The Quality of Educational Services in Islamic Azad University: A Case Study of Sciences and Research Branch, Tehran, Iran

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Considering the high importance of supplying and nurturing an efficient work force and the role of educational services in this regard, many studies have considered the quality of these services. Few, however, have investigated students' views in this regard. Therefore, the present study attempted to assess the quality of educational services from the students' perspective. Data were collected using Fadkh and Bagvat's educational services questionnaire administered to 372 university students and analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Reliability of the questionnaire was estimated using Cronbach's alpha coefficient and experts' views were sought for validity assessment. The results showed that the quality of education in Islamic Azad University, Science and Research Branch and the quality of educational services in terms of faculties management system, interpersonal relationships between the faculty members and facilities were assessed by students as above the average. However, students believed that teaching skills of the faculty members were below the average and, therefore, undesirable. Based on the findings, faculties were significantly different in the quality of education according to the students. Finally the students of college of Technical Engineering were believed to have the lowest level of quality; the students of the Faculty of Basic Sciences, on the other hand, evaluated the educational services quality as really high. The results point to the conclusion that educational institutions should care about the quality of educational services and students' views about these services to improve their students' educational performance and, consequently, their status.

Keywords: quality, educational services, quality of faculties, management, behavior and interpersonal relationship, teaching skills

Introduction

The quality of everything is a part of its nature and is naturally considered as part of that thing. Quality has been defined from different perspectives and approaches (Shani et al, 2006). Many of the popular definitions of quality emphasize the relationship between quality, need and satisfaction. Parasuraman et al. (1988) define quality as the distance between consumer's expectations and perceptions. The concept of quality concerns all sections of an organization and is intended to increase efficiency of the whole system so that it holds back factors disrupting quality. Its ultimate goal is complete adaptation with the features expected by the customers with the minimum cost for the organization, which consequently leads to an improvement in competitiveness (Bradley, 2006). A general definition for quality includes the features of the product or services which can meet explicit or implied needs of the customers (Zahedi et al., 2000).

Higher education organizations as the most prominent representative in work force investment have an important role in supplying and nurturing an efficient work force. Considering their tertiary mission including education, research and providing services and the determining role they play in different economical, social, cultural and political fields, a high proportion of the budget is allocated to assisting these organizations. Therefore, assuring their performance quality is an undeniable requirement to prevent the human and material resources from being wasted and also to foster competitiveness for the future world which is the most important factor for the survival of any organization (Bazargan, 2004). One of the best sources of evidence for assessment and evaluation of the quality of educational services is the views of the students who are at the receiving end of these services. The purpose of the present study is to consider the views of the students of Islamic Azad University in Iran and their perceptions about the appropriateness of the available services.

