

Problematic and Damaged Image of a University among Iranian Students: The Lived Experience of Iranian Students at Universities¹

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The current paper tried to explore Iranian students' lived experience at universities in recent years after the commercialization and commodification of higher education, followed by limitations on the universities' public and governmental resources. Thus a university student is reduced to a customer position. This research aims to study students' lived experience in an old comprehensive university in Iran's capital. Since the researchers' goal was to go near the students themselves to reveal the lived and perceived experiences of them, with the interpretive paradigm as a methodology. The hermeneutic phenomenological research method was chosen with deep exploratory interviews as a data-gathering tool. Deep exploratory interviews were used with a purposive sample of 25 university students on the data saturation basis. Two hundred fifty main propositions were found from these interviews. The most essential propositions extracted with the thematic analysis method showed that just 30 percent of experiences were positive, but 70 percent were negative.

Keywords: Lived Experience- Students' Perception- Phenomenology- Meaning of University

Introduction

During the past decades, universities were tempted to earn money due to the massification of higher education followed by limitations on universities' public and governmental resources. Since students were also considered a group of clients not knowledge-seekers. The importance of entrepreneurial rules in academic management grows every day, and the market ideology dominates. Commercialization, commodification, and entrepreneurial education are new approaches to these trends. Therefore, the production and sale of knowledge and technology get a special position. The heavy shadow of commodification and commercialization in higher education often keeps the social and cultural identity of universities on the sidelines or forgotten, although they are the institutions of public utility and also their original missions of teaching and training together with criticism and illustration responsibilities are major for societies. However, these trends are not limited to Iran and are universal, as they are discussed by Bok (2003); (Shumar (1997), Naidoo (2003), Naidoo et al. (2005), they appear with more complex and possibly more vulgar dimensions in Iran over the last two decades. Some researches show that gradually the utopic perception of university students is diminishing in academic education. (Mohammadi (2014); Soroush (2014); Shams and Maarefvand, 2015; Farasatkah 2014). Over a decade, authors' educational experiences confirm that these trends are reflected in the minds, perceptions, and behaviors of the students unavoidably. The way they sit on chairs in classrooms, look at professors, listen to lessons, their class behaviors, educational activities, their commuting to the campus, writing on exam sheets, and several kinds of concerns they have during education, can be deduced that they are no more like the students of the last generation in our classes. Although they sit in university classes, most of them are not knowledge-seekers anymore. An exposed and revealed proof of this issue is the prevalence of certificate-orientation in the country. The certificate is enough for them, and they do not look for real knowledge. What do the Iranian students

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mean by their entrance and attendance in universities? Whether our students do this or that, study well or not, looking for certificates or seeking creativity and exploration, all are related to their meaning in their minds about universities and their attendance in universities. The current paper addressed this gap and tried to explore Iranian students' lived experiences at university to know how students' perceptions have changed after commercializing and commodifying higher education. Since meanings and perceptions of the university existing with the students are important as they shape and direct the study methods and manners.

The phenomenological methodology tradition has the concern to come close to affairs and people. For a while, the performance of the universities and quality of teaching and learning, and the social results and impressions of the universities in the country have become quarrelsome. Therefore, the researchers took a high extreme and chose one of the oldest major public universities for a case study to see what feelings the students have of being there and what their lived experiences in the university are. The survey was not conducted with pre-fabricated questionnaires in a theoretical framework because through that the students would have reacted to our prepared options and we could not penetrate into their deep perceptions, feelings, and meanings, and lived experiences. So, the hermeneutic phenomenological analysis method was chosen. Iran, based on the gain theoretical sensitivity by studying the references and texts on university performance (Yamani, 2001; Farasatkah 2008; Biren Baum, 1988). Due to the nature of university globally, the findings of this study contribute to Iran and higher education policy on a more global level.

