Iranian Journal of Educational Sociology

Journal Website

Article history:
Received 01 February 2026
Revised 05 June 2026
Accepted 13 June 2026
Initial Published 15 June 2026
Final Publication 01 July 2026

Iranian Journal of Educational Sociology

Volume 9, Issue 4, pp 1-14

Quarterly
Iranian Journal of Educational Sociology

E-ISSN: 2645-3460

Identifying Key Change Management Strategies in Iranian Higher Education: A Qualitative Study

Mahtab. Matlabi Lotfabadi[1], Amineh. Ahmadi[1*], Zahra. Taleb [2]

[1] Department of Educational Management, ST.C., Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran
[2] Department of Psychology and Educational Sciences, ST.C., Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran

*** Corresponding author email address**: aminehahmadi@iau.ac.ir

A r t i c l e I n f o

Article type:
Original Research

How to cite this article:
Matlabi Lotfabadi, M., Ahmadi, A., & Taleb, Z. (2026). Identifying Key Change Management Strategies in Iranian Higher Education: A Qualitative Study. *Iranian Journal of Educational Sociology, 9*(4), 1-14.
https://doi.org/10.61838/kman.ijes.1489

A B S T R A C T

Purpose: This study aimed to identify the key dimensions, components, and strategies of change management within the higher education system of Iran through an in-depth qualitative exploration of experts' experiences and perspectives.

Methods and Materials: This qualitative study was conducted among faculty members of the Islamic Azad University who possessed substantial expertise in higher education management and organizational change. Participants were selected using purposive and snowball sampling techniques to ensure the inclusion of knowledgeable informants capable of providing rich and relevant insights. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 experts and continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. Interview data were transcribed and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis approach with the assistance of MAXQDA 20 software. To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, several rigor-enhancing procedures were employed, including expert review, member checking, involvement of a second analyst, and assessment of intra-theme agreement, which reached 84.2%, indicating satisfactory reliability and consistency in the coding process.

Findings: The analysis revealed a comprehensive framework of change management in higher education consisting of two overarching themes, ten subthemes, and fifty-seven meaning units. The first major theme, factors influencing the implementation of change management, encompassed six subthemes: individual and psychological characteristics, personal skills and competencies, organizational and managerial factors, organizational culture and attitudes, resources and infrastructure, and environmental and international influences. The second major theme, change management strategies, included four subthemes: faculty educational empowerment, executive support and policy development, resistance management and change facilitation, and communication and stakeholder participation.

Conclusion: The findings indicate that successful change management in higher education requires an integrated approach that simultaneously addresses human, organizational, cultural, structural, and environmental dimensions while implementing targeted strategies to support adaptation and sustainable transformation.

Keywords: *Change Management; Higher Education; Change Strategies; Organizational Transformation*

1. Introduction

The contemporary higher education environment is characterized by rapid technological advances, increasing societal expectations, globalization, evolving labor market demands, and continuous shifts in knowledge production and dissemination. Universities are no longer viewed solely as institutions responsible for teaching and research; rather, they are expected to function as dynamic, innovative, and adaptive organizations capable of responding effectively to complex environmental changes. Consequently, change management has emerged as a strategic necessity for higher education institutions seeking to maintain relevance, improve quality, and achieve sustainable development. Organizational change is widely recognized as an inevitable phenomenon in modern institutions, particularly in knowledge-based organizations such as universities, where continuous adaptation to internal and external developments is essential for long-term effectiveness and competitiveness (Hosseini, 2022; Mirzaei & Bayat Mokhtari, 2021). In this context, successful change management encompasses not only structural and procedural modifications but also the transformation of organizational culture, leadership practices, stakeholder engagement, and institutional capabilities (Galli, 2019; Roman et al., 2024). The growing importance of educational innovation, digital transformation, and knowledge-based economies has further intensified the need for universities to adopt effective change management approaches capable of facilitating adaptation and continuous improvement (Enache & Petrescu, 2025; Khaskheli, 2023).

The increasing pace of technological development has fundamentally transformed educational systems worldwide. Digital technologies, artificial intelligence, online learning platforms, and data-driven decision-making have reshaped traditional educational processes and created new opportunities and challenges for higher education institutions. Educational innovation has become a key driver of institutional development, requiring universities to continuously revise teaching methods, curricula, governance structures, and service delivery mechanisms (Zhong, 2022; Zorrilla Briones & Sánchez Ancajima, 2026). The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this transformation by compelling institutions to adopt innovative instructional strategies and digital learning environments on an unprecedented scale (Karma et al., 2021). However, the successful implementation of educational innovations depends largely on the institution's ability to manage change effectively. Innovation initiatives frequently encounter resistance from stakeholders, limitations in organizational resources, cultural barriers, and challenges related to leadership and governance (Kouhgivi, 2022; Nejadfallah & Jahanian, 2022). Therefore, understanding the factors that facilitate or hinder change implementation has become a critical concern for higher education leaders and policymakers.

The literature on organizational change highlights that change management is a multidimensional process involving strategic planning, stakeholder engagement, leadership support, communication, organizational learning, and continuous evaluation. Various theoretical frameworks have been developed to guide change initiatives, including Lewin's three-stage model, Kotter's eight-step model, the ADKAR model, and other contemporary approaches that emphasize participation, adaptability, and organizational readiness (Galli, 2019; Paramitha et al., 2020; Roman et al., 2024). These models suggest that successful change implementation requires more than introducing new policies or technologies; it requires cultivating a supportive organizational culture, enhancing stakeholder commitment, and addressing resistance throughout the transformation process. Recent investigations have demonstrated that institutions capable of integrating leadership, communication, and knowledge management practices into their change initiatives are more likely to achieve sustainable organizational performance and innovation outcomes (Rodriguez Villanueva & Schwarz, 2025; Umar et al., 2025).

