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Presenting a Model for Policy Formulation in Developing Entrepreneurship Education in Iran's Tourism Industry

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ABSTRACT

Iran's tourism industry, despite possessing unparalleled capacities, faces a profound gap between its existing potential and current performance, rooted in the systematic weaknesses of the human capital cultivation system for entrepreneurship. The present study was conducted with the aim of designing and presenting a model for policy formulation in developing entrepreneurship education within Iran's tourism industry. This research adopted a qualitative approach and utilized thematic analysis method. The participants consisted of 18 experts and key actors from three domains: public policy-making, entrepreneurship education, and tourism management, selected through purposive sampling with the technique of maximum variation. Data were collected via in-depth semi-structured interviews and analyzed using MAXQDA software through three stages of open, axial, and selective coding. The validity of the findings was ensured through participant review and data source triangulation. Data analysis led to the identification of three main themes and twelve sub-themes. The main themes include: "Integrated and Networked Institutional Governance" with sub-themes of cross-sectoral leadership and coordination, definition of roles and responsibilities of stakeholders, legal and supportive mechanisms, and sustainable resource provision; "Integrated, Context-Aware, and Ecosystem-Oriented Educational Program" with sub-themes of hybrid competencies, experiential and problem-based learning, content localization, and instructor empowerment; and "Learning System for Monitoring, Evaluation, and Continuous Improvement" with sub-themes of combined indicators of progress and impact, process evaluation, agile feedback mechanisms, and institutionalization of organizational learning. The proposed model, by integrating the three pillars of governance, education, and evaluation within a networked and dynamic structure, offers a process-oriented and indigenous framework for policy formulation in developing entrepreneurship education in Iran's tourism industry. This model addresses simultaneous coverage of micro levels, meso levels, and macro levels, targeting the fourfold gaps in context-awareness, institutional integration, outcome evaluation, and technology integration, and can serve as a roadmap for policymakers and planners.

KEYWORDS: Public policy-making, entrepreneurship education, tourism industry, policy formulation model, thematic analysis

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1. Introduction

In the global economic sphere of the 21st century, the tourism industry serves as a leading driver in job creation, economic growth, sustainable development, and intercultural interactions (Feola et al., 2024). According to assessments by reputable international organizations, this industry's share of global gross domestic product stands at nearly 10%, with projections indicating that the volume of international trips will reach 1.8 billion by 2030 (Ktisarn & Phuthong, 2026). This dynamic industry is currently amid rapid transformations, including technological shifts (such as the expansion of artificial intelligence and the digital economy), changing tourist preferences toward personalized and responsible experiences, and increasing environmental pressures (Christou et al., 2026). In such a competitive and complex environment, entrepreneurship is regarded as the engine of innovation, identification of emerging opportunities, creation of novel business models, and ultimately, ensuring the competitiveness and resilience of this sector. Extensive empirical evidence confirms that the flourishing of entrepreneurial talents in this field relies more on a targeted, systematic, and integrated educational process than on individual characteristics (Ali-Asghar et al., 2024; Uddin et al., 2022; Khetarpal et al., 2025).

Iran, endowed with a rich heritage in historical, cultural, natural, and geographical dimensions, possesses exceptional capacity to become one of the leading tourism hubs at the regional and global levels (Kazemi & Ranjbar Motalq, 2024). The country's upstream documents, from the Vision 1404 to development programs, emphasize ambitious goals such as attracting 20 million international tourists annually. However, the actual performance of this industry in the national economy reveals a significant gap from these aspirations and even global averages (Dehghanpour et al., 2024). Data indicate that tourism's contribution to Iran's GDP reaches at most about 5%, whereas the global average is around 10%. Additionally, the rate of new and entrepreneurial business creation in this sector is assessed as far below the country's true potential. This profound performance gap stems from multiple structural challenges, the most fundamental of which is the systematic weakness in the human capital development system for entrepreneurial, creative, and industry-specific expertise in tourism (Yadollahi Farsi & Sadeghi Ganji, 2026).

The central issue of this research is the absence of a coherent, indigenous, and executable policy framework for developing entrepreneurship education in Iran's tourism industry. Reviews show that efforts in this area have generally been insular, fragmented, short-term, and lacking a macro-strategic foundation (Ali-Asghar et al., 2024; Kahkha et al., 2023). These initiatives have often taken the form of single-topic training courses, limited workshops, or supplementary content in university curricula, adopting a predominantly theoretical and content-focused approach, while lacking essential integration with dynamic labor market needs, experiential learning processes, and post-educational support networks. Such incomplete programs are incapable of cultivating the hybrid competencies required for a successful tourism entrepreneur, which combine business skills, cultural awareness, environmental sensitivity, and the ability to create experiences (Christou et al., 2026). This policy vacuum manifests across three levels: At the macro level, the lack of effective coordination mechanisms between education authorities and tourism industry institutions has led to parallelism, policy conflicts, and resource wastage (Dehghanpour et al., 2024); at the meso level, deficiencies in support structures such as specialized incubators, accelerators, and venture capital funds that could assist graduates in transforming ideas into businesses are evident (Al Lawati et al., 2026); and at the micro level, the misalignment of educational content with Iran's specific tourism challenges and the neglect of active, experience-based teaching methods act as serious barriers (Adjimah et al., 2025).

