

BUDGETARY SLACK PROBLEMS AMONG IRAQI PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES

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Abstract

Iraq's education ministry is concerned about the cost of implementing education initiatives to suit the urgent local demands of its public universities. This paper is aiming to investigate the influence of budget quality on budgetary slack, moderated by government spending transparency among Iraqi public universities. The budgetary justification and accounting system for these reforms should play a vital role in providing transparent and high-quality financial information that meets the requirements for monitoring universities' performance and making decisions that best serve the Iraqi educational agenda via public universities. The questionnaire was distributed among 149 respondents in Iraqi Public Universities. The unit of analysis were the administrative department, accounts, and auditing department staff such as directors, managers, and supervisors working at Iraqi Public Universities. The findings indicated that there is a positive significant relationship between budget quality and budget slack. In addition, government spending transparency significantly moderates budget quality and budgetary slack. This study found that budgetary slack exclusively aims to improve the probability that actual public universities' performance should exceed expectations. Underestimating the quantity of revenue or income to be generated or overestimating the number of costs is required to be controlled. This study suggests that there is a need to improve financial quality and standardization so that corruption and fraud could be avoided. Therefore refinements in financial politics from time to time can help to make changes in financial disclosures as required.

Keywords : Budget Slack, Government Spending Transparency, Budget quality.

Introduction

The allocation of funding to higher education has been under revision by both the state and federal governments for several years. Since 1985, state support for higher education has declined significantly, from 45.1 percent in 1985 to 35.8 percent in 1999 (Santos, 2007). In addition, Eze, et.al., (2020), suggested that inconsistency in funding and a lack of a suitable model with which to draw adequate budgetary provisions for the education sector, they suggest that the Federal Ministry of Education use the identified model in its budgetary provisions for the education sector. This will address the issue of inconsistency in financing. This 21% decline over a 15-year period has been devastating to several universities across the country. Tuition has been increased in order for institutions to sustain revenue, as have Public donations and grant contracts.

Due to the variability in the amount of money received by universities, many have rethought their resource allocation strategies. Previously, funding was allocated based on faculty performance, but when the financial crisis struck between 2001 and 2010, institutions were forced to reassess their funding strategies (Santos, 2007). Numerous colleges now allocate their resources using a data-driven strategy. The literature review's budget allocation part discusses the state support of higher education, higher education income and expenditures, budget types, and budget models. Each state finances its colleges and universities differently. Numerous governments have changed to a performance-based budgeting method for higher education spending over the previous decade. This type of funding model is contingent on an institution's performance against predefined measures and compensates resources for achieved levels of performance (Schmidlein, 1999; McLendon, & Hearn, 2013; Vale, et.al., 2022).

Generally, public institutions of higher education get state funding, whereas Public universities do not. Carol et al. (2004) and Broadbent, & Poon, (2015) discovered that higher education institutions receive significant funding through state allocations, tuition, and local allocations. When funds are insufficient, institutions frequently hike tuition to make up for the difference (Carol et al., 2004). Public colleges are self-supporting solely through tuition and fees. Additionally, many schools receive funding from benefactors and grants. State support enables institutions to avoid raising tuition needlessly to cover operating costs (Carol et al., 2004). A university's budget is made up of revenues and expenses. State appropriations and federal funds are the two main sources of funding for universities. State funds come from federal appropriations or state grants and contracts. Federal funds are used for student financial aid in the form of scholarships, loans, and work-study. Tuition is another source of revenue for higher education institutions (McLendon, & Hearn, 2013; Broadbent, & Poon, 2015; Teixeira, Biscaia, & Rocha, 2022).

Despite the centrality and significance of budgeting in business operations, practitioners and academics have raised concerns about how budgeting really works in practice, as well as the harmful and beneficial effects budgeting has on public institutions. Budgetary slack is one of the concerns with managerial behavior in budgeting. "The excess of the amount allocated in an area over that which is essential," Merchant (1981) defined budgetary slack. Although budgetary slack is regarded as dysfunctional behavior by academics, "budgetary slack may be considered a positive thing and can be acceptable provided it is within the permissible range and does not

clash with the company's aims and ambitions," according to the business viewpoint(Zainun Tuan Mat et al., 2018).

