the inclusion criteria and were selected for analysis. All studies were conducted in Iran and directly addressed the research objectives.

Table 1. Characteristics of the Included Studies

N	Methodology	Title	Year	Authors
1	Qualitative – Content Analysis	Explaining Educational Justice Among Medical Students: A Study of Students' Views and Experiences (10)	2010	Sanagoo et al.
2	Qualitative – Content Analysis	Factors Affecting Educational Justice in Clinical Settings: Perspectives of Students and Educators at Guilan University (12)	2013–2014	Mousavi et al.
3	Qualitative – Grounded Theory	Explaining Educational Justice Among Faculty Members in Iranian Universities of Medical Sciences (13)	2020–2021	Mohammadi et al.
4	Qualitative	A Qualitative Study on Educational Justice in Iranian Medical Education (7)	2021	Kalateh Sadati et al.
5	Qualitative – Grounded Theory	Explaining Educational Justice in Medical Sciences Universities: A Grounded Theory Study (8)	2020–2021	Mohammadi et al.
6	Descriptive – Survey-Based	Identifying and Ranking Key Factors Influencing Educational Justice and Proposing a Model at Ahvaz University (2)	2020–2021	Mahmoudi et al.
7	Mixed Methods	Identifying Factors Affecting Educational Justice and Its Role in Student Vitality at Payam Noor University (3)	2022	Mehrabani et al.

The characteristics of the included studies are presented in Table 1.

The factors influencing educational justice in Iranian Universities of Medical Sciences were categorized into two main groups: facilitators and barriers

1. Facilitators:

- Equal treatment among students regardless of gender, ethnicity, academic discipline, appearance, or social behavior; fair evaluation methods; use of engaging teaching strategies to motivate students; and attention to individual learning differences during instruction [10].

- Equal access to facilities, resources, and equipment for all students; employment of competent instructors; goal-oriented educational planning; integration of theory and practice; and alignment between education and clinical care [12].

Equal educational opportunities for faculty members, including access to resources, equipment, and benefits, are aligned with individual competencies [13].

- Clear and standardized evaluation criteria for students, appropriate alignment between the number of admitted students and available university resources, and proportional distribution of students relative to faculty numbers and educational and welfare facilities [8].

- Implementation of applied and fundamental research to identify gaps in the educational system; stable and merit-based management; selection of administrators based on expertise and experience; use of participatory methods in curriculum development; sufficient motivation among faculty and staff; research-driven decision-making; enhanced faculty engagement through improved compensation; establishment of performance evaluation criteria; and effective oversight of staff activities [2].

2: Barriers

- Exposure to unfavorable clinical realities, such as inconsistent enforcement of dress codes across disciplines (e.g., wearing jeans or makeup), shortage of experienced clinical instructors, interpersonal disparities (e.g., differential treatment of students from various fields by staff), and inconsistent evaluation processes [12].
- Discrimination among faculty members in terms of access to educational resources, allocation of benefits and promotions, and physical and clinical space, where faculty in medicine, dentistry, and pharmacy are prioritized over those in other disciplines [13].
- Structural inequalities in society, including the unequal distribution of resources across university tiers (Types 1, 2, and 3), urban disparities that concentrate top faculty and facilities in major cities, and limited access for students to equal opportunities in university entrance exams and university admissions. Additional barriers include the commodification of education (e.g., students entering medical fields without interest or aptitude, driven by income and status) and unjust policies such as quota-based admissions, disadvantages for general applicants, and disparities between public, private, and international universities [7]. Discrimination among students within medical sciences universities, where priority is given to students in medicine, dentistry and pharmacy. This manifests as unequal access to educational resources, experienced faculty, and physical and clinical facilities. Furthermore, Type 1 universities receive greater funding and resources than Type 2 and 3 institutions, exacerbating educational disparities [8].

Discussion

This narrative review was conducted to identify the key factors influencing educational justice in Iranian Universities of Medical Sciences. The findings revealed that these factors fall into two main categories: facilitators and barriers to the realization of educational justice. Each category is discussed in detail below.

Among the most prominent facilitating factors are the absence of favoritism among students, the implementation of fair student evaluation methods [10], the presence of clear and standardized assessment criteria [8], and equal access to facilities and educational resources for all students [12]. According to the literature, establishing a fair and transparent evaluation system is one of the core strategies for achieving educational justice in

universities of medical sciences [4], and should not be overlooked.