Conducting this research is an imperative necessity from several perspectives. From a scientific and theoretical standpoint, while there exists a rich body of literature in entrepreneurship education, policy-making, and tourism, examinations (such as Dehghanpour et al., 2024; Ali-Asghar et al., 2024) indicate that these domains have been studied largely in isolation. In particular, there is a significant gap in providing an integrated, process-oriented, and indigenous model that synthesizes these three areas into an operational policy framework tailored to Iran's unique conditions. For instance, comprehensive models like Ali-Asghar et al. (2024) emphasize interactions among various factors but are not specifically focused on the tourism industry and do not delineate the concrete, step-by-step stages of policy formulation, implementation, and evaluation with necessary detail. International studies are primarily centered on micro-psychological levels (Uddin et al., 2022; Martins et al., 2022) or the design of specific educational programs (Feola et al., 2024; Christou et al., 2026), lacking a macro perspective on policy-making processes in a complex institutional context like Iran. The innovation of this research lies in directly addressing this gap through the “design and presentation of a multi-level policy formulation model” that simultaneously incorporates three key features: 1) integration of foundational theories from micro to macro levels, 2) indigenization based on the specific requirements and challenges of Iran's tourism industry, and 3) executability through clearly defined components, stages, responsible institutions, and evaluation mechanisms.

This research aims to bridge this gap, thereby providing a foundation for future investigations and policy actions. From a policy and practical perspective, stakeholders and high-level policymakers face a multitude of operational questions regarding the ideal model, stakeholders and their roles, and processes for formulation, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation; this study addresses these by offering an evidence-based operational roadmap. From an economic and social viewpoint, given the employment-generating and developmental nature of the tourism industry, fostering entrepreneurship in this sector can significantly contribute to resolving unemployment issues—particularly among youth and graduates—balanced regional development, increased foreign exchange earnings, and enhanced national economic competitiveness. Consequently, the main research question is: Considering the inherent complexities of this industry and the indigenous conditions of the country, what components, stages, institutional mechanisms, and evaluation pillars should the policy formulation model for developing entrepreneurship education in Iran's tourism industry encompass?

2. Theoretical Foundations and Research Literature

Designing an effective model for policy formulation requires establishing a foundation on robust and interdisciplinary theoretical pillars. This section provides an integrated conceptual framework through an in-depth examination of the three core concepts: “development policy,” “entrepreneurship education,” and “entrepreneurship in the tourism industry.” Understanding the dynamic and multi-level interactions among these concepts is key to moving beyond fragmented perspectives toward comprehensive and context-aware policy designs.

Development Policy

Within the framework of this research, development policy is not merely regarded as an administrative resolution or document but as a dynamic, rational, and cyclical process of institutional interactions, aimed at guiding socio-economic transformations toward macro and

long-term objectives. This process extends beyond the classical stages of agenda-setting, formulation, approval, implementation, and evaluation, emphasizing modern concepts such as “policy learnability” and “constructive feedback” (Dehghanpour et al., 2024). In the context of developing tourism entrepreneurship education, a successful policy must foster coordination across three fundamental dimensions of sustainability: the economic dimension, centered on creating competitive and profitable businesses; the social dimension, emphasizing equitable job creation, local community skill development, and strengthening social capital; and the environmental and cultural dimension, aimed at preserving natural and cultural heritage while enhancing destination identity (Kazemi & Ranjbar Motalq, 2024). Contemporary policy-making approaches advocate moving away from hierarchical models toward “networked governance,” whose success depends on the active and coordinated participation of diverse stakeholders, including government, the private sector, educational institutions, civil society, and particularly universities and local communities. For instance, research indicates that structured collaboration between tourism enterprises and local communities can lead to the collective creation of sustainable entrepreneurial opportunities by reducing resource barriers and interest conflicts (Poureidivand et al., 2024). Accordingly, development policy must design and facilitate the necessary institutional requirements for such interactions (Ver Steeg, 2022).

Entrepreneurship Education

Entrepreneurship education is today recognized as a transformative and multidimensional learning process, whose ultimate goal is not merely the transmission of theoretical knowledge but the shaping and strengthening of “entrepreneurial intention” through the comprehensive development of individual competencies (Martins et al., 2022). Empirical studies in Iran show that factors such as positive attitudes, supportive subjective norms, perceived behavioral control, and educational quality directly influence individuals’ intentions to become entrepreneurs (Attayi et al., 2022; Mahdizadeh et al., 2022). These competencies, in modern literature, encompass a broad spectrum, including cognitive and operational competencies such as opportunity identification, design thinking, and financial management; behavioral and attitudinal competencies such as creativity, resilience, and ethical commitment; and relational and contextual competencies such as networking, leadership, and cultural literacy for effective engagement with diverse contexts (Khetarpal et al., 2025; Feola et al., 2024). To cultivate such complex and multifaceted competencies, educational methods must transcend traditional lecture-based paradigms. In this regard, active and experiential methods—such as in-depth case studies, business simulations, field projects addressing real-world problems, and internships within entrepreneurial ecosystems—form the core of effective education. These approaches not only deepen theoretical understanding but also enhance individuals’ self-efficacy and psychological readiness for entering the practical arena and confronting real challenges (Hasan et al., 2025).