The public has sought greater responsibility, particularly in the handling of public finances, as the frequency of bribery, corruption, and fund misappropriation scandals among public officials have increased (Majid, 2017; Zainun Tuan Mat et al., 2018). According to Transparency International Report (2022), "Iraq is the 157 least corrupt nation out of 180 countries, according to the 2021 Corruption Perceptions Index reported by Transparency International." Table 1 is showing the corruption perceptions index in Iraq which is appreciated to 23 index points in 2021.

Table 1: Iraqi Corruption Perception Rank and Index.

Years	Corruption Perceptions Rank	Corruption Perceptions Index
2003	133	22
2004	145	21
2005	158	22
2006	163	19
2007	179	15
2008	180	13
2009	180	15
2010	178	15
2011	182	18
2012	169	18
2013	171	16
2014	170	16
2015	161	16
2016	166	17
2017	169	18
2018	168	18
2019	162	20
2020	160	21
2021	157	23

Source: Transparency International Report (2022) and <https://take-profit.org/en/statistics/corruption-index/iraq/>

The index offers an annual snapshot of the relative degree of corruption. The maximum level was 22 index points reported and the minimum was 13 index points. During that time, Iraq's average score was 18 points, with a low of 13 points in 2008 and a high of 23 points in 2021. In addition, Iraq fell to 157th rank in terms of corruption in 2021. The lowest level was 133, while the highest was 182. Corruption may be detected in a variety of ways, the most prevalent of which are internal and external audits, as well as reports, as you can see in the graphical representation of the corruption perception index and ranking in Graph 1 shown below.

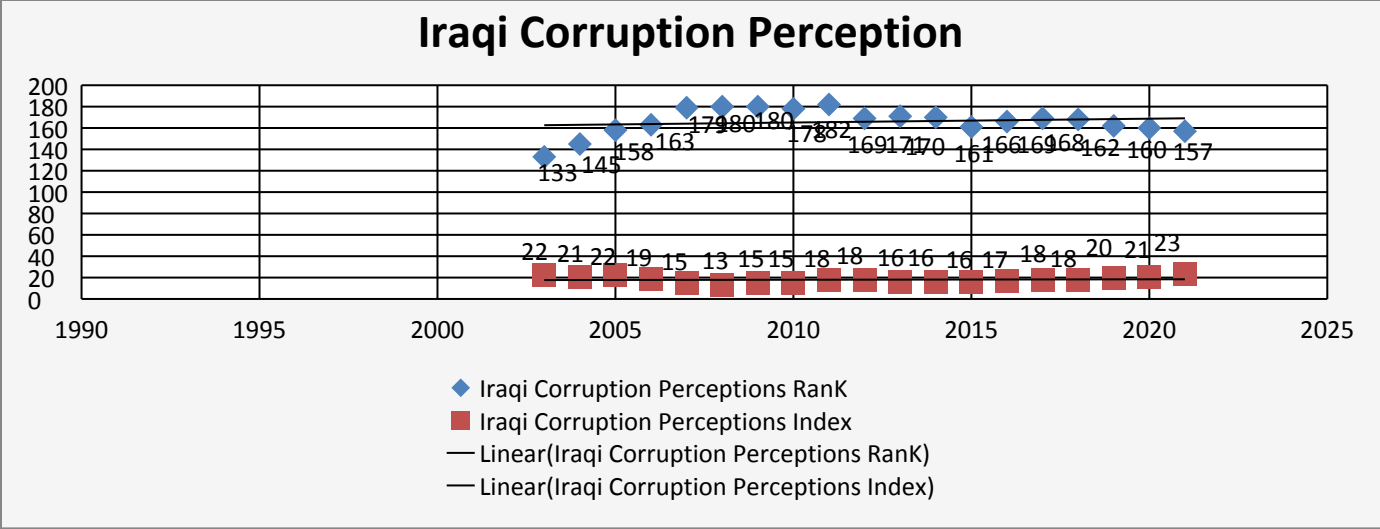


Figure 1: Iraqi Corruption Perception

Source: Researcher Generated based on Transparency International Report (2022) Data.