Higher education institutions represent particularly complex environments for change management because they involve multiple stakeholders with diverse interests, including faculty members, students, administrators, policymakers, and external partners. Faculty members often enjoy significant professional autonomy, making top-down change initiatives difficult to implement without meaningful participation and consensus-building. Furthermore, universities possess deeply rooted traditions, norms, and academic cultures that can either facilitate or impede transformation efforts (Caliskan & Zhu, 2020; Cotton et al., 2017). Research has shown that organizational culture plays a decisive role in determining the success of educational innovation and institutional reform. Institutions that promote learning, collaboration, experimentation, and openness to innovation tend to exhibit greater adaptability and resilience during periods of change (Khodamabbasi et al., 2017; Valencia-Arias et al., 2023). Conversely, resistance arising from entrenched beliefs, traditional practices, and uncertainty regarding change outcomes may significantly

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E-ISSN: 2645-3460

hinder organizational transformation (Adewale & Ghavifekr, 2025; Malone, 2018).

Recent scholarship has increasingly emphasized the importance of organizational readiness and innovation capacity as prerequisites for successful change management. Organizational readiness refers to the extent to which members of an institution are psychologically and structurally prepared to implement and sustain change initiatives. This readiness is influenced by factors such as leadership commitment, resource availability, technological infrastructure, employee competencies, and organizational culture (Amelia & Sushandoyo, 2023; Peña-Lang & Villa, 2026). Studies have demonstrated that institutions with higher levels of organizational readiness experience fewer implementation barriers and greater success in achieving desired outcomes from innovation and transformation projects (Campbell & Wood, 2026; Depoo & Hyršlová, 2025). Similarly, intellectual capital, knowledge management, and technological capabilities have been identified as critical drivers of innovation and institutional performance in higher education settings (Mamilla & Yen, 2026; Valencia-Arias et al., 2023). These findings suggest that effective change management requires an integrated approach that combines human, organizational, technological, and strategic dimensions.

Leadership constitutes another critical factor influencing the success of change initiatives in higher education. Effective leaders play a central role in articulating a clear vision, fostering stakeholder commitment, mobilizing resources, and creating an environment conducive to innovation and learning. Transformational leadership, in particular, has been associated with higher levels of organizational innovation, employee engagement, and sustainable performance during periods of change (Maduforo et al., 2026; Umar et al., 2025). Leadership effectiveness becomes especially important in higher education institutions where organizational structures are decentralized and decision-making processes often require extensive consultation and collaboration. Evidence from recent studies indicates that leaders who prioritize communication, participation, trust-building, and professional development are more successful in overcoming resistance and facilitating organizational transformation (Adewale & Ghavifekr, 2025; Rodriguez Villanueva & Schwarz, 2025). Consequently, understanding the leadership-related dimensions of change management remains essential for developing effective institutional strategies.

The concept of sustainable change has also gained prominence within contemporary higher education research. Sustainable change refers to transformation processes that generate long-term improvements while maintaining institutional stability and stakeholder commitment. Such change requires continuous monitoring, evaluation, learning, and adaptation rather than one-time interventions (Depoo & Hyršlová, 2025; Helmold, 2022). Sustainable change management is particularly important in higher education because educational reforms often involve long implementation periods and require enduring support from multiple stakeholders. Moreover, universities must balance innovation with the preservation of academic values, institutional identity, and educational quality. Research suggests that sustainable transformation is most likely to occur when institutions establish supportive policies, invest in capacity building, and create mechanisms for ongoing stakeholder engagement and feedback (Campbell & Wood, 2026; Enache & Petrescu, 2025).

In the context of Iran, higher education institutions face unique challenges and opportunities related to organizational transformation. Rapid technological advancements, demographic changes, internationalization pressures, evolving labor market requirements, and national development goals have increased the need for educational innovation and institutional adaptation. At the same time, universities encounter barriers such as bureaucratic structures, resource constraints, cultural resistance, and policy inconsistencies that may complicate change implementation efforts (Borughani, 2022; Nourbakhsh et al., 2024). Future-oriented analyses of Iranian higher education have highlighted the necessity of developing adaptive, innovative, and resilient institutions capable of responding effectively to emerging educational and societal demands (Taghizadeh Tabarsi et al., 2024). Despite growing recognition of the importance of change management, limited research has comprehensively examined the key strategies and influencing factors that shape change management processes within the Iranian higher education system. Existing studies have often focused on isolated dimensions such as innovation management, organizational performance, or policy development, leaving a need for a holistic understanding of change management from the perspectives of higher education experts and practitioners (Nejadfallah & Jahanian, 2022; Nourbakhsh et al., 2024).

Furthermore, recent international evidence underscores that successful transformation in higher education depends upon the interaction of multiple dimensions, including

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organizational culture, knowledge management, technological readiness, stakeholder participation, leadership effectiveness, and environmental responsiveness (Maduforo et al., 2026; Mamilla & Yen, 2026). The barriers to digital transformation identified in higher education institutions worldwide—including inadequate infrastructure, resistance to innovation, insufficient training, and governance challenges—demonstrate the complexity of implementing sustainable change (Singun, 2025). At the same time, research indicates that universities capable of leveraging organizational knowledge, fostering innovation-oriented cultures, and engaging stakeholders in decision-making processes achieve higher levels of institutional effectiveness and educational quality (Peña-Lang & Villa, 2026; Zorrilla Briones & Sánchez Ancajima, 2026). These findings reinforce the importance of identifying context-specific factors and strategies that can support successful change management within particular higher education systems.