Furthermore, evidence indicates that students expect to benefit equally from available services and resources in educational settings. Therefore, the Ministry of Health and Medical Education must place greater emphasis on fairness in student treatment and equity in resource allocation. Such efforts can enhance students' perception of educational justice and lead to improved academic outcomes [14].

Another key facilitator of educational justice in Iranian Universities of Medical Sciences is the provision of equal educational opportunities, resources, and benefits for all faculty members, aligned with their individual competencies [13]. According to existing evidence, justice in education entails that faculty, students, and society at large should have equitable access to educational advantages and resources [8]. Educational policymakers must prioritize this principle.

Additional facilitating factors include the employment of competent instructors [12], appropriate student-to-faculty ratios [8], and the use of engaging teaching methods that motivate students and accommodate diverse learning styles [10]. Evidence also highlights that recruiting qualified, capable, and sufficient faculty members is a critical strategy for achieving educational justice [4].

The integration of theory and practice, goal-oriented educational planning, and alignment between education and clinical care [12] are further contributors to educational justice. One of the major challenges in nursing education, as noted in the literature, is the disconnect between theoretical knowledge and clinical application—a problem observed internationally [15]. Another study emphasized that effective clinical education requires instructors who can apply theoretical knowledge across diverse clinical scenarios and teach students to use it in real-life settings [16]. Therefore, strategic educational planning that bridges theory and practice is essential for promoting justice in medical education. Evidence also suggests that collaboration between clinical staff and educators enhances the effectiveness of clinical training [16], underscoring the importance of linking education with healthcare delivery.

Moreover, maintaining a proper balance between the number of admitted students and the available educational and welfare resources [8] is vital for ensuring educational justice. Studies have shown that student admissions should be based on universities' actual capacity and infrastructure. The annual increase

in medical student enrollment, without corresponding improvements in clinical and educational facilities, results in graduates who lack essential competencies—an outcome that contradicts the principles of educational justice [4].

Adequate motivation among faculty and staff, along with enhanced engagement through improved salaries and benefits, the establishment of performance evaluation criteria, and effective oversight of staff activities [2], are also recognized as key facilitators of educational justice in Iranian Universities of Medical Sciences. Evidence suggests that human resources are the most influential factor in driving both positive and negative changes within universities. The more motivated and experienced the personnel, the greater the improvement in both the quantity and quality of education [4].

In the study by Mohammadi et al., it was emphasized that educational justice among faculty members can only be achieved when benefits and promotions are based on merit and individual competencies. This requires the prior identification of faculty qualifications and the allocation of rewards accordingly [13], reinforcing the importance of performance evaluation systems and structured oversight as facilitators of educational justice.

Additional facilitating factors include stable and rule-based management, the selection of administrators based on expertise and experience, the use of participatory approaches in curriculum development, evidence-based decision-making, and the implementation of applied and fundamental research to identify gaps in the educational system [2]. Research findings indicate that avoiding politicization of academic leadership and institutionalizing managerial stability can accelerate the realization of educational justice. Justice in education demands that academic leadership be entrusted to the most knowledgeable and competent individuals. Without a sound educational management system, it is impossible to improve the quality of education [4].

Moreover, participatory curriculum development, research-driven decision-making, and the use of applied and foundational studies to identify systemic deficiencies can lead to more effective educational management. These approaches enable decisions to be made on the basis of evidence rather than personal preferences, thereby increasing the likelihood of achieving fair and competent academic governance.

Several barriers continue to hinder the realization of educational justice in Iranian Universities of Medical Sciences. These include exposure to unfavorable clinical realities—such as inconsistent enforcement of

dress codes across disciplines (e.g., allowing jeans)—and interpersonal disparities, in which staff members treat students from different fields unequally [12]. Additional obstacles include discrimination among students, with preferential treatment given to those in medicine, dentistry, and pharmacy [8]; inconsistent and unfair evaluation processes [12]; and disproportionate allocation of educational resources and budgets favoring Type 1 universities over Type 2 and 3 institutions [8].

Evidence suggests that medical sciences universities must actively work to eliminate both actual and perceived discrimination between students of different disciplines. Such efforts not only benefit students in less prioritized fields but also help medical students overcome the false sense of superiority instilled by the educational system. This shift enables future physicians to engage in collaborative practice and work effectively with all members of the healthcare team in combating disease [4].