Entrepreneurship in the Tourism Industry

Entrepreneurship in the tourism industry can be defined as the process of creating novel economic and social value through the creative and responsible utilization of a destination’s unique resources and attractions (Poureidivand et al., 2024). The nature of this industry renders entrepreneurship therein a distinct and complex phenomenon, with its primary distinguishing features including the inherent dependence on delivering “experience” as the end product—a personalized blend of

services, culture, nature, and hospitality—and its inseparable linkage to culture and place (Feola et al., 2024). Success in this arena necessitates respect for, understanding of, and authentic representation of the host culture and the destination's unique characteristics, transforming the entrepreneur into a “skilled storyteller” capable of crafting an engaging and credible narrative of the place (Mion et al., 2026).

The complexity of this domain extends to its high sensitivity to external factors, including political, security, economic, and global health variables, which demands flexibility and resilience in business models (Al Lawati et al., 2026). Furthermore, due to its direct dependence on environmental health and the cultural integrity of the host community, tourism entrepreneurship carries an intrinsic commitment to sustainability, rendering destructive models unsustainable in the long term (Adjimah et al., 2025). In this context, novel paradigms such as “cultural entrepreneurship,” which emphasizes leveraging cultural assets as the core of business models and engaging with the political economy of place, and “sustainable tourism entrepreneurship,” which seeks a profitable balance across economic, social, and environmental dimensions, have emerged. The ultimate aim of these approaches is to foster businesses that preserve resources for future generations and ensure the sustainable improvement of local community welfare (Christou et al., 2026).

Public Policy Cycle

The public policy cycle, as a classic and process-oriented model (Lasswell, 1956; Anderson, 1975), provides a structured framework for analyzing and designing policies, wherein the policy-making process is divided into interconnected and sequential stages: agenda-setting, formulation, approval, implementation, evaluation, and revision. The distinguishing strength of this framework lies in its systemic and cyclical view of policy, such that the output of each stage (particularly evaluation results) serves as corrective feedback for preceding stages, transforming policy from a static document into a dynamic and learning process (Dehghanpour et al., 2024). In the present research, this framework plays the role of an operational skeleton and integrator. Specifically, it first provides a clear roadmap for the concrete steps in model formulation and second, acts as a pivot for integrating other theories: drawing from the entrepreneurship ecosystem framework in the problem identification and stakeholder engagement stage, from human capital theory in economic justification and goal-setting during formulation, from the theory of planned behavior in designing educational and supportive content during implementation, and from a synthesis of these theories in developing combined indicators during evaluation. The inherent emphasis of this framework on evaluation and feedback directly addresses the gap in evaluation systems identified in the existing literature and, by mandating the clarification of institutional roles in each stage, significantly contributes to resolving the challenge of institutional integration gaps in formulating entrepreneurship education policy for Iran's tourism industry.

An examination of the empirical background of related studies reveals that, despite valuable research in the separate domains of tourism entrepreneurship, entrepreneurship education, and policy-making, a central gap is evident in providing an integrated, process-oriented, and context-aware model for formulating policies to develop entrepreneurship education in Iran's tourism industry.

A systematic review of the empirical research background reveals three distinct yet incomplete streams of investigation, each illuminating only a portion of the broader puzzle. The first stream consists of international studies (e.g., Martins et al., 2022; Uddin et al., 2022), which meticulously explore the psychological mechanisms through which entrepreneurship education influences individuals' intentions and attitudes but lack a macro perspective for institutionalizing these findings within an industry-specific policy framework. The second stream (e.g., Feola et al., 2024; Christou et al., 2026) focuses on designing innovative educational programs and context-aware competencies, such as sustainability or intercultural skills, but remains at the meso level of educational institutions without developing macro mechanisms for cross-sectoral coordination. Conversely, domestic studies (e.g., Dehghanpour et al., 2024; Kazemi & Ranjbar Motalq, 2024) effectively delineate the policy context and evaluation frameworks for Iran's tourism industry but do not delve into the specialized content and processes for formulating "entrepreneurship education" policies.

In conclusion, the primary research gap is the absence of an integrated and process-oriented model that can simultaneously synthesize micro-level psychological findings, meso-level educational innovations, and macro-level institutional and indigenous considerations into an operational governance system for Iran's tourism industry. The innovation of this research lies in directly addressing this composite gap through the design of a "policy formulation model." This model deliberately interconnects various levels: from formulating macro objectives based on Iran's upstream documents and indigenous evaluation mechanisms, to determining educational content grounded in globally proven competencies and experiential pedagogical methods. Thus, this study bridges the gap between fragmented existing knowledge and policymakers' urgent need for an operational and testable framework by providing an executable and context-aware roadmap.