Given the increasing need for transformation in higher education and the limited availability of comprehensive qualitative evidence regarding change management within Iranian universities, there is a pressing need to explore the perspectives of academic experts who possess direct experience with educational innovation, institutional development, and organizational change. Such an investigation can contribute to both theoretical understanding and practical policy development by identifying the critical factors that influence change implementation and the strategies that facilitate successful transformation in higher education institutions.

Therefore, the present study aimed to identify the key strategies and influencing factors of change management in the Iranian higher education system through a qualitative thematic analysis of experts' experiences and perspectives.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study employed a qualitative research design using the thematic analysis approach proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) to identify and explore the key dimensions and strategies of change management within the Iranian higher education system. The qualitative approach was selected because of its suitability for examining complex organizational phenomena and uncovering underlying concepts, experiences, and perceptions that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative methods. The study focused on generating an in-depth understanding of the factors influencing change management and the strategies required for its successful implementation in higher education institutions. In addition to interview data, relevant scholarly sources, including books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and research reports published between 2014 and 2026 in the fields of change management and educational innovation, were reviewed to support conceptual development. These resources were obtained from reputable national and international academic databases, including Google Scholar, Civilica, Irandoc, Noormags, and databases affiliated with the Academic Center for Education, Culture and Research (ACECR).

The study population consisted of faculty members of the Islamic Azad University specializing in educational management, higher education management, and curriculum planning. Participants were selected because of their professional expertise and direct involvement in higher education administration, policy, and organizational development. A non-probability purposive sampling strategy combined with snowball sampling was employed to identify information-rich participants capable of providing valuable insights into change management practices in higher education. The initial participant was selected purposefully based on the objectives of the study and demonstrated expertise in the research topic. Subsequent participants were identified through recommendations from previously interviewed experts. Inclusion criteria required participants to possess a doctoral or postdoctoral degree in a relevant field, have substantial managerial or executive experience within higher education institutions, demonstrate a record of scholarly contributions related to higher education or organizational change, possess at least ten years of academic experience, and express willingness to participate in the interview process. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. Saturation was reached after the twentieth interview, as no new codes, concepts, or themes emerged from the final interviews. Consequently, the final sample consisted of 20 experts whose perspectives formed the basis of the qualitative analysis.

2.2. Measure

The primary data collection instrument was a semi-structured interview protocol developed to explore participants' experiences, perceptions, and professional insights regarding change management in higher education.

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Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they provide sufficient flexibility for participants to elaborate on their experiences while ensuring that discussions remain aligned with the objectives of the study. The interview guide contained a series of open-ended questions addressing the challenges, influencing factors, organizational conditions, leadership practices, and strategic approaches associated with implementing change in higher education institutions. Follow-up and probing questions were used whenever necessary to obtain deeper explanations and clarify emerging concepts. All interviews were conducted individually, recorded with participants' consent, and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Several strategies were employed to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings. Credibility was enhanced through expert validation, whereby preliminary interpretations and thematic structures were reviewed by specialists in educational management and higher education. Member checking was also conducted by sharing portions of the findings with selected participants to verify the accuracy of interpretations and ensure that the extracted meanings reflected their intended perspectives. Furthermore, repeated engagement with the data, continuous comparison of emerging themes, and systematic documentation of analytical memos throughout the research process contributed to strengthening the rigor of the study. Dependability was assessed through intercoder agreement procedures. An experienced qualitative researcher independently analyzed three interview transcripts, and the extracted meaning units and codes were compared with those identified by the principal researcher. The level of agreement was calculated using the Abbaszadeh formula, resulting in an intra-theme agreement coefficient of 84.2%, indicating an acceptable level of reliability and consistency in the coding and interpretation process.

2.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis commenced immediately after the completion of data collection and achievement of theoretical saturation. The interview transcripts were imported into MAXQDA 20 software to facilitate systematic organization, coding, and analysis of qualitative data. The analytical procedure followed the six phases of thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Initially, the researchers familiarized themselves with the data through repeated reading and review of the interview transcripts. During the second phase, meaningful segments of text were identified and assigned initial codes that represented participants' statements and experiences. In the third phase, similar codes were grouped together and organized into preliminary conceptual categories. These categories were subsequently examined, refined, and integrated into broader subthemes and overarching themes. The emerging thematic structure was repeatedly reviewed to ensure coherence, internal consistency, and alignment with the research objectives. During the final stages of analysis, themes were clearly defined, named, and organized into a conceptual framework illustrating the dimensions and strategies of change management in higher education. The resulting framework was developed through continuous comparison of data segments, iterative refinement of themes, and consensus among researchers regarding the interpretation of the findings.