Despite the fact that the country's anti-corruption measures and framework have grown since 2005, it still lacks a solid and comprehensive integrity system (Maxime Agator, 2013). There is a huge political influence on anti-corruption authorities, Iraqi public departments, and the politicization of corruption concerns, as well as a weak civil society, insecurity, a lack of resources, and insufficient legislative measures, significantly impede the government's ability to effectively combat rising corruption in a government department and government universities. Therefore in the coming years, it will be a great challenge for the Iraqi government to combat financial corruption and ensure integrity among public Universities. This research is conceptually aiming to investigate the budget slack among Iraqi public Universities. When drafting a budget statement for the following financial term, budgetary slack is the practice of overestimating costs and/or underestimating predicted income. In addition, public universities in Iraq face critical budgetary problems, which require urgent attention in order to avoid over or under-budgeting.

Literature Review

Budgeting

Governments, organizations, and people all use budgets to estimate revenue and spending for a specific future period of time. A budget is a financial plan for a specific time period, usually a year, which has been shown to considerably improve the success of any financial endeavor. One of the early management accounting approaches was the budget (cf. Argyris, 1952; Faulkner, 1961). Budgeting difficulties have aroused the interest of academics in management accounting (Weetman, 2006; Fisher et al., 2008; Eze, Asogwa, Obetta, Ojide, & Okonkwo, 2020; Hatami-Marbini, et.al., 2022; El Hamshary, Abouhamad, & Marzouk, 2022). The researchers defined the “aim and nature of the budget system, went over the budget process in detail, explained the benefits of budget planning, and proposed behavioral budgeting features” (see, Weetman, 2006).

The budget should be created in accordance with the organization's goals and the distribution of available resources. A budget is an important tool in business for aligning workers' actions and efforts with the shared goals of the firm (Covaleski et al., 2003; Fadda, et. al., 2021). Budget mechanism is used as a planning tool, allowing for more efficient resource distribution to various departments and centers (see Magner et al., 2006; Weetman, 2006). Budgeting is an essential component of management accounting and it assists in the effectiveness and execution of managerial tasks. According to Weetman (2006), the budget process aids in planning, control, communication, and performance evaluation. Budget Force Management's readiness to establish formal planning processes that encourage all departments to contribute to the creation of the overall budget was characterized by Weetman (2006). This planning will encourage departments to behave as expected, and those that have not met their goals will receive extra attention. The budget should be used to achieve the traditional goals of assessing the performance of certain organizational activities or members (Abernety & Brownell, 1999). Budgeting is used to control university spending and more efficiently distribute resources (Mah'd, 2010).

All Iraqi Public universities are obliged to implement and approve a university budget, which must be reported to the MoHE at the start of each year. Despite the fact that all Public universities submit the budget format to the MoHE, each university's implementation of this format differs. The dissemination of budget information and the transmission of budget decisions to operational levels has been repeatedly advocated in the literature (Mah'd, 2010). Operational managers have access to confidential information about their responsibilities and have a greater understanding of their operational domains than top management. Procedures that enable subordinates to attain the university's and department's strategic goals result in better decision-making and increased subordinate performance (Mah'd et al., 2013). The following is a synopsis of selected literature on participatory budgeting.

Slack

The inability to precisely forecast anything from the complete social and physical aspects that directly impact the decision-making behavior of the individuals in the organization is referred to as environmental uncertainty (Milliken, 1987 in Astuti 2007). The absence of knowledge, inability to find out the findings, and incapacity to assess the possibilities are all signs of environmental ambiguity. Planning becomes difficult in instances where the operation is unclear and future occurrences are more unpredictable. According to Govindarajan (1986), the environment, which includes rivals, consumers, suppliers, regulators, and needed technology, is the primary source of uncertainty for a firm. If you believe the environment is unpredictable and you don't comprehend how the environment's components will vary, you'll have a high level of environmental uncertainty (Milliken, 1987).

According to Duncan (1972), when environmental uncertainty is minimal (the environment is reasonably constant), humans may forecast the future state and plan more precisely the actions that will be taken. Members of the organization can utilize it in a somewhat steady situation to make correct judgments that benefit the organization. Subordinates who actively engage in budget preparation and work in a low-uncertainty setting may be able to generate slack in the budget because they can deal with uncertainty and foresee the future. Instead, as the environment

becomes more unclear, forecasting the future becomes more difficult, making it more difficult to create budgetary slack.