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Literature Review

During the recent years, the quality of education has been the main concern of academic organizations focusing their activities and programs mainly on this issue. In majority of the countries in the world, comprehensive development and growth has become possible and effective by the help and support of an efficient, effectual and productive higher education system (Seyyed Javadin and Kimasi, 2006). Improving the quality of higher education is a continuous effort to constantly improve processes, productions and services provided by an organization in order to satisfy the customers' needs, enhance competitiveness and achieve an optimal level of performance (Zomorrodian, 1998). For promoting the quality of education, customers should be first identified and known. The major step towards developing quality improvement programs is knowing the expectations and perceptions of quality desired by the customers receiving specific services or articles. Today, the issue of improving the quality of academic education is an inseparable part of political and official discourse of the authorities in charge of the higher education system in different countries though no attention has been paid to the concept of quality and the required constructions for its improvement. Even in some organizations it is stated that so far the policy of universities has been to help quantitative development and from now on the attention will be shifted towards quality enhancement. These analyses and statements obviously indicate that there is a lack of awareness and knowledge of this concept as quantitative and qualitative development cannot be essentially considered as separate. Therefore, clearly taking any quantitative measures will certainly have an effect on the quality (Yamini, 2002). In the literature related to education, different definitions and interpretations can be found related to the concept of quality. Frenetic (2008), for instance, referred to quality as a process that all the people deal with and are concerned with. He stated that the picture of quality has not always been matched with the reality and has been influenced by the people's mind. For this reason, it is not readily measurable and does not lend itself to assessment. According to Frenette (as cited in Bidokhti et al., 2007), normalized definitions of quality based on certain criteria can be valid and correct. Bazargan (2004) regards the quality of higher education system as the consistency between input, process, and output and also the results of this system and the predetermined standards being consistent. These standards are developed and determined based on the objectives, goals and expectations of the society from the higher education. The quality of higher education encompasses all the applications and activities including education, research, the staff, students, facilities and equipment, services provided to the people in the society, and universities. In other words, based on the model of organizational factors for improving the quality of higher education, all the factors including the input, process, product, output and consequences should be taken into account (Bazargan, 2002). Considering the fact that popularity and the quality level of a university depends primarily on the students' conditions, students are considered to be one of the important sources of evaluation (Mohammadi, et al., 2006). Currently, students' views about different aspects of the provided education in educational institutions are solicited and considered as one of the factors used for monitoring purposes in universities all over the world (Kebryae and Roudbari, 2006). In fact, learners or students are at the center of gravity and the core of any educational system (university). All the efforts in different sections of the university are made for the purpose of making good changes in the behavior and performance of the students (Mohammadi, 2008). Therefore, students as a part of the input for university and its main beneficiaries can be a good source of information for evaluating universities helping to provide a good picture of the status of universities (Guiness, as cited in Mohammadi, et al., 2006). In today's intensely competitive market with many active educational institutes providing similar services, the winners will be those who provide high-quality and valuable services. By making changes and promoting their higher education system, these institutes should have a deep understanding of the services they provide to the students. The policy-makers in educational institutes should know that the secret to their survival in this ever-changing world is constant changing for the purpose of improving the educational services they provide and valuing the students (Fadkh & Bagvat, 2011). Accordingly, it is expected that academic systems evaluate and assess the existing situation and pay attention to their level of consistency and correspondence with desirable conditions and in this way identify the areas of mismatch and try to find solutions to fill in the gaps (Mohammadi, et al., 1384).

Some researchers have made an attempt to solicit students' views in some universities. Tofighi et al., (2012), for instance, conducted a research entitled "the quality of educational services from the perspective of students of the faculty of paramedics, Tehran University of Medical Sciences. They concluded that students' expectations are much higher than their perception of the existing situation and in none of the aspects of providing services were their expectations met. In another study, Mohammdi

et al., (2011) found that the greatest gap in quality was in accountability. Bayazdi (2010) conducted a study entitled "the relationship between quality of educational services and the educational performance of students of technology-engineering and students of human sciences in University of Kordestan, Iran; the results were indicative of the fact that there is a quality gap in all aspects. Behrangi et al. (2008) also conducted their study entitled "Assessing the quality of educational services in educational centers of Payam-e-Nour University in Azarbayjan-e-Sharghi and Azarbayjan-e-Gharbi from the students' perspective"; they found that students' average gap of understanding and expectation of the quality of higher education services was negative in all the components and aspects of the model and the students were not satisfied with the quality of services provided in the educational centers of Payam-e-Nour University. Zafiropoulos et al., (2007) also evaluated the quality of services in a higher education institutes in Greece from the point of view of the students. They came to the conclusion that there was a significant difference between attitude and expectations of the staff and the students in their views about the quality of services. Besides, they found that there was a gap between the existing quality and the quality demanded by the students.