3. Findings and Results

Data analysis was conducted following the transcription of the interviews and based on the extracted initial codes, subthemes, and overarching themes. The findings related to change management strategies in higher education are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Change Management Strategies in Higher Education

Interview Codes	Meaning Unit	Subtheme
11-13-14	Strengthening interaction between faculty members and university management	Communication and Participation in the Change Process
12-14-15	Establishing formal and informal channels for participation	Communication and Participation in the Change Process
13-15-16	Active faculty participation in educational decision-making and change policy formulation	Communication and Participation in the Change Process
14-16-17	Providing opportunities for meaningful student participation in the educational innovation process	Communication and Participation in the Change Process
15-17-18	Strengthening communication among educational, research, and technological sectors to enhance synergy	Communication and Participation in the Change Process

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1-16-18	Designing two-way feedback mechanisms to evaluate innovation implementation	Communication and Participation in the Change Process
1-3-4	Empowerment for the design and implementation of active learning	Empowerment and Training
3-5-6	Enhancing technological and digital competencies	Empowerment and Training
2-3-18	Retraining to update specialized and technological knowledge	Empowerment and Training
4-6-7	Conducting workshops, training programs, and innovation seminars	Empowerment and Training
5-7-8	Utilizing emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence in teaching	Empowerment and Training
16-18-19	Continuous assessment as part of the empowerment process	Empowerment and Training
9-11-12	Allocating dedicated financial resources to support educational innovation initiatives	Support and Implementation Policies
10-12-13	Providing technical and technological support during implementation	Support and Implementation Policies
11-13-14	Utilizing successful domestic and international experiences	Support and Implementation Policies
14-15-16	Developing sustainable policies aligned with innovation	Support and Implementation Policies
16-17	Establishing mechanisms for continuous monitoring and evaluation of policy performance	Support and Implementation Policies
1-2-18	Identifying individual, cultural, and organizational barriers to the adoption of educational innovation	Resistance Management and Change Facilitation
5-6-7	Reducing resistance and strengthening the motivation and participation of innovation "early adopters"	Resistance Management and Change Facilitation
10-11-13	Interaction and dialogue for managing resistance to change	Resistance Management and Change Facilitation
8-9-10	Addressing conflicts among values, beliefs, and traditional educational philosophies as sources of resistance	Resistance Management and Change Facilitation

In response to the question concerning change management strategies in higher education, content analysis of the interviews resulted in the extraction of 21 initial codes, which were subsequently categorized into four subthemes or major components. The findings indicate that the successful implementation of change management in higher education requires the adoption of simultaneous and multi-level strategies. These strategies not only facilitate the acceptance of change but also create the conditions for sustainable and effective implementation by reducing individual, cultural, and organizational barriers. Therefore, the success of change management depends not only on structural interventions but also on the interaction among human capacities, organizational support, and a culture that is receptive to change.

Active participation and continuous interaction between faculty members and university management play a central role in the success of change management within higher education. Establishing formal and informal channels for consultation, encouraging active involvement in educational decision-making and policy formulation, and providing opportunities for student participation are among the key factors that strengthen such interaction. Furthermore, enhancing communication among educational, research, and technological sectors and designing two-way feedback mechanisms facilitate synergy and coordination among different units, thereby increasing the capacity for effective implementation of educational changes. One faculty member stated: "When I was involved in the decision-making process, I became more motivated to adopt innovative teaching methods" (Interview Code 11).

Data analysis revealed that improving faculty members' technological and digital competencies, providing retraining opportunities to update specialized knowledge, and utilizing emerging technologies are critical factors for successful change management in higher education. Organizing workshops, training courses, and innovation seminars creates opportunities for experiential learning and skill development, thereby strengthening the implementation of innovations. Moreover, continuous evaluation of empowerment initiatives enables the identification of educational needs and the refinement of interventions. One participant commented: "Participating in workshops and training programs significantly enhanced my ability to use modern technologies in teaching and increased my confidence" (Interview Code 15).

The findings demonstrate that providing organizational support and establishing coherent implementation policies play a vital role in the success of change management in higher education. Allocating dedicated financial resources to educational innovation projects, offering technical and technological support during implementation, and drawing upon successful domestic and international experiences facilitate effective change implementation and reduce practical and organizational barriers. In addition, sustainable policies aligned with innovation contribute to harmonizing individual and organizational goals and maintaining educational transformation over time. One participant noted: "The availability of financial resources and technical support

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enabled us to implement innovative ideas in classrooms and projects, while learning from the experiences of other universities improved our practices" (Interview Code 9).

The analysis indicates that identifying and managing individual, cultural, and organizational resistance is a critical factor in the success of change management in higher education. Resistance to innovation may stem from traditional educational attitudes, values, and beliefs and, if neglected, can create substantial challenges for implementing change. Active interaction, dialogue, and participation among faculty members, particularly innovation "early adopters," play a crucial role in reducing resistance and increasing motivation. One faculty member explained: "By organizing continuous meetings and discussions with colleagues who were initially hesitant about innovation, we were able to change their attitudes and encourage their active participation in implementing modern teaching approaches" (Interview Code 7).

The findings related to the factors influencing change management in higher education are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Factors Influencing Change Management in Higher Education

