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

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Abstract

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Keywords

Lived Experience, Students' Perception, Phenomenology, Meaning of University

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

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The current paper tried to explore the lived experience of Iranian students at universities in recent years after commercialization and commodification of higher education followed by limitations on the public and governmental resources of the universities. Thus, a university student is reduced to a customer position. The aim of this research is to study the lived experience of students in an old comprehensive university in the capital of Iran. Since the goal of the researchers 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 fulfilled with a purposive sample of 25 university students on the data saturation basis. 250 main propositions were found from these interviews. The most important propositions extracted with the thematic analysis method showed that just 30 percent of experiences were positive but 70 percent of them 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 the public and governmental resources of the universities. Since students were also considered a group of clients, not knowledge-seekers. The importance of entrepreneurial rules in academic managements grows every day, and the market ideology dominates. Commercialization, commodification and entrepreneurial education are new approaches in these trends. Therefore, 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. Although these trends are not limited to Iran and are universal, as they are discussed by Bok (2003; Naidoo, 2003; Naidoo & Jamieson, 2007; Shumar, 1997), 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 the academic education (Farasatkah, 2015; Mohammadi, 2014; Shams & Maarefvand, 2015; Soroush, 2014). The educational experiences of authors over a decade confirm that these trends are reflected on the minds, perceptions and behaviors of the students unavoidably. The way they sit in chairs at classrooms, look at professors, listen to lessons, behave in class, perform educational activities, commute to the campus, write on

exam sheets, and other actions all indicate it is no longer like the last generation of students. 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; they do not pursue real knowledge. What do the Iranian students mean by their entrance and attendance in universities? Whether our students do this or that, all are related to the meaning they have in their minds about universities and affect their attendance at universities. The current paper addressed this gap and tried to explore the lived experiences of Iranian students at a university in order to know how students' perception has changed after the commercializing and commodifying of higher education. Meanings and perceptions of the students are important as they shape and direct the study's methods and manners.

The phenomenological methodology tradition has the concern to come close to affairs and people. It is for a while that 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 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 (Birnbaum, 1988; Farasatkah, 2008; Yamani, 2001). Due to the nature of university in the world, the findings of this study are a contribution for Iran and also for higher education policy on a more global level.

Theoretical Background

Max Weber was one of the leading sociologists who paid theoretical attention to the important impact of our understanding and interpretation of our actions. Deeds we do are proportional to the meanings we have of those deeds. A meaning residing in the mind is behind our deeds (Bendix, 1973). Habermas (1984) concerns to a "lived world" in a system in order to know it. This tradition has helped the social sciences to emphasize the meanings people make of the world of their lives. On this very basis that we need to study the meanings of the university in the student's lived perception. Some researches in this field focus on the image of the university by a student and some other titled the student perception of university followed this subject and some others focused on the students' lived experience. One of the earliest pieces of research about the image of universities is Morey's. His study showed that this mental image affects the choices and performances of students and differs with regard to the years and disciplines of students (Morey, 1971). Arpan and his colleagues found that the most important things that associate the image of the university in the minds of students are the associates resulted from scientific performance, sports dimensions and news reflections of the university (Arpan, Raney, & Zivnuska, 2003). The perceptions of American and Chinese students are compared in the research of Xu (2011). The research of Lizzio and his colleagues 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). 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, & Janssens, 2005). 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 of behaviors in students’ mind. 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 at 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 & Maarefvand, 2015). Farasatkah (2013) 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 on students’ life, what the discussed identities were and how the “self-expression” patterns were.

Methodology

Since the goal of the researchers 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; Langdrige, 2007; Streubert & Carpenter, 2010). The exploratory interviews were used as a data gathering tool to reveal the lived and perceived experiences of the students. Based on the objectives of the study, 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 fulfilled with a purposive sample of 25 university students.

Participation and cooperation of one of the writer students in the interview