3. Research Methodology

The present research is an explanatory-exploratory study in terms of its objectives, aiming to discover and explain relationships among factors and to present a conceptual model. In terms of data collection and analysis methods, it falls under qualitative research. Given the complex, multidimensional, and context-dependent nature of the policy-making topic, the qualitative approach enables an in-depth exploration of experts' experiences, perceptions, and recommendations. The research design was implemented as a sequential exploratory approach, wherein qualitative data in the first stage formed the basis for developing the final model. For analyzing the policy-making process in this study, the public policy cycle model was employed as the overarching analytical framework. This model, rooted in the works of Harold Lasswell (1948), divides the policy-making process into interconnected and dynamic stages: agenda-setting, formulation, approval/legitimization, implementation, evaluation, and revision. The focus of this research is on the policy formulation phase. Accordingly, the field questions and explorations centered on how to design a model for this stage (including components, steps, responsible institutions, and mechanisms) to ensure its output can connect to subsequent stages of the cycle (implementation and evaluation). The study population comprised all experts, scholars, and key actors in the three topical domains: public policy-making, entrepreneurship education, and tourism management. To obtain in-depth and rich information, purposive sampling with the "maximum variation" technique was used to cover various dimensions of the issue from the perspectives of diverse stakeholders. Selection criteria for participants included at least 10 years of specialized experience and direct awareness or involvement in one of the research issue's dimensions.

Sampling and interviews continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. Theoretical saturation (i.e., the point at which data collection ceases because no new themes or relationships emerge) was reached after the 15th interview. However, to ensure greater reliability and conduct confirmatory interviews, three additional participants were interviewed, whose findings fully aligned with the extracted themes, reconfirming theoretical saturation. Thus, the final number of analyzed interviews was 18.

The primary data collection method in this research was in-depth semi-structured interviews. To guide the interviews and cover various research dimensions, a researcher-developed interview guide was designed based on the study's objectives, theoretical foundations (theory of planned behavior, human capital theory, entrepreneurship ecosystem, and policy cycle), and main research questions (sample questions are provided in Table 3 of the main article). This guide included main open-ended questions as well as potential probing questions to maintain focus on the research objectives while allowing flexibility and depth for discovering new insights. All interviews were audio-recorded with the full consent and awareness of participants and then fully transcribed for analysis. The duration of each interview ranged from 45 to 75 minutes.

For analyzing the data from the interviews, thematic analysis was employed. This process was conducted in three main stages:

1. Open coding: Careful reading of the interview texts and extraction of initial codes.
2. Axial coding: Organizing similar codes under categories (themes) and exploring relationships among them.
3. Selective coding: Integrating categories around a central core and shaping the final model.

The coding was performed using MAXQDA qualitative analysis software to enhance precision and organization. For greater transparency, a brief sample of the coding process is presented in the table below:

Table 1. Sample of Thematic Analysis Coding Process

Interview Text (Participant's Statement)	Open Coding (Initial Code)	Axial Coding (Sub-Theme)	Main Theme
For success, a powerful upstream institution like a Supreme Council must take on the coordination of ministries of science, tourism, and economy to ensure its decisions are implemented.	Need for a cross-sectoral coordinating institution; Necessity of executive authority for the coordinating body	Cross-Sectoral Leadership and Coordination	Integrated and Networked Institutional Governance

To enhance the reliability (dependability) of the findings, the coding process was independently conducted by the researcher and a colleague familiar with qualitative methods on 20% of the data, yielding an acceptable agreement rate (above 85%). Disagreements were resolved through discussion and consensus. To increase internal validity (credibility), strategies such as member checking (presenting summary findings to 4 experts for final confirmation) and data source triangulation (comparing perspectives from different expert groups) were employed.

Additionally, this research is subject to inherent limitations of the qualitative method, which must be considered: First, while the findings and proposed model offer depth and contextual richness, they lack statistical generalizability, and their applicability to other contexts depends on the reader's judgment and contextual similarity. Second, despite efforts toward neutrality, data interpretation is influenced by the researcher's preconceptions, which was mitigated through peer review and participant feedback processes. These limitations have been taken into account in interpreting the results and suggesting future studies (such as quantitative testing of the model).

4. Findings

The results derived from thematic analysis of in-depth interviews with experts indicate that formulating an effective policy for developing entrepreneurship education in Iran's tourism industry requires a systemic and multi-level perspective. The qualitative data analysis yielded three interconnected main themes, which constitute the foundational pillars of the proposed model. These themes are: 1) Integrated and Networked Institutional Governance, 2) Integrated, Context-Aware, and Ecosystem-Oriented Educational Program, and 3) Learning System for Monitoring, Evaluation, and Continuous Improvement. Each of these macro themes emerges from an interconnected set of sub-themes identified through the open and axial coding processes.

In-depth analysis of the qualitative data from expert interviews—structured around key research questions, including model components, formulation processes, institutional roles, and evaluation mechanisms—resulted in the formation of an integrated and multi-level model. This model directly addresses the central research gap, namely the absence of a process-oriented and indigenous framework for policy formulation in this domain. The findings demonstrate that the success of such a policy hinges on the dynamic and simultaneous interaction of three fundamental pillars, each comprising a collection of sub-concepts and operational components. These three pillars provide a coherent response to the various levels of analysis outlined in the integrated theoretical framework of the study: the macro level of governance, the meso level of program design and support institutions, and the micro level of educational and evaluative practices. In the following, these findings are explicated not in isolation but within a cohesive analytical narrative that highlights their internal connections and linkages to the theoretical foundations and research questions.