Budgetary Slack

The term budget slack is explained as “Budgetary slack is a built-in cushion in a budget that seeks to increase the chances of the actual performance being better than the budget. There are two ways to accomplish budgetary slack: underestimate the amount of revenue or income to be generated or overestimate the number of expenses that are to be incurred.”(Dunk, 1993) and Budgetary slack can be caused when managers underestimate predicted sales in order to keep a new product line within an easy-to-achieve range. When drafting a budget statement for the following financial term, budgetary slack is the practice of overestimating costs and/or underestimating predicted income. It's a buffer set by upper management or lower-level managers to help develop budget estimations that aren't too difficult to meet. Budgetary slack is a built-in margin in a budget that seeks to improve the probability of actual performance exceeding the budget. Budgetary slack may be achieved in one of two ways: underestimating the quantity of revenue or money to be generated or overestimating the number of costs to be incurred(Robinson et al., 2018). Budgetary slack is a built-in buffer in a budget that aims to improve the likelihood of actual performance exceeding the budget. Budgetary slack may be achieved in one of two ways: underestimating the quantity of revenue or income to be generated or overestimating the number of costs to be incurred (Dunk, 1993). The purposeful underestimation of anticipated revenue or over-estimation of budgeted costs is known as budgetary slack. This gives managers a higher chance of "making their numbers," which is especially essential if performance reviews and bonuses are based on meeting budgetary targets (Damrongsukniwat et al., 2015).

Budget Quality

A budget is an estimate of income and expenditures for a given future period of time, and it is often created and updated on a regular basis. An individual, a group of people, a corporation, a government, or pretty much anything else that earns and spends money may all have budgets. One can evaluate the quality of a budget based on projected income. A well-planned, adaptable, realistic, and well-communicated budget is essential. Consistency is the key to a quality budget (Erlina et al., 2017). Budgeting is a long-term process, so the more frequently you keep track of your spending, evaluate how well you're doing toward your financial objectives, and search for methods to cut back on unnecessary spending, the more positive effects your budget will have on your financial life (Albassam, 2015).

Government Spending Transparency

An open and transparent budget process promotes societal trust that people's opinions and interests are recognized as well as responsible use of public funds. Budgeting that is open and inclusive helps to produce more effective, responsive, and equitable public policy. Budget transparency is the complete, timely, and organized presentation of all pertinent financial information(Caamaño-Alegre et al., 2013; Citro et al., 2021). In this way, accountability the ability to hold authorities accountable for their actions is achieved via openness. Trust between a

government and those it rules will be inadequate in the absence of openness and accountability. Transparency encourages accountability and gives locals the chance to learn more about what's happening in their communities. Improved policy decisions arise from the better engagement between citizens and elected officials and from a more educated constituency. On the basis of above literature review the following research hypothesis are proposed:

- H1 : *There is a significant relationship between budget quality and budgetary slack.*
- H2 : *Government spending transparency significantly moderate between budget quality and budgetary slack.*

Methodology and Empirical results

Methodology

This paper utilized a qualitative research approach which is particularly useful for understanding certain aspects of social life and its methods, which (generally) generate words rather than numbers and not data for analysis. Therefore, the questionnaire was distributed among 149 respondents in Iraqi Public Universities. The unit of analysis were the administrative department, accounts and auditing department, directors, managers, and supervisors at Iraqi Public Universities. These managers are responsible for the activities related to budget preparation. The researcher distributed an adapted questionnaire using a 5-point Likert scale.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework includes budget quality as independent variable influencing budgetary slack. The conceptual framework is supported government spending transparency as moderating variable.