Interview Codes	Meaning Unit	Subtheme
1-2	Positive or negative faculty attitudes toward educational innovation	Individual and Psychological Factors
3-4	Self-efficacy in dealing with technology and changes in teaching methods	Individual and Psychological Factors
4-5	Fear of failure or making mistakes in implementing innovation	Individual and Psychological Factors
1-2-3-4	Commitment to lifelong learning	Individual and Psychological Factors
3-5-6	Intrinsic motivation for professional growth and personal development	Individual and Psychological Factors
4-6-7	Ability to learn quickly and adapt to a dynamic environment	Individual and Psychological Factors
5-7-9	Use of effective coping strategies when facing educational challenges	Individual and Psychological Factors
6-7-9-15	Technological competence and readiness for innovative teaching methods	Individual Skills and Competencies
1-8-10	Ability to design and implement active learning	Individual Skills and Competencies
2-9-11	Flexibility and adaptability to educational changes	Individual Skills and Competencies
4-11-12-13	Motivation and creativity in generating and implementing new ideas	Individual Skills and Competencies
5-12-13	Reflective skills (ability to evaluate one's own performance)	Individual Skills and Competencies
6-13-14	Ability to collaborate, engage in team learning, and exchange experiences with colleagues	Individual Skills and Competencies
7-14-15	Managerial support for innovative ideas and initiatives	Organizational and Managerial Factors
8-15-16	Managerial stability and implementation policies within the university	Organizational and Managerial Factors
9-16-17	Alignment of university macro-policies with educational innovation	Organizational and Managerial Factors
1-4-17	Evaluation systems that move beyond traditional models	Organizational and Managerial Factors
2-5	Bureaucracy and restrictive administrative complexities	Organizational and Managerial Factors
6-9	Transparent and sustainable implementation policies	Organizational and Managerial Factors
3-11-12	Clear definition of roles and responsibilities during the change process	Organizational and Managerial Factors
5-15-16	Cultural resistance to change and modernization	Organizational Culture and Attitudes
6-5	Dominance of traditional educational values and practices	Organizational Culture and Attitudes
3-10-13	Lack of confidence in the effectiveness of technology in education	Organizational Culture and Attitudes
7-8-9-19	Organizational culture supportive of learning and technology	Organizational Culture and Attitudes
4-5-6	Influence of prevailing values within academic departments on innovative behavior	Organizational Culture and Attitudes
2-6-7	Presence of a culture of organizational learning and learning from experience and mistakes	Organizational Culture and Attitudes
5-6-7	Colleagues' attitudes and the collective climate toward innovation	Organizational Culture and Attitudes
11-12-13	Budget shortages and financial constraints	Resources and Infrastructure
1-17-18	Weak technological infrastructure and limited access to digital resources	Resources and Infrastructure
11-12	Low quality of technical support services during implementation	Resources and Infrastructure
2-3-19	Limitations in research resources and educational data	Resources and Infrastructure
16-17-19	Insufficient time for course redesign and preparation	Resources and Infrastructure
4-6-7	Limited access to in-service training opportunities for innovation	Resources and Infrastructure
6-8-9	International interactions and collaborations in higher education	Environmental and International Factors
9-11-12	Ministry of Science policies and programs regarding innovation	Environmental and International Factors
10-12-13	Benchmarking and learning from successful international experiences	Environmental and International Factors

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E-ISSN: 2645-3460

In the analysis of factors influencing change management in higher education, content analysis of the interviews resulted in the extraction of 36 initial codes, which were subsequently categorized into six subthemes or major components. The findings indicate that the success of change management in higher education is influenced by a set of interrelated and multi-level factors that operate simultaneously and may either facilitate or constrain the acceptance and implementation of educational change.

The findings revealed that faculty members' psychological characteristics and personal dispositions play a decisive role in the success of change management initiatives. Positive attitudes toward educational innovation, self-efficacy in dealing with technology and changes in teaching methods, intrinsic motivation for professional development, and commitment to lifelong learning facilitate the acceptance and implementation of change. In contrast, fear of failure or making mistakes during the implementation of innovations may constitute a significant barrier. The ability to learn rapidly, adapt to dynamic environments, and employ effective coping strategies when confronting educational challenges further contributes to successful adaptation. Faculty self-efficacy is not a static characteristic; rather, it develops through practical experience, gradual learning, and social support. Consequently, change management extends beyond the provision of technological infrastructure and requires simultaneous attention to the psychological, motivational, and supportive needs of faculty members. Such attention can substantially increase the likelihood of successful and sustainable educational transformation. As one participant explained: *"When I first encountered new teaching methods, I was hesitant, but through practice and collaboration with colleagues, I became more confident in implementing the changes"* (Interview Code 5).

The findings indicate that the ability to design and implement active learning strategies, flexibility, creativity in generating innovative ideas, reflective practice, and teamwork are among the most important competencies facilitating successful educational change. Technological competence and readiness to adopt innovative teaching approaches further strengthen the implementation of educational innovations. Managerial support and a positive work environment also increase faculty motivation to embrace change. The continuous development of creative abilities, adaptability, and reflective skills, combined with organizational support, constitutes a critical prerequisite for achieving sustainable innovation in higher education. One faculty member stated: *"Designing active learning classrooms increased both my own motivation and that of my students to implement new ideas"* (Interview Code 14).

The findings demonstrate that managerial stability, transparent policies, clearly defined roles and responsibilities, and alignment between organizational goals and innovation initiatives are important facilitators of successful change implementation. Conversely, complex bureaucratic procedures, ambiguity regarding responsibilities, and organizational resistance may slow or even obstruct the change process. In addition, the development of evaluation systems that align with innovation objectives plays a crucial role in guiding behaviors and enhancing change outcomes. Effective change management in educational innovation therefore requires simultaneous attention to organizational structure, role clarity, alignment between individual and institutional goals, and supportive evaluation mechanisms. This combination promotes behavioral alignment, reduces resistance, and increases the likelihood of successful and sustainable educational transformation. One participant remarked: *"When roles and responsibilities were unclear, implementing educational changes became extremely difficult"* (Interview Code 12).