Table 2. Overview of Coding, Sub-Themes, and Key Identified Components

Main Theme	Sub-Themes	Key Identified Components
Integrated and Networked Institutional Governance	Cross-Sectoral Leadership and Coordination	- Establishment of a Supreme Steering Council with cross-sectoral authority - Designation of a national coordinating body - Design of inter-organizational conflict resolution mechanisms
	Definition of Stakeholder Roles and Responsibilities	- Diverse roles for universities (research-oriented, skills-oriented) - Triple responsibilities for the private sector (educational, supportive, job creation) - Innovative role for local communities as educational partners

Main Theme	Sub-Themes	Key Identified Components
	Establishment of Legal and Supportive Mechanisms	- Tax incentive packages for participating institutions - Regulatory facilitation for tourism startups by graduates - Legal support for innovative ideas
	Provision and Allocation of Sustainable Resources	- Creation of a national endowment fund for tourism entrepreneurship - Allocation of a percentage of tourism revenues to entrepreneurship education - Attraction of private sector investment in education
Integrated, Context-Aware, and Ecosystem-Oriented Educational Program	Hybrid Competencies	- Triad of competencies: technical-managerial, cultural-historical, environmental-social - Emphasis on digital literacy and AI in tourism - Development of intercultural soft skills
	Experiential and Problem-Based Learning Methods	- Field projects solving real-world problems - Tourism business simulations using emerging technologies - Internships within entrepreneurial ecosystems
	Content Localization Based on Iran's Advantages	- Integration of global principles with Iran's religious-cultural tourism requirements - Design of resilient content suited to sanction conditions - Attention to regional climatic and cultural diversity
	Empowerment of Facilitator-Instructors	- Internship programs for faculty in the tourism industry - Establishment of a network of tourism entrepreneurship instructors - Faculty promotion system based on practical experience
Learning System for Monitoring, Evaluation, and Continuous Improvement	Combined Progress and Impact Indicators	- Leading indicators: stakeholder satisfaction, learning quality - Lagging indicators: business creation rate, business survival rate - Impact indicators: regional development, cultural heritage preservation
	Process and Outcome Evaluation in the Policy Cycle	- Continuous evaluation concurrent with implementation - Stage-wise evaluation in each policy cycle phase - Long-term impact assessment
	Agile Feedback and Revision Mechanisms	- Online systems for registering issues and suggestions - Periodic feedback sessions with stakeholders - Rapid policy revision mechanisms
	Institutionalization of Organizational Learning	- Creation of a national knowledge and experience bank - Documentation system for lessons learned - Periodic revisions based on evaluation findings

Thus, the conceptual model is presented as follows:

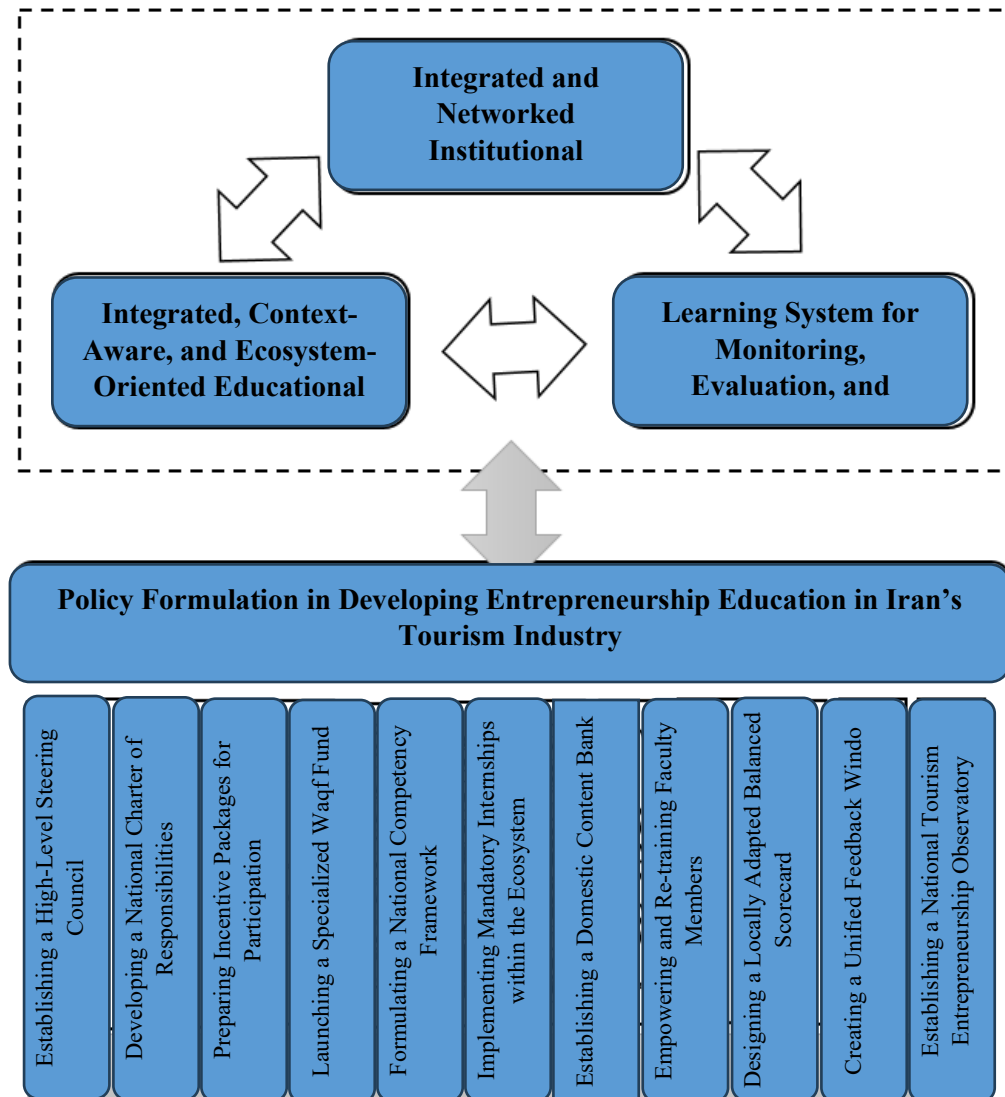


Figure1. Policy Formulation in Developing Entrepreneurship Education in Iran's Tourism Industry

Conceptual Figure Description

The presented conceptual figure serves as a visual manifestation of a dynamic and integrated model that clearly illustrates the multi-level and interactive nature of the policy-making process in this domain. At the core of this model, "Entrepreneurship Education Development Policy" is positioned not as a static document but as a dynamic and learning-oriented ultimate goal, toward whose realization, support, and continuous enhancement all system components align their orientations. The three primary pillars identified—integrated institutional governance, integrated and context-aware educational program, and learning-oriented evaluation system—are arranged around this central nucleus not in a linear or hierarchical sequence but as a network of interconnected and equivalent nodes. This networked structure underscores a key principle: the effectiveness and sustainability of the policy depend on the simultaneous presence, mutual interaction, and reciprocal reinforcement of these three pillars. None of these pillars can bear the burden of success alone or in a delayed turn; rather, like a living system, the absence or weakness of any one severely disrupts

the equilibrium and functionality of the entire ensemble. This perspective distinctly departs from traditional linear and static models, affirming the inherent complexity of entrepreneurship development in a multifaceted industry like tourism.

The connections between the central nucleus and the three pillars, as well as among the pillars themselves, are depicted as bidirectional and cyclical flows, symbolizing ongoing influence and mutual impact. In this configuration, the pillar of integrated governance functions as the skeleton and nervous system of the overall structure. By defining macro frameworks, assigning roles, approving supportive mechanisms, and allocating sustainable resources, this pillar provides the essential institutional and legal foundation for the birth and growth of the educational program. Without this foundation, even the best educational programs encounter structural barriers during implementation and are doomed to failure. Moreover, effective governance ensures the necessary execution guarantees and authority for the evaluation system, preventing its results from being overlooked. In contrast, the pillar of integrated educational programming forms the pulsating heart and motivating muscles of the model. It is this pillar that, through cultivating competent and entrepreneurial human resources, produces the tangible and concrete outputs of the policy. The quality of these outputs concretizes the policy's objectives and provides raw, vital data for judgment and evaluation. A weak educational program, even with sound governance, yields negligible outputs for evaluation and ultimately undermines the legitimacy of the entire system.

Within this dynamic interaction, the pillar of the learning-oriented evaluation system plays the role of the model's brain and immune system. It does not passively await final outcomes but actively and continuously monitors processes and assesses impacts. Its function is twofold: on one hand, by measuring indicators, it gauges the health and efficiency of the other two pillars (Is governance effective? Is the educational program achieving its goals?). On the other hand, and more importantly, through agile feedback mechanisms, it continuously channels powerful diagnostic information back to both the governance and educational programming pillars and, ultimately, to the central nucleus (the policy itself). These feedbacks serve as the essential fuel for improvement and adaptation. For example, evaluation data might reveal that a specific supportive mechanism (from the governance pillar) is ineffective or that a particular teaching method (from the educational pillar) is inefficient. This information triggers immediate revision and reform in those areas. Thus, this pillar transforms the model from a static structure into a living, self-correcting, and learning system capable of adapting to environmental changes (technology, market, macro conditions). Consequently, the conceptual figure not only delineates the model's components but also reveals the cyclical logic of its vitality: governance provides the foundation for education; education generates outputs and data for evaluation; and evaluation creates feedback for reforming governance and education. This continuous cycle serves as the driving engine for the evolution and ongoing advancement of the entrepreneurship education development policy in Iran's tourism industry.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The theme of integrated and networked institutional governance emerged as the most foundational pillar of the model from the perspective of the overwhelming majority of experts. This theme directly addresses the research question concerning institutional mechanisms and policy formulation stages, manifesting the practical application of entrepreneurship ecosystem theory and networked governance principles within Iran's complex context. Analysis of the interviews reveals that the root cause of previous efforts' failures lies not in a lack of good intentions but in a genuine institutional integration gap. Fragmentation, parallelism, and occasional policy conflicts among multiple institutions responsible for education, tourism, employment, and economic affairs are identified as the primary structural barriers. Therefore, the core of this theme revolves around designing mechanisms to foster coordination and alignment among these institutions.