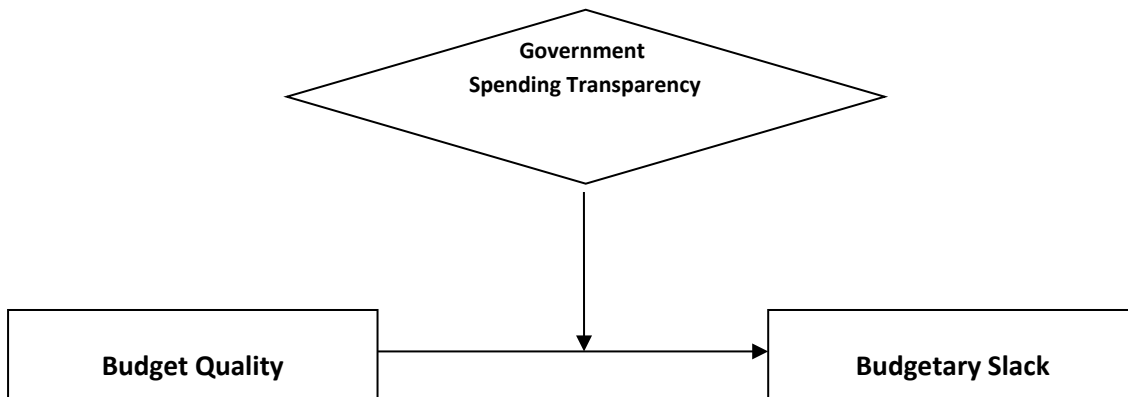


Figure 2 : Research Framework

Empirical Analysis

Statistic Package for Social Science (SPSS) was used to evaluate the data. In this study, a total of 149 questionnaires were distributed to the administrative department, accounts, and auditing department staff such as directors, managers, and supervisors, and all questionnaires were returned. It means that have 100% of the response rate. The demographic profile shows that the majority of the respondents were between 31 to 50 years (121; 81.2%), Male (108; 72.5%), working experience of more than five years (133; 89.3%). The respondents were mostly Muslims (148; 99.3%) and they were mostly earning between U\$D 1000 to 2500 (115; 77.2%) and they were bachelors (36; 24.2%) and Masters (67; 45%).

Construct Reliability

Construct reliability evaluation normally emphasizes on composite reliability as an evaluation of a construct's internal consistency (Hair et al., 2011). Apart from Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability does not consider that all indicators are similarly reliable, creating it more suitable for PLS-SEM, which prioritizes indicators according to their reliability during model estimation (Hair et al., 2011). In PLS-SEM reliability is measured using Cronbach's Alpha and composite reliability (CR). PLS-SEM prioritizes indicators (constructs) according to their reliability during estimation (Hair et al., 2011). PLS-SEM aims at maximizing the endogenous construct (R² values or square multiple correlations) in the path model. Generally, R² values for the endogenous construct can be described as respectively strongly, moderate and weak. R² is useful to examine our total variation in the structural model, in particular, the highest R² values, the highest total variation include in a path model.

Table 3
Summary of Measurement Model

Variables	AVE	Composite Reliability	R - Square	Cronbach's Alpha	Communality	Redundancy
Budget Quality	0.965	0.996386		0.995969	0.964998	
Budgetary Slack	0.96424	0.996639	0.99829	0.99629	0.964235	0.472687
Government Spending Transparency	0.96425	0.996306		0.99588	0.964249	

Discriminant Validity

Discriminant validity is the degree to which an extent does not correlate with conflicting constructs from which it is hypothetical to differ (Malhotra, 2004). Fornell and Larcker (1981) recommended that the square root of AVE in each latent variable can be utilized to establish discriminant validity if this value is greater than other correlation values between the latent variables.

Table 4
Discriminant Validity

Variables	Budget Quality	Budgetary Slack	Government Spending Transparency
Budget Quality	0.982343117		
Budgetary Slack	0.978547	0.981954683	
Government Spending Transparency	0.968451	0.978321	0.981961812

Hypothesis Testing

As PLS-SEM is considered a soft modelling approach was employed as a finalized model after resolving the reliability and validity assumptions. The proposed hypotheses are tested using this finalized model.

Hypothesis	Relationships	Original Sample (O)	Sample Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (STDEV)	P-Value	T Statistics (O/STERR)	Acceptance / Rejection
H1	Budget Quality → Budgetary Slack	0.333714	0.324742	0.073831	0.04383	4.519949	Accepted
H2 (Moderation)	Budget Quality ↑ Govt_Spending Transparency → Budgetary Slack	0.54089	0.487789	0.084486	0.03449	6.402123	Accepted