One of the earliest pieces of research about the image of the university is Morey's. His study showed that this mental image affects students' choices and performances and differs concerning students' years and disciplines (Morey, 1971). Arpan and his colleague found that the most important things that associate the image of university in students' minds are the associates resulting from scientific performance, sports dimensions, and news reflections of the university (Arpan et al., 2003:97-113). The perceptions of American and Chinese students are compared in the research of Xu (2011:1-10). Lizzio and his colleagues' research showed that the students' perception could predict both the hard and soft dimensions of the university quality; hard as educational and research performance and soft as satisfaction (Lizzio, Wilson & Simons, 2002: 27-52). Thesis research at Umeå University in the 2010-2011 academic year entitled 'students' perceptions and educational changes' found that the most important aspects of this perception are their perception of learning, responsibility, engagement and satisfaction (Furberg, 2011). Another study showed that the students' perceptions of the philosophy, method and meaning of evaluation and examinations in universities influence their educational behaviors (Struyven, Dochy and Janssens, 2005:331-347). In his book entitled 'Learning to teach in higher education', Ramsden says: 'to become a good teacher, first, you must understand your students' experiences of learning' (Ramsden, 2004: xii). Therefore, understanding their experiences helps us to teach better in classrooms. Annamalai and Muniandy (2013) focused on the reasons for behaviors in students' minds. In Iran, a research entitled examining the social factors affecting the production and consumption of texts among students (Mohammadi, 2014). The study about Ferdowsi University of Mashhad (Soroush, 2014) resulted that a student with an interest in education and hope for a better future in addition to terms of family and economic factors will be heading to the university. Another research about the quality of life for overseas students in Shahid Beheshti University with a total number of 116 students was studied in the academic year 2012-2013. The result showed that they do not have a desirable quality of life (Shams and Maarefvand, 2015). Farasatkah (2012) reviewed eight periods of students' lives, and the main questions were as follows: which group had access to universities in each period, what dominant paradigm was for students' life, what utopia they had, what perceptions influence students' life, what the discussed identities were and how the 'self-expression' patterns were.

Methodology

Since the researchers' goal was to go near the students themselves rather than handing out quantitative questionnaires in which their reactions to our pre-prepared categories are merely shown, the qualitative descriptive study approach was applied. While we locate the affairs themselves and expose ourselves to their free manifestations. The hermeneutic phenomenological research method was chosen (Aspers, 2009; Streubert and Carpenter, 2011; Langdridge, 2007). The exploratory interviews were used as a data-gathering tool to reveal the students' lived and perceived experiences. Based on the objectives of the study, the purposive sampling frame was chosen to ensure that the individuals do not have any considerations and restrictions to interview, participate with enthusiastic

adequate confidence in the study and present their experiences and perceptions with comfort and sincerely and without self-censorship or role-play. Deep exploratory interviews were used with a purposive sample of 25 university students.

Findings

Findings showed that in total, about 30 percent of comments indicated positively experienced and lived perception of the research participants from the studied universities, while about 70 percent of experiences were associated with a negative and unsatisfactory evaluation. Thematic analysis result contains 18 subcategories and three main categories Students' life, growth, and development.

The subcategories and themes are shown in table 1.