At the heart of this mechanism is the need to establish a cross-sectoral leadership and coordination structure with requisite authority. Experts explicitly emphasized the necessity of forming a "Supreme Steering Council" or similar body that operates beyond traditional ministerial boundaries. This council (comprising high-level representatives from the Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology, the Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts, and Tourism Organization, the Ministry of Economy, the Chamber of Commerce, and leading academic institutions) should function as a regulatory, facilitative, and integrating center rather than a direct executor. This proposal advances beyond studies such as Dehghanpour et al. (2024), which highlighted coordination needs but did not delineate operational mechanisms. By setting macro directions, resolving policy conflicts, and overseeing integrated implementation, this council directly counters existing fragmentation. However, such a council alone is insufficient. Its success hinges on clearly defined and mutually accepted roles and responsibilities for each stakeholder. In this regard, findings indicate that universities must evolve from passive implementers of predetermined programs to active partners in generating adaptive knowledge and content design. Different universities, based on their missions and geographies (e.g., those in tourism-rich areas), can assume specialized roles. The private sector, too, cannot merely be a consumer of the workforce; it bears a threefold role as a provider of practical internship spaces, business mentors and advisors, and ultimately, an absorber of trained human capital. A subtle yet critical point in this section is the identification of local communities' innovative role. Often viewed as passive development subjects in traditional policy models, local communities are redefined here as educational partners and custodians of authentic indigenous knowledge. Their involvement in program design ensures content alignment with the destination's cultural, social, and environmental realities, emerging from within the community rather than imposed externally—a perspective aligned with international findings on sustainable tourism development and addressing part of the context-awareness gap.

To transcend idealism, this governance blueprint requires robust legal and supportive mechanisms. Interviewees stressed the need for incentives and execution guarantees. For instance, designing tax incentive packages for hotels, agencies, and enterprises that create effective internship capacities or support entrepreneurial graduates can encourage private sector engagement. Facilitating regulations for licensing and establishing tourism businesses by relevant graduates represents significant barrier removal. Additionally, creating legal frameworks for protecting intellectual property in innovative tourism ideas can mitigate entrepreneurship risks. Ultimately, the long-term sustainability of the entire system depends on providing and allocating diverse, sustainable resources. Exclusive reliance on annual government budgets, perpetually vulnerable to fluctuations

and shortages, renders the model fragile. Thus, innovative solutions were proposed, such as establishing a “National Endowment Fund for Tourism Entrepreneurship Development,” “allocating a percentage of stable tourism revenues from regions to local entrepreneurship education,” and “attracting private venture capital in education-focused tourism startups.” This approach elevates educational policy from a mere consumptive cost to a strategic investment with multifaceted financing mechanisms. Overall, the integrated governance theme, by linking institutions into an accountable network with incentives, lays the institutional groundwork for advancing the subsequent two themes.

The theme of integrated, context-aware, and ecosystem-oriented educational programming addresses the core of the learning process and the research questions on content, competencies, and teaching methods. This theme bridges the study's two foundational theories: human capital theory, emphasizing investment in specific competencies, and the theory of planned behavior, explaining the psychological mechanisms of entrepreneurial intention formation. Data analysis indicates that the existing traditional, theory-centric educational programs are not only inefficient but also at odds with tourism's experiential and complex nature. Thus, this theme centers on a radical redesign of the educational program.

The foundation of this redesign is defining a blended and multidimensional set of competencies required for a successful tourism entrepreneur in Iran. These competencies extend beyond hard business skills to form an interconnected triad: first, technical-managerial and digital competencies, such as financial management, digital marketing, and leveraging technologies like AI for service personalization. Second, cultural-historical and interpretive competencies, including deep understanding of cultural heritage, skills in compelling authentic storytelling, and intercultural interaction abilities. Third, environmental-social and ethical competencies, grounded in adherence to sustainable tourism principles, sensitivity to environmental preservation, and commitment to equitable community development. This triadic model directly targets the context-awareness gap, as global models often emphasize one or two dimensions, whereas Iran's cultural richness alongside environmental vulnerabilities necessitates simultaneous integration of all three. This finding aligns with trends in studies such as Feola et al. (2024) on intercultural competencies and Christou et al. (2026) on green entrepreneurship education but advances them through an integrated framework tailored to Iran's context.

