

Analysis of the Lived Experiences of Elite Migrant Students Regarding the Value Systems of Their Host Universities

Mahdi. Tikani¹, Mohammad Reza. Nili Ahmadabadi^{2*}, Hamid Reza. Safavi³

¹ PhD Candidate, Faculty of Education and Psychology, University of Isfahan, Isfahan, Iran

² Associate Professor, Faculty of Education and Psychology, University of Isfahan, Isfahan, Iran

³ Professor, Department of Civil Engineering, Isfahan University of Technology, Isfahan, Iran

* Corresponding author email address: m.nili.a@edu.ui.ac.ir

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ABSTRACT

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Core and key values in every university are an inseparable part of academic culture. While values articulated in official university documents represent one dimension, another dimension consists of the values perceived and experienced by students. The present study aims to explore the value system perceived by elite international students by analyzing their lived experiences within the universities they attend. This research is qualitative in nature and follows an interpretative phenomenological approach. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 10 elite international students, and thematic analysis was employed for data analysis. Based on the framework proposed by Attride-Stirling, the analysis was conducted at three levels: basic themes, organizing themes, and global themes. The overarching global theme of "experienced university values" encompassed four organizing themes: scientific and research values, educational and learning values, social and relational values, and economic and career-oriented values. The findings of this study revealed a relative alignment between the values perceived by students and those articulated in the official documents of selected universities. In this regard, it is recommended that universities in Iran operationalize key values identified in this research—such as emotional support for students, stronger university–industry collaboration, diverse learning models, and the efficiency and quality of research—in order to bridge existing gaps and enhance the overall academic environment.

Keywords: Lived experiences, University values, Elite international students, Thematic analysis



Introduction

Universities function as cultural institutions where core values significantly influence academic interactions. These values are often codified in official mission statements but are also internalized and enacted through daily practices. This study investigates how elite Iranian migrant students perceive and interpret the value systems of their host universities, recognizing that such values shape their academic and personal experiences abroad. Grounded in the conceptual framework of organizational culture and educational values, the research addresses a critical gap: how values are not only declared but experienced. The analysis situates these students as culturally sensitive observers due to their high academic status and transnational mobility, providing a unique lens to assess the alignment (or misalignment) between documented and lived university values.

Methodology

This qualitative study adopted an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of elite Iranian students currently studying in top-ranked global universities. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with ten participants selected via snowball sampling. Thematic analysis based on Attride-Stirling's model was employed to identify patterns across three layers: basic themes, organizing themes, and global themes. This multilayered framework allowed the researchers to systematically connect micro-level experiences with broader institutional discourses. MAXQDA2020 software was used to facilitate rigorous data coding and categorization, ensuring traceability and consistency in the analytic process. The study's trustworthiness was enhanced through member-checking and peer debriefing, aligning with qualitative validity standards.

Findings

Thematic analysis of the interviews revealed four key domains of experienced university values: scientific and research values, educational and learning values, social and relational values, and economic and career-oriented values. Participants emphasized the importance of academic integrity, collaboration with industry, updated research content, and support for innovation. In the educational domain, values such as responsibility, persistence, learner-centeredness, and respect for diversity were highlighted. Constructive faculty-student relationships, attention to students' mental well-being, and career support systems were frequently mentioned. Overall, students perceived their host universities as ecosystems that align declared institutional values with supportive academic practices. These environments were reported to foster both personal development and academic achievement, offering a valuable contrast to the students' prior educational experiences in their home country.

Conclusion

This study contributes to a deeper understanding of how elite Iranian migrant students experience university values in global academic environments. While there is general alignment between perceived values and institutional declarations, students' lived experiences reveal richer, more nuanced interpretations. Universities in the home country can benefit from these insights by revisiting their value frameworks and reinforcing the implementation of declared values in practice. These findings may serve as a roadmap for reforming academic policy, enhancing student support mechanisms, and promoting a values-driven academic culture across institutional contexts.

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