Table 1. Thematic analysis and subcategories

No.	Propositions	Themes	Codes
1.	Students' life, growth and development	Academic vitality, Comfort, Joy, Nutrition, Student support system, Physical and mental health of student, sport, student vitality, Critical thinking, Variety and freedom of viewpoints and lifestyles, cooperative rate, Diversity of student association	39codes
2.	Management and leadership style	Strategic planning thinking, Academic integration, Being out of pressure and interest groups	10 codes
3.	Faculty members	knowledge and expertise, ethics and character, being available and accountable to students, commitment to education and research	17 codes
4.	Teaching and learning	Presenting lesson plan, quality and engagement and effectiveness in classes, being away from educational formalism, learn how to learn, integrating learning and research, avoiding memory oriented learning, developing creativity and knowledge skills	15 codes
5.	The Quality of Academic provisions	Physical facilities, library, lab equipment, Internet, new academic references, technology	13 codes
6.	The Academic Justice	Exempt from discrimination in functions and services (teaching, evaluation, educational and research opportunities	4 codes
7.	Facilitating	Facilitating administrative bureaucracy and labyrinthine regulations, removing administrative annoyances, removing annoying process.	19 codes
8.	The campus atmosphere	architectural symbols, campus atmosphere, university façade, standards for dormitory and university	43 codes
9.	The organizational culture and the career life quality	Professional ethics at university, the atmosphere of departments, social and academic interaction of teachers in and out of university, staying away from factionalism and corruption	9 codes
10.	The scientific and academic norms	Scientific socializing of students, commitment to major, internalizing academic norms, internalizing academic discipline in classes and researches and defense of the thesis, following copyright citation format and avoiding plagiarism	12 codes
11.	The cultural and social missions of the university	intellectualism, criticism and social enlightenment; social and cultural development of students; cultural and social vitality in students, students' cooperation in various associations	9 codes
12.	The Academic autonomy and adequacy	Meritocratic selection for management positions; academic freedom for students and teachers; selectivity of university	10 codes

		president	
13.	The Curriculum	Required general and basic courses; transformative and updated curriculum based on the society and market need; existence of optional and extracurricular training	11 codes
14.	Academic competitiveness	the emergence of initiatives, creativity, and innovation; National and international competitions among universities; creative variety of cultures among majors	5 codes
15.	Internationalisation	International cooperation; glocalization of academic activities; establishing global and comparable standards at universities; Teaching an international language; Modifying processes; students and staff mobility; consortiums; cultural variation; multicultural university life...	6 codes
16.	Reputation and social brand	Accreditation system; internal and external evaluation; Surveying from students and alumni; ranking; reputation; excellence of university quality	12 codes
17.	Training qualified graduates	Preparing graduates for social mobility, job placement, and entrepreneurship; making opportunity and chance for alumni;	6 codes
18.	The production of knowledge, entrepreneurship, and specialized services to the community and social responsibility	Producing the required papers and books for society; social accountability; connection of industry and the world of work; connection of university and wealth production community	10 codes

The phenomenological approach helped us bring about a relatively rich description of the university's lived experience. Eighteen features if the constituting elements of the lived and perceived experience of the students about the university were found, which may be reduced to three categories of major indexes: the university's institutional index including four features (3, 5, 12 &13), the university's process index including nine features (1, 2, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 &15) and finally the university's achievement index including five features (11, 14, 16, 17 & 18). (figure 1)

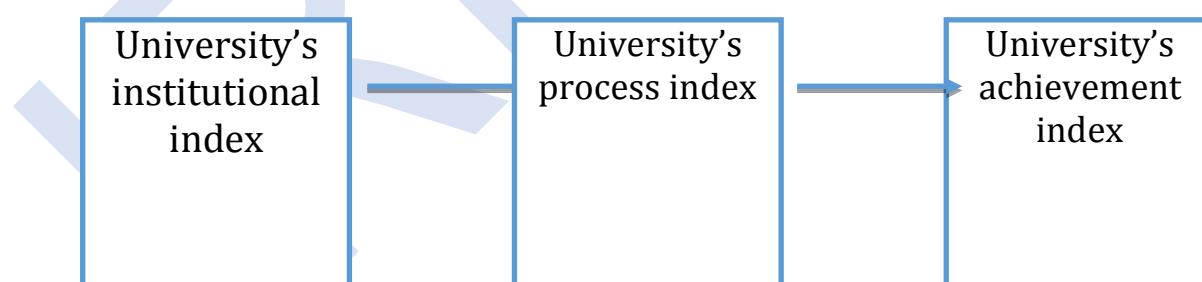


Figure 1. A Model for the desired university based on students' lived experience

Discussion

The result was as follows:

One. The social image of the university in the hearts and eyes of the students is flawed and controversial. Students participating in the study were not feeling very positive about being at the university.