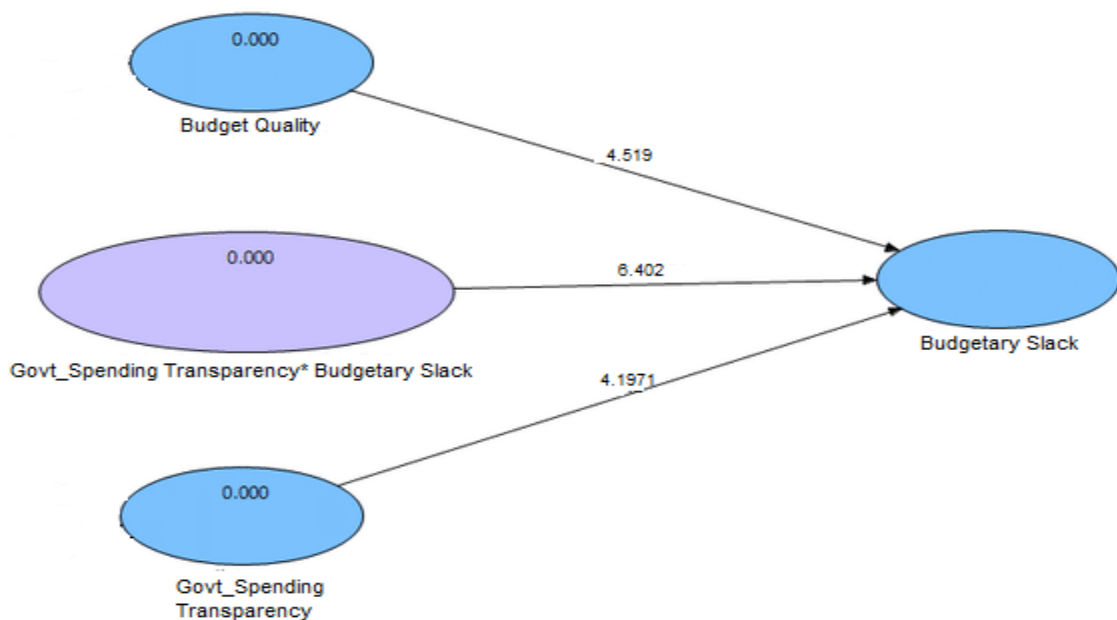


Figure 3 : Structural empirical Model

The availability of control mechanisms in budgeting, in anticipation of slack, is the next major step in attaining an organization's goals and objectives to match what has been planned. According to the goal setting theory, the determinant factor for a person's effort level is determined by the individual's own objectives and the amount of his responsibility for the goal, budget preparation is a kind of duty for him as the party who is permitted to do so. In addition, Octariani et al., (2017), budget clarity and target accuracy, among other things, have an impact on the budget's quality. A budget that is created with clear and detailed information on all parts of what it contains, such as cost items, inputs, outputs, and outcomes, must be stated explicitly, clearly, and easily understood by those who are responsible for budget development and implementation. Furthermore, the budget process must be timely (given on time), precise in its allocations and computations, and include information on all groups that would benefit from the budget's advantages.

Furthermore, Kenis (1979) conducted research on the quality of the budget based on its characteristics, and the results show that the overall characteristics of the budget objectives (participation, clarity of objectives, feedback, evaluation, and budget target difficulty level) play an important role in developing or behavior toward the budget. Collins (1978) investigated how budget characteristics (accuracy, estimate certainty, controllability, and participation) interacted with personality variables to predict budgetary response attitudes and discovered that overall budget characteristics were positively and significantly correlated with response attitude.

Budget participation lowers the generation of budgetary slack, and greater strategic planning participation minimizes the creation of budgetary slack (Baerdemaeker & Bruggeman, 2015). Unlike previous studies (Dunk, 1993; Robinson et al., 2018), which looked at the effect of budget quality (based on its characteristics) on various variables in terms of the party creating and executing the budget, this study looked at the effect of budget quality on members of the budget committee who are involved in budget discussion and oversight.

Empirical recommendations

The budget can give decision-makers relative information. Budget management is done by comparing actual expenditure to budgeted spending. As a result, higher education budgets should be used for policy direction, communication, incentive control, tracking resource allocation, and accountability (Bedford, Speklé, & Widener, 2022; Li, Huwei, & Yanlin 2022; Weetman, 2006; Moll, 2003). Several studies have found that the budgeting process at universities has severe behavioral consequences that may impair the capacity to fulfill goals while staying within budgeted spending limits (Emmanuel, Otley & Merchant, 1990). The distinctive features of strategic management in higher education have been investigated (ThysClement & Wilkin, 1998; Shattock, 2000; Sari, & Dwirandra, 2019; Li, Huwei, & Yanlin, 2022; Aladejare, 2022). According to Shattock (2000), competitiveness, opportunism, money creation, cost reduction, relevance, quality, and reputation are the buzzwords for successful institutions in the modern environment.