The results of Barnce's (2007) study with regard to the analysis of the gap in higher education quality among the students of higher education in China showed that there was a negative gap in all aspects of the quality of services (e.g., assurance, accountability, trust-worthiness, sympathy, physical conditions). In a different study by Chua (2006), which was related to the quality of educational services at the School of Business Management, Ryerson University in Toronto, the greatest negative quality gap was found to be in the aspect of assurance. Considering the importance of qualitative development in higher education and its measurement and assessment, the need for doing research is especially acute in this field. Therefore, considering the importance of gaining knowledge about both perceptions and expectations of the students as one of the internal customers of the educational system, for the purpose of improving the quality of educational services and eliminating or reducing the gap between the existing conditions and the desirable conditions, the present study attempted to examine the quality of educational services in faculties of Islamic Azad University, Science and Research Branch from the students' perspective in order not only to evaluate the quality of the provided services but also identify their strengths and possible shortcomings. It is expected that the results of this study be used by higher education policy-makers especially education center under investigation.

There are many different measurement models for assessing the quality of services including Servqual, Phdke & Bhagwat, Kano and Hampto. Phdke & Bhagwat model was used for quality assessment in this study. This model was used by Phadke and Bhagwat in 2011 for considering the quality of education in the schools of Bangalore in India from their students' point of view. In this model, the quality of education is assessed by the students. Using this model, a framework can be developed that covers four main aspects of the quality of the services. Based on these four aspects, the students as the receivers of the services evaluate the status of services delivery and availability. These four aspects include: a) school management which refers to what the faculties management system do for the students; b) interpersonal relationship between the faculty members, which is related to the behavior and the ability for building confidence and willingness for assisting, and interpersonal relationship between the teachers and their students; c) faculty members' teaching skills, which is related to the teachers' level of knowledge, their method of teaching, rate of learning and amount of feedback; and finally d) faculties facilities and equipment, referring to the use of devices, equipment, the communication system and appearance of the faculty. The main and the primary goal of developing this model was to provide an appropriate framework for measuring the quality of services in all organizations.

Despite the large body of research examining the quality of educational services, the number of studies addressing this issue are quite limited in the Iranian context. Especially the number of studies considering the quality of educational services in Islamic Azad University in Iran are quite limited.

Research Questions

In order to identify the strengths or weaknesses that Islamic Azad University has, the possible shortcomings can be identified so that effective remedies can be prescribed for eliminating these shortcomings and exploiting the existing strengths for providing more efficient educational services to the students. This study attempted to shed some light on students' attitude towards the types of services provided to them in Islamic Azad University, Science and Research Branch. Thus, the following questions, were formulated and addressed in this study:
- How is the quality of educational services in terms of management from the students' perspective?

- How is the quality of educational services in terms of behavior and interpersonal relationship between the faculty members?
- How is the quality of educational services in terms of faculty members' teaching skills from the students' perspective?
- How is the quality of educational services in terms of facilities and equipment from the students' perspective?
- How is the quality of educational services different in faculties from the students' perspective?

Method

The present study is a survey-based descriptive study conducted in 2012. The sample population of the study included all the students of faculties of Islamic Azad University, Science and Research Branch. From these students, 372 were selected as participants using stratified random sampling technique. The instrument used for data collection included a 37-item likert-scale questionnaire with the answers ranging from (1) too little to (5) very much. The questionnaire was used for assessing respondents' level of satisfaction with different aspects of the quality of educational services. Then respondents' level of satisfaction was calculated using factor analysis. It should be noted that the questionnaire, which is based on Phdke and Bhagwat's four-dimensional model, measures students' views and their perceptions of the faculties

management, interpersonal relationship between the faculty members, faculty members' teaching skills, and the available facilities and equipment. Experts in the field (university teachers and PhD students) were consulted to assess the validity of the questionnaire. Their views were sought and used for improving the questionnaire. For reliability analysis, 40 questionnaires were piloted to the students from the sample population; Cronbach's Alpha coefficient was calculated and found to be .70. Descriptive (frequency analysis, mean, standard deviation, variance) and inferential statistics (one-sample t-test, independent samples t-test and ANOVA) were used for analyzing the data. Kolmogrov-Smirnov test was used to confirm normal distribution of the data related to the research variables. Finally, ANOVA and tukey test were used for comparing the means for the different faculties under study. SPSS 16 was used for data analysis.