Two. Students participating in the study have not come to university only to study, but they also want to live there. It turns out that they are not just minds as white tablets and not empty containers to be filled with knowledge. They have come to the university, not just with the minds but also with their bodies and various needs, feelings, passions of life, joys, games and their participation, assembly, and other aspirations.

They do not want the university just for education but want it as a social club. This is a less satisfying expectation. One of the repetitive propositions indicated that undergraduate students have more or less vitality at their entrance, but it is reduced during the following semesters. It will be a big mistake to think that an Iranian university is just responsible for selling expertise to the students, training, testing, and issuing certificates.

Three. Different kinds of managerial, financial, and political troubles prevent the studied Iranian university from achieving success in students' development. Several costly and formal cultural activities are going on at the university, but have a more governmental nature and lack diversity. The campus atmosphere does not satisfy the various juvenile, cultural, social, and recreational needs of participants in this study. It lacks the necessary leverage for the development of focal and social competencies and life skills and the quality of student life.

Four. It seems that verbal, face-to-face and emotional culture continues to be important for Iranian students. Human relations and people-oriented managers were among the most outstanding sensitivities of the students participating in the study. The uneasy bureaucratic relationships are meaningless to them. Even if a manager works in the framework of official rules, they will not be adequately pleased. They want to see the president of the university. They want him to attend their assemblies and talk about the academic procedures and listen to them.

Five. According to the results of the current case study, the Iranian student atmosphere is going through a period of academic elitism and a sense of master-student in the traditional sense of the word. Probably the world of communication and information explosion the one hand, and the loss of quality in the national universities and the dominance of quantity on it and especially the anomic and deformed status of the current Iranian society, on the other hand, has caused the ideal view that students had toward the teacher gradually decrease.

Six. Compared to the colorful organizations having abundant modern facilities which have been established during past years by several governmental and pseudo-governmental institutions, universities have turned into poor organizations and places for the poor and the participants in the study talk about it in a humiliating manner: not enough room and chairs in its library, not enough English books, repeatedly interrupting Internet, not enough equipment in the labs, etc.

Seven. There is still an ideal university model in students' eyes and minds in Iran, a university with academic autonomy that its faculty members elect its president. The university has substantive differences with other executive organizations and institutions, and it is not proper to count it as a part of the total collection of the government bureaucracy.

Eight. If we say that Iranians are more sensitive than most other societies, it is not so far from the truth. The power distance feeling for an Iranian and the Iranian youth, in particular, is annoying. The tolerance threshold of Iranians to discrimination is limited. They may tolerate not having something, but inequality and discrimination are out of their tolerance. If injustice and discrimination are so annoying and bizarre, then woe to when a student sees this in his/her instructor's behavior. If the teachers do not have moral and meaningful leverage on the students, they can not impress them efficiently. Do teachers discriminate? Not obvious. But it is the discrimination sensation that is evident among the students in the current study.

Nine. Some other pieces of research show that Iranians are typically emotional. Their language is rich with emotional and sensational propositions (Moiiede Hekmat, 2011:71-84). They are friendly and expect that their friends back them. Warm and informal relationships are more critical for them than cold relationships. Perhaps a cold, undesirable and emotionless behavior, legal though it is, may offend them (Farasatkah, 2015).

Ten. General, optional and free courses in all universities of the world are some of the good and effective mechanisms promoting the focal and non-technical competencies such as critical thinking, cultural understanding, effective human communication, life quality skills development, problem-solving, power of organizing and planning of activities, information and communication technology literacy and other literacies necessary for the emergence and development of the diversity of human multiple intelligences and creativity of young people, historical and social awareness, developing familiarity with the national language and literature and international languages and the like. But unfortunately, in Iran, because of the government's ideological interferences in these programs, weaknesses in needs assessment, planning, or implementation have resulted in the opposite and contrary outcomes.

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