Organizational culture and attitudes, including shared values, beliefs, and collective behaviors, were identified as significant determinants of educational innovation and change management success. Institutions that promote continuous learning, technological acceptance, and support for innovation demonstrate greater capacity to adopt and sustain change. In contrast, the dominance of traditional educational values, skepticism toward technology, and collective resistance can create substantial obstacles to transformation. The attitudes of colleagues and the overall organizational climate toward innovation directly influence individuals' willingness to embrace change. Therefore, effective change management requires strategies that support cultural transformation, foster positive attitudes toward technology and innovation, and cultivate a supportive collective environment. Such efforts facilitate the acceptance of change and contribute to its long-term sustainability. One participant explained: *"Some colleagues still adhere to traditional methods and do not take change and innovation seriously"* (Interview Code 6).

Access to financial resources, technological facilities, technical support services, educational data, and professional development opportunities emerged as essential prerequisites for successful educational innovation.

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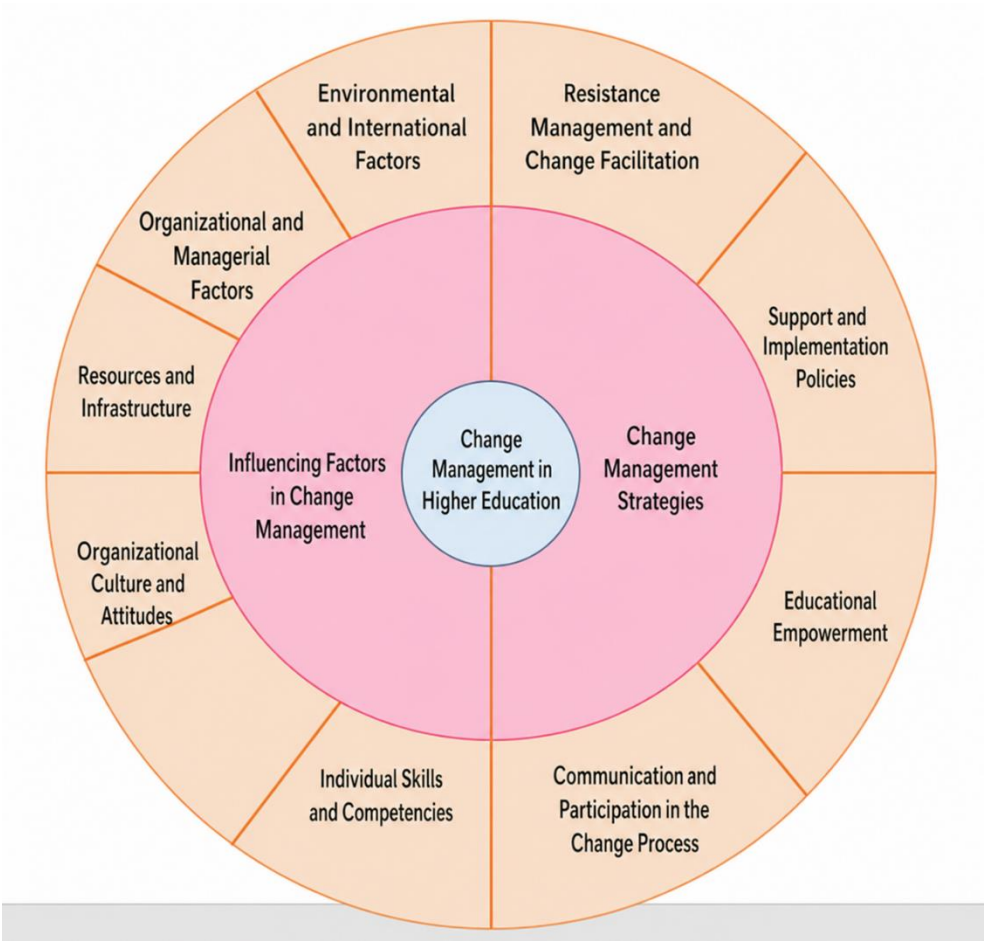
Resource shortages and inadequate infrastructure can create serious practical barriers to change implementation. Furthermore, sufficient time for course redesign and content preparation was identified as a critical factor influencing the success of educational transformation. Effective change management in higher education therefore requires comprehensive planning to ensure the availability of financial, technological, and human resources, alongside adequate support services and realistic implementation timelines. Such an approach enhances the feasibility of innovative initiatives, reduces operational barriers, and significantly increases the likelihood of sustainable educational change. One participant noted: *"The lack of adequate equipment prevented some innovative ideas from being implemented in classrooms"* (Interview Code 19).

The findings indicate that broader environmental influences, including national higher education policies, international collaborations, and learning from successful experiences in other universities, play an important role in facilitating innovation and change. These external factors can reduce organizational and individual constraints while creating favorable conditions for increasing confidence and motivation among implementation teams. The findings suggest that change management in higher education should not be viewed solely as an internal organizational process. Rather, attention to environmental influences, benchmarking, and international engagement represents a vital element in the success and sustainability of educational innovations. As one participant stated: *"Observing the successful experiences of other universities gave our team greater confidence to implement changes"* (Interview Code 10).

Figure 1

Final Model of the Study



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E-ISSN: 2645-3460

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed to identify the key strategies and influencing factors of change management in the Iranian higher education system through a qualitative thematic analysis of experts' experiences and perspectives. The findings revealed that change management in higher education is a multidimensional phenomenon encompassing two overarching dimensions: change management strategies and factors influencing change management. The strategic dimension consisted of communication and participation in the change process, educational empowerment, support and implementation policies, and resistance management and change facilitation. The influencing factors dimension included individual and psychological factors, individual skills and competencies, organizational and managerial factors, organizational culture and attitudes, resources and infrastructure, and environmental and international factors. Overall, the findings suggest that effective change management in higher education requires a holistic and integrated approach that simultaneously addresses human, organizational, cultural, technological, and environmental dimensions.