Results

In order to find the answer to the secondary question of whether the quality of educational services (in terms of management, behavior and interpersonal relationship, faculty members' teaching skills, and facilities and equipment and quality of the university) is variable in different faculties, students' views were sought (see Table 1).

Table 1. The results of t-test related to different aspects of the quality of educational services.

Variable	Mean	Std.	Equality of means assumed	t	df	Sig.
Quality of faculties	114.36	12.62	111	5.136	371	0.000
Management	43.98	6.62	42	5.780	371	0.000
Behavior and interpersonal relationship	24.52	3.82	24	2.65	371	0.008
Teaching skills	26.51	4.04	27	-2.308	371	0.022
Facilities and equipment	19.33	3.62	18	7.090	371	0.000

Considering the level of significance shown in Table 1 (Sig=0.00) which is lower than 0.05, it can be stated that the quality of educational services in Islamic Azad University, Science and Research Branch is desirable according to the students. Besides, considering the significance of the values shown in Table 1, the quality of educational services is above average in terms of management of the faculties, behavior and interpersonal relationships between the faculty members, facilities and equipment. However, based on the results and considering the fact that level of significance for students' views about the teachers' teaching skills is

0.022 which is below 0.05, it seems that the quality of educational services is not desirable in terms of faculty members' teaching skills from the students' perspective.

To answer the main question of the study related to the average quality of the educational services in Islamic Azad University, Science and Research Branch, ANOVA was used for comparing the means for different groups, , i.e., to compare the quality of educational services in different faculties based on the students' views. The results of analysis have been provided in Table 2.

Table 2. The results of ANOVA for quality of educational services in different faculties.

	Total square	df	Mean square	F value	Sig.
Between groups	1936.119	3	645.373		
Within groups	57231.889	368	155.521	4.150	0.007
Total	59168.008	371			

As shown in Table 2, the level of significance was found to be lower than 0.05 which is indicative of the fact that there is a significant difference between different faculties in the quality of educational services from the students' point of view. Post-hoc analyses were conducted using tukey test to find out where the differences lie (see Table 3).

Table 3. The results of tukey test for the lowest and highest level of quality in faculties.

Faculty	No.	Means comparison by Alpha	
		1	2
Engineering	135	112.02	
Human sciences	102	114.05	114.05
Management	53	115.09	115.09
Basic sciences	82		118.12
Sig.		0.388	0.156

The results of tukey test indicate that the lowest level of quality in educational services is believed to be in the Faculty of Engineering and the highest level in the Faculty of Basic Sciences based on the students views.

Discussion

Today, universities are under pressure to prove their commitment in contribution to development of societies so much that accountability towards success or failure in achieving this goal has become a necessity (Johnson, 2004). Accordingly, the quality of the available educational services has acquired great significance. Students as the input for the academic systems have a determining role in the process of assuring quality (Feli et al., 2012). Therefore, the main purpose of the present study was to consider the quality of educational services in the faculties of Islamic Azad University, Science and Research Branch from the students' perspective using a four-dimensional model developed by Phdke and Bhagwat. The results related to the main research question showed that the quality of educational services in Islamic Azad University, Science and Research Branch is good. In addition, the findings related to the secondary questions indicated that from the students' perspective the highest quality of educational services was in management, facilities and equipment, and behavior and interpersonal relationship between the faculty members respectively. On the other hand, the lowest quality standards were believed by the students to be in the faculty members' teaching skills. Furthermore, the greatest gap in the quality of educational services was in the Faculty of Engineering and the smallest gap in the Faculty of Basic Sciences from the respondents' perspective. The results of our study are consistent with the findings of Phdke et al. (2011), Mohammadi et al. (2010) and Chua et al. (2004) who also found that the greatest gap exists in the faculty members' teaching. However, the findings were not consistent with the results of some other studies including Miri et al. (2010), Kebriayi et al. (2006), Ruby et al. (1998), Arbuni et al (2006) and Bradley (2006) who found that the quality of educational services was better in teaching in comparison with other aspects of quality. In Ruby's (1998) study, the highest level of satisfaction was found to be in the aspects of management (responsiveness) and facilities and physical equipment respectively; this result is consistent with the findings of our study. But the findings of Kebriayi et al. (1384) and Agha Mollayi et al (2007) showed that the largest gap was in the aspect of management. Bigdeli et al. (2008), Feli et al. (2012), and Behrangi et al. (2008), on the other hand, found that the largest negative gap was in the aspect of facilities and equipment from the students' point of view. In a similar study by Miri and Nikban (2010), it was found that there was a significant difference between the faculties in terms of the quality of educational services from the students' perspective, which is consistent with the findings of this study (question 5). Phdke and Bhagwat (2011), however, concluded that all the faculties enjoy the same level of quality according to the students.