Moreover, student evaluation processes must be fair and proportionate. Injustice in assessment can lead to feelings of doubt and anxiety, ultimately diminishing students' academic enthusiasm [14]. Faculty evaluation methods also play a critical role in educational justice, as students often compare their grades with peers and perceive discrepancies as unfair [10].

From a policy perspective, achieving educational justice requires a fundamental shift in how educational budgets are allocated. Specifically, the rate of budget growth for Type 2 and 3 universities must accelerate to prevent the concentration of resources and capabilities in a few elite institutions. This approach ensures that all students—regardless of location or discipline—have access to adequate facilities and opportunities to realize their potential [4].

Additional barriers to educational justice in Iranian Universities of Medical Sciences include the shortage of experienced clinical instructors [12] and discrimination among faculty members regarding access to educational resources, allocation of benefits and promotions, and physical and clinical infrastructure [13]. The evidence indicates that recruiting qualified and competent faculty members is a key strategy for achieving educational justice [4], particularly in clinical education, which plays a vital role in shaping students' professional identity [16].

Moreover, the realization of educational justice is closely tied to organizational justice. Without addressing institutional inequalities, achieving educational equity becomes exceedingly difficult. Therefore, universities must actively work to enhance

organizational justice as part of their broader mission to promote educational fairness [4]. This includes eliminating all forms of discrimination among faculty members regarding access to resources, promotion criteria, and physical and clinical facilities.

Structural inequalities within society—such as the unequal distribution of resources among Type 1, 2, and 3 universities, and urban disparities that concentrate top faculty and facilities in major cities—also hinder educational justice. Students from less privileged areas often lack equal access to university entrance exams and academic opportunities. In addition, unjust policies such as quota-based admissions, disadvantages for general applicants, and the commercialization of education through private and international universities further exacerbate these disparities [7].

To address these challenges, the equitable distribution of qualified faculty and specialists is essential. Since experienced instructors often prefer to relocate to major universities and provincial centers, targeted policies must be implemented to ensure balanced staffing across institutions. Furthermore, accelerated budget growth for Type 2 and 3 universities is necessary to prevent the concentration of resources in a few elite institutions and to ensure that all students have adequate opportunities to develop their talents.

From a policy standpoint, the government must reconsider several practices that undermine educational justice. These include quota-based admissions versus merit-based selection, the establishment of international and private branches with minimal infrastructure, and the monetization of graduate education. Reforming these areas is critical to fostering a more equitable and inclusive academic environment [4].

The commodification of education—where individuals enter medical fields without proper guidance, interest, or aptitude, driven solely by financial gain and social status—represents another significant barrier to educational justice in Iranian Universities of Medical Sciences [7]. This phenomenon leads to the misallocation of talent and undermines the integrity of medical education. In contrast, evidence supports implementing talent identification strategies to recognize and nurture students' abilities while preventing misdirection. Such approaches are essential for promoting educational justice [4].

One of the strengths of this study lies in its narrative review design, which allows for the synthesis of findings from multiple studies into a single

comprehensive analysis. Efforts were made to include a diverse range of articles addressing various aspects of educational justice. However, a key limitation of this study was the lack of access to the full text of certain articles, which may have restricted the scope of the review.

Conclusion

To achieve educational justice in Iranian Universities of Medical Sciences, relevant authorities must incorporate the influencing factors into their strategic planning. Targeted efforts must be made to eliminate barriers and strengthen facilitating elements. This approach enables institutions to fully benefit from the advantages of implementing educational justice across the medical education system.

Authorship contribution statement

All authors have reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript. MR conceived and designed the study. MR, TT, and KH conducted the study and collected the data; MR, TT, and performed the data analysis and interpretation.

Ethical Consideration

This article is derived from a research project approved by the Research Deputy of Lorestan University of Medical Sciences, under the ethical code IR.LUMS.REC.1404.184.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors have no conflict of interests related to this article.

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Data Availability

This study is a narrative review and does not include any new, primary data. All data supporting the findings of this study are derived from previously published articles and sources, which are cited within the manuscript. Therefore, no additional data are available.

Declaration of Generative AI

The authors declare that they have not used any type of generative artificial intelligence for the writing of this manuscript, nor for the creation of tables, or their corresponding captions.

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