According to Ho et al. (2006), universities account for 24% of budgeting research. Furthermore, due to the significant amount of money that comes from Public funds, 83 percent of which originates from the United States, budgeting is extremely essential for American colleges (Ho et al., 2006). This confirms the assumption that Public colleges require larger budgets to deploy fewer resources than public universities, which get government financing or grants in some form or another. Higher education establishments throughout the world devote substantial resources to strategy and budget planning to improve institutional performance and fulfill the demands of external stakeholders (Lillis, 2002).

The notion of a university, as well as its finance and enrolment issues, has been stimulated. Hardy (1988) investigated the experiences of prominent Canadian institutions that sought to distribute resources using a rational analytical framework during times of financial limitations. The application of strategic planning in the setting of a university has been extensively researched in the literature. Moreover, ThysClement and Wilkin's (1998), goals are to determine if European universities have strategic plans and, if so, to create and implement them based on university replies. His methodological approach, which comprised interviews with notable professors from five different schools as well as questionnaires, was given to top administrators from European universities. The study found that universities differ from one another because they utilize professional bureaucratic models and centripetal and centrifugal internal intervention methods. The literature has looked into the distribution of resources in universities. While some academics looked at the influence of staff on budget allocation, others focused on the role of the state in university budgeting. ThysClement and Wilkin (1998) noted that the ability of academic department heads to directly influence budget allocations within the university may be limited.

Budgetary control is advised, which should include assigning different managers accountable for their department's budget. Managers examine the actual expenditure, compare it to budget estimates, and make adjustments to future spending to align reality and projections. In order to gain important insight into the influences that organizational governance factors have on justifiable fund allocation decisions and to double-check what developments have been made on previously allocated funds to these Public Universities in Iraq, future mix method research on budgetary slack within public universities may examine fund balance trends at multiple universities over the past ten or twenty years. Beyond the parameters of the current investigation, this research should be continued. Notably, further research into private universities and colleges in Iraq, comprehensive institutions, community colleges, and technical schools are also necessary.

Implications

The study's limitations will give direction and instructions for future research. First, using the budgetary factors of Universities in Iraq, this study solely looks at the influence of budget slack perspective on Iraqi Universities Financial problems. More research is needed to expand this study by including another component, which further elaborates sub-dimensions of budgetary slack. When drafting a budget statement for the following financial term, budgetary slack is the practice of overestimating costs and/or underestimating predicted income. It's a buffer set by

upper management or lower-level managers to help develop budget estimations that aren't too difficult to meet. Budgetary slack is a built-in buffer in a budget that aims to improve the likelihood of actual performance in an organization exceeding the budget. Budgetary slack may be achieved in one of two ways: underestimating the quantity of revenue or money to be generated or overestimating the number of costs to be incurred. Therefore, when drafting a budget statement for the following fiscal term, budgetary slack is defined as the habit of overestimating costs and/or underestimating predicted income. It's a cushion established by upper management or lower-level managers to help them generate budget forecasts that aren't too difficult to meet.

Conclusion

Budgetary slack and budget quality can emerge when management underestimates predicted sales in order to keep a new product line within an easy-to-achieve range. Budgetary control is a term used in finance to describe how revenue and expenses are managed. In practice, this entails comparing actual revenue or spending against anticipated income or expenditure on a regular basis to see whether corrective action is necessary. Budgeting simply serves as a model of how the company may perform financially if particular tactics, events, or objectives are implemented. The management in public universities should project income and control expenses, and subsequently, drag the losses to profitability. However, the numerous functions that unqualified fund balances within the public university in Iraq, as well as the Higher education budgetary policy design, need attention. The impact of participatory elements requires specific monitoring, as a result, although only in the extremely specific set of higher education, this research has improved our knowledge of budgetary slack. Therefore, further study in many similar circumstances is required to better understand how slack resources might be used as a campus resource. Likewise, the policy and practice can be improved and protected from further being exploited.

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