The inconsistency in the findings with regard to students' attitude towards the quality of educational services might be a clear indication of the role of educational context in forming their views and attitudes. These inconsistencies also imply that every educational system might be suffering from certain shortcomings that the authorities might be unaware of. Universities and educational institutions might have a much better performance if they pay attention to the students' needs and wants and address the related shortcomings that might endanger the quality of the services provided. For this purpose, authorizes are well recommended to investigate and take into consideration their views and address the possible shortcomings. In this way, they not only can identify and attend to these inhibitive factors, they can also instigate students' motivation by caring about their needs and in this way promote their educational performance which can finally promote the university's status in the national and international scope.

Conclusions

Based on the results, every educational institution might be suffering from certain limitations in terms of the quality of educational services available. An important implication of this finding might be that these limitations should be identified and solutions sought for removing them. Accordingly, in order to eliminate or reduce the possible gaps in the four dimensions, some priorities can be set for allocation of resources. For example, the management aspect of the university which has the smallest gap may be given the lowest priority and in contrast, faculty members' teaching skills should have the highest priority in allocation of resources because it has the largest gap. After that, the aspects of behavior and interpersonal relationships and then facilities and equipment should be attended to by the authorities. Furthermore, by enhancing the quality of services in Faculty of Engineering which had the lowest level of educational services quality and in other faculties and also by prioritizing and allocating resources to the aspects which have the largest gap, the gaps can be reduced in these aspects and other aspects will also improve and evaluated as good by the students. In this way, the ideal conditions can be best prepared for students' educational development, which consequently leads to building professional reputation for educational institutions.

Another implication of the study might be that, considering the different findings obtained with regard to students' views about the quality of educational services in different institutional contexts, as mentioned before, different educational institutions might have shortcomings of a different nature. In order for an efficient identification of these weaknesses, it is recommended to identify and address them. Students might be a reliable source of information about different aspects of the qualities since they are at the receiving end of these services. Authorities would do better to identify and address students' problems. Students might also develop a sense of value in themselves seeing that their authorities care about their needs and wants which can consequently influence their educational performance in a positive way.

However, the present study was constrained by certain limitations that might limit generalizability of the findings. One of the limitations was that the data were collected using students' self-expressions; these perceptions and views might have been influenced by the students' thoughts and their personal subjective and dogmatic judgments. In order to obtain more objective results, future studies would consider teachers' attitude and beliefs about the quality of educational services and make a comparison between the teachers and students' views. Furthermore, students' perspectives might have been influenced by some extraneous factors such as contextual factors in Iran and the participants' educational background or by the faculty members' behavior. For instance, if the quality of educational services they have received during their high school has been really high, they might not be really positively oriented towards the quality of services in Islamic Azad University. Therefore, comparative studies in different contexts, either outside or inside Iran can yield interesting results that are really informative. Finally, the findings of this study are limited to Islamic Azad University and cannot be generalized to other academic contexts or institutions. Therefore, future studies could also be directed at making a comparison between different academic institutions with regard to their students' attitude towards the services provided. Furthermore, in order to gain a better understanding of the quality of services and their consequences on Islamic Azad University, Science and Research Branch and its beneficiaries especially the students' educational performance, further and more rigorous studies of an interactional nature might be quite revealing.

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