One of the major findings of this study was the importance of communication and participation in the change process. Participants emphasized that active involvement of faculty members and students in decision-making, policy development, and innovation initiatives significantly increases the likelihood of successful change implementation. This finding aligns with contemporary change management theories, which emphasize stakeholder participation as a critical determinant of organizational transformation. Previous studies have similarly demonstrated that change initiatives are more successful when organizational members perceive themselves as active contributors rather than passive recipients of change (Galli, 2019; Roman et al., 2024). Furthermore, research in higher education has shown that participatory governance structures foster trust, reduce uncertainty, and enhance commitment to institutional reforms (Miller & Gunnels, 2020; Valencia-Arias et al., 2023). The findings also support the conclusions of Rodriguez Villanueva and Schwarz, who reported that communication mechanisms and collaborative decision-making processes are essential for navigating organizational transformations effectively (Rodriguez Villanueva & Schwarz, 2025). In the context of higher education, where academic autonomy and collegial culture are highly valued, communication and participation become particularly important because they help build consensus and minimize resistance among faculty members and other stakeholders.

Another significant finding concerned the role of educational empowerment and professional development in facilitating change management. Participants highlighted the importance of enhancing technological competencies, updating professional knowledge, utilizing emerging technologies, and providing continuous training opportunities. These findings are consistent with the growing literature on educational innovation and organizational learning. Scholars have argued that successful innovation adoption depends on the knowledge, skills, and readiness of organizational members to engage with new practices and technologies (Khaskheli, 2023; Zorrilla Briones & Sánchez Ancajima, 2026). Similarly, studies examining digital transformation in higher education have identified faculty training and technological competency development as prerequisites for sustainable innovation implementation (Singun, 2025; Zhong, 2022). The findings are also consistent with the work of Mamilla and Yen, who emphasized the importance of intellectual capital, knowledge management, and technological capability in fostering innovation within higher education institutions (Mamilla & Yen, 2026). Continuous empowerment initiatives not only improve technical competencies but also increase confidence, adaptability, and willingness to embrace change, thereby enhancing institutional capacity for transformation.

The findings additionally revealed that organizational support and implementation policies play a crucial role in change management success. Participants stressed the importance of financial resources, technical support, policy coherence, and continuous monitoring mechanisms. These results support previous research indicating that change initiatives frequently fail when institutions lack sufficient resources, clear implementation frameworks, or long-term policy commitment (Amelia & Sushandoyo, 2023; Depoo & Hyršlová, 2025). Sustainable change management requires institutions to establish supportive infrastructures capable of translating strategic goals into operational practices. Campbell and Wood argued that meaningful educational innovation depends on institutional mechanisms that support both incremental and transformative change processes (Campbell & Wood, 2026). Likewise, Enache and Petrescu highlighted the necessity of policy alignment and organizational support structures for achieving successful

transformation in higher education institutions (Enache & Petrescu, 2025). The present findings reinforce these perspectives by demonstrating that organizational support functions as an enabling condition that facilitates the implementation and sustainability of educational innovations.

The study further identified resistance management and change facilitation as an essential strategic component of successful change management. Participants noted that resistance often emerges from deeply rooted educational beliefs, traditional practices, and uncertainty regarding innovation outcomes. These findings correspond closely with established change management theories, which recognize resistance as a natural response to organizational transformation (Galli, 2019; Paramitha et al., 2020). Malone's application of the Kübler-Ross change curve in educational settings demonstrated that emotional reactions and uncertainty frequently accompany educational change initiatives and require deliberate management strategies (Malone, 2018). Similarly, Adewale and Ghavifekr found that resistance among academic staff represents one of the most significant barriers to change implementation in higher education institutions (Adewale & Ghavifekr, 2025). The current findings suggest that dialogue, participation, trust-building, and engagement of innovation adopters can effectively reduce resistance and increase motivation for change. This observation supports the view that resistance should not be regarded merely as an obstacle but as an opportunity for organizational learning and stakeholder engagement.

Among the factors influencing change management, individual and psychological characteristics emerged as particularly important. Participants emphasized attitudes toward innovation, self-efficacy, motivation, lifelong learning commitment, adaptability, and coping strategies as key determinants of change acceptance. These findings are consistent with research demonstrating that individual readiness and psychological preparedness significantly influence organizational transformation outcomes (Amelia & Sushandoyo, 2023; Umar et al., 2025). Faculty members who possess confidence in their abilities, maintain positive attitudes toward innovation, and demonstrate intrinsic motivation are more likely to engage constructively with change initiatives. Previous studies have similarly reported that self-efficacy and learning orientation positively affect technology adoption and educational innovation implementation (Zhong, 2022; Zorrilla Briones & Sánchez Ancajima, 2026). The findings therefore suggest that change management strategies should address not only structural dimensions but also the psychological needs and perceptions of organizational members.

The role of individual skills and competencies was another important finding. Participants highlighted technological proficiency, active learning design skills, flexibility, creativity, reflective practice, and teamwork as critical capabilities supporting successful educational transformation. These findings correspond with previous research emphasizing the relationship between human capital and organizational innovation. Knowledge-intensive organizations such as universities rely heavily on the competencies of their members to generate, adopt, and sustain innovation (Khaskheli, 2023; Mamilla & Yen, 2026). Furthermore, studies on innovation management have demonstrated that creativity, adaptability, and collaborative learning enhance organizational responsiveness to change (Kouhgivi, 2022; Nejadfallah & Jahanian, 2022). The current findings extend this literature by illustrating how these competencies contribute specifically to change management processes within higher education institutions.