Cultivating such complex competencies is impossible behind classroom desks using one-way transmission methods. Thus, the methodological core of this theme rests on experiential, problem-based, and ecosystem-oriented learning. Methods such as field problem-solving—requiring students to identify a real challenge in a tourism destination and propose a business plan— or advanced simulations mimicking the risk-laden launch of a tourism venture were highlighted. However, the most crucial method is immersive internships within entrepreneurial ecosystems. Rather than superficial internships, students should engage in specialized tourism incubators, accelerators, or alongside successful entrepreneurs as apprentices. This approach precisely impacts the mechanisms of the theory of planned behavior: experiencing success and failure in a real yet supportive environment transforms attitudes toward entrepreneurship; acquiring practical skills sharply increases perceived behavioral control (self-efficacy); and immersion in a network of mentors and supportive peers strengthens subjective norms. This explanation theoretically accounts for the effectiveness of experiential methods empirically demonstrated in studies like Martins et al. (2022) and Uddin et al. (2022).

However, adopting international active methods without indigenous content adaptation exacerbates gaps. Hence, deep content localization is another sub-pillar of this theme. This means

examples, case studies, simulation scenarios, and field projects must arise from Iran's specific conditions. For instance, designing business models for an eco-lodge in a water-stressed region or marketing a cultural-religious tour for international markets while considering unique requirements creates context-aware content. This necessitates close collaboration with local communities, indigenous entrepreneurs, and regional institutions. Ultimately, realizing this advanced educational program depends on empowering facilitator-instructors. Professors and trainers, largely trained in academic environments, require practical experience updates and a role shift from "knowledge transmitters" to "learning process facilitators." Proposed solutions include mandatory industry internships, experience-sharing networks between instructors and entrepreneurs, and promotion systems based on ecosystem participation. Overall, the educational programming theme portrays a dynamic learning system where blended and indigenous competencies are internalized through real experiences and interactions with supportive networks.

The theme of the learning-oriented monitoring, evaluation, and continuous improvement system serves as the driving engine for adapting and elevating the prior two pillars and responds to the final segment of the research question on evaluation mechanisms. This theme concretizes the crucial evaluation and feedback stage in the public policy cycle and provides a structured response to the identified outcome evaluation gap in the literature. Interview analysis reveals that the deficiencies in existing evaluation systems extend beyond their quantitative focus to include improper timing, failure to use results for learning, and lack of agile reform mechanisms. Thus, this theme emphasizes establishing a dynamic, multi-level, and impactful evaluation system.

The first step in designing this system is defining combined progress and impact indicators that transcend mere activity counts (e.g., number of courses or participants). These indicators should be categorized into three types: leading or process indicators measuring execution quality, such as stakeholder satisfaction (students, industry professionals) and program alignment with industry needs. Lagging or output indicators assessing direct results, such as the rate of new business creation by graduates. Special emphasis is placed on long-term impact indicators that gauge the policy's ultimate goals. An index like "survival and growth rate of created businesses after 3 and 5 years" is among the most proposed, as it demonstrates the program's ability to train resilient entrepreneurs rather than merely credentialed ones. Other impact indicators could include "sustainable employment creation in destinations" or "impact on cultural heritage preservation and revival." This combined approach directly addresses critiques in international literature (e.g., Babatunde et al., 2021) on purely quantitative and short-term evaluations.

However, designing smart indicators alone is insufficient. Timing and utility of evaluation are the next critical aspects. Evaluations should not be isolated events at the end of a 5-year cycle, as they would only serve to judge the past rather than improve the future. Instead, the system must be process-oriented and continuous, with data collection and analysis occurring concurrently with educational program implementation at regular intervals (e.g., annually or semi-annually). This "evaluation alongside implementation" approach enables rapid identification of shortcomings, goal deviations, and market need changes—a perspective fully aligned with Dehghanpour et al. (2024)'s emphasis on evaluation across all policy cycle stages.

To transform continuous evaluation information into action, agile feedback and revision mechanisms are essential. The system must be equipped with diverse and accessible channels for direct stakeholder input. A proposal emerged for an "interactive online monitoring and grievance system," where entrepreneurs, alumni, and instructors can log issues, suggestions, and experiences. However, success lies not in data collection but in accountability and follow-through. The system should ensure every report or suggestion is routed to the responsible entity within a specified

timeframe (e.g., 15 working days), with responses and actions communicated back to the stakeholder. This process builds trust and elevates the system from bureaucratic exercise to a living management tool. Such a mechanism transforms policy from a static document into an adaptive, learning entity capable of swiftly adjusting to environmental changes (technology, tourist preferences, economic conditions).

Finally, the output of this entire process must not be scattered or buried in administrative reports. Institutionalizing organizational learning is the concluding and completing stage of the cycle. This entails systematically documenting evaluation findings, lessons from successes and failures, and best field practices into a “National Knowledge and Experience Bank for Tourism Entrepreneurship Development.” As a public resource, this bank should inform course revisions, new content design, instructor training, and even macro policy reforms. Thus, learning becomes embedded at the systemic level, ensuring every action builds on accumulated knowledge from past initiatives. Overall, the third theme demonstrates that evaluation is not a cost or end-of-process formality but the cornerstone of continuous improvement, transforming policy into a living, learning entity.

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Authenticity of the texts, honesty and fidelity has been observed.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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