The findings also underscore the importance of organizational and managerial factors. Stable leadership, transparent policies, role clarity, supportive evaluation systems, and alignment between institutional goals and innovation initiatives were identified as essential facilitators of change. These results are consistent with research highlighting leadership and governance as fundamental drivers of organizational transformation (Maduforo et al., 2026; Umar et al., 2025). Transformational leaders play a crucial role in creating shared vision, motivating stakeholders, and fostering an environment conducive to innovation and learning. Studies have shown that leadership effectiveness is strongly associated with institutional adaptability and sustainable performance outcomes (Helmold, 2022; Rodriguez Villanueva & Schwarz, 2025). Conversely, bureaucratic complexity, policy inconsistency, and role ambiguity may create uncertainty and hinder the implementation of educational reforms. The present findings therefore reinforce the need for strategic leadership and effective governance structures in higher education change initiatives.

Organizational culture and attitudes emerged as another influential dimension affecting change management. Participants reported that cultures characterized by openness to learning, technological acceptance, and innovation support are more likely to facilitate successful transformation. In contrast, traditional values, skepticism

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toward innovation, and collective resistance may hinder change efforts. These findings align closely with previous studies demonstrating that organizational culture significantly influences innovation adoption and educational reform outcomes (Caliskan & Zhu, 2020; Khodamabbasi et al., 2017). Learning-oriented cultures encourage experimentation, collaboration, and continuous improvement, thereby creating favorable conditions for organizational change. The findings also support research suggesting that cultural transformation often constitutes one of the most challenging yet essential components of successful change management (Enache & Petrescu, 2025; Hosseini, 2022). Consequently, institutional leaders should recognize cultural development as a strategic priority rather than a secondary consideration during transformation initiatives.

Resources and infrastructure were identified as additional factors influencing change management effectiveness. Participants emphasized the importance of financial support, technological infrastructure, technical services, educational resources, and sufficient time for innovation implementation. These findings are consistent with studies indicating that inadequate resources represent a major barrier to educational innovation and organizational transformation (Depoo & Hyršlová, 2025; Singun, 2025). Organizational readiness research similarly highlights resource availability as a prerequisite for successful change implementation (Amelia & Sushandoyo, 2023). The findings suggest that even highly motivated individuals and supportive leaders may struggle to implement innovation in the absence of adequate institutional resources. Therefore, investments in infrastructure and support systems remain essential components of sustainable change strategies.

Finally, environmental and international factors were identified as influential determinants of change management success. Participants emphasized the role of governmental policies, international collaboration, and learning from successful global experiences. These findings support recent scholarship emphasizing the growing interconnectedness of higher education systems and the importance of environmental responsiveness in organizational adaptation (Maduforo et al., 2026; Taghizadeh Tabarsi et al., 2024). Globalization, technological advancement, and international benchmarking create both pressures and opportunities for institutional transformation. Research has shown that universities benefit significantly from international partnerships, knowledge exchange, and exposure to successful innovation models (Campbell & Wood, 2026; Peña-Lang & Villa, 2026). The present findings indicate that effective change management in higher education cannot be understood solely as an internal organizational process; rather, it must be viewed within a broader environmental and international context.

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the findings were derived from a relatively limited sample of faculty members and experts affiliated primarily with the Islamic Azad University system, which may restrict the transferability of results to other higher education institutions. Second, the study relied exclusively on qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews; therefore, the findings reflect participants' perceptions and experiences rather than objective measures of organizational performance or change outcomes. Third, the cross-sectional nature of the research prevented examination of how change management processes evolve over time. Finally, contextual characteristics of the Iranian higher education system may influence the applicability of findings in different national and institutional settings.

Future studies may employ mixed-methods or quantitative designs to validate and extend the conceptual framework identified in the present research. Researchers are encouraged to examine the relationships among the identified factors and strategies using structural modeling approaches and larger samples. Comparative studies across different universities, regions, and countries may provide deeper insight into contextual influences on change management. Longitudinal investigations could also explore how change initiatives develop over time and identify the factors associated with successful implementation and sustainability. In addition, future research may investigate the role of emerging technologies, artificial intelligence, and digital transformation in shaping change management practices within higher education institutions.

University leaders and policymakers should prioritize participatory approaches that actively involve faculty members, students, and administrators in change-related decision-making processes. Institutions should invest in continuous professional development programs that strengthen technological competencies, innovation capabilities, and adaptive skills among academic staff. Establishing clear policies, stable leadership structures, transparent communication mechanisms, and effective evaluation systems can facilitate successful implementation of change initiatives. Universities should also allocate adequate financial and technological resources to support

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E-ISSN: 2645-3460

innovation and create organizational cultures that encourage experimentation, collaboration, and continuous learning. Finally, strengthening international partnerships and systematically learning from successful global experiences can enhance institutional capacity for sustainable transformation and innovation in higher education.

Authors' Contributions

Authors equally contributed to this article.

Declaration

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

Transparency Statement

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

Acknowledgments

We hereby thank all participants for agreeing to record the interview and participate in the research.

Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

Funding

According to the authors, this article has no financial support.

Ethical Considerations

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were under the ethical standards of the institutional and, or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

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E-ISSN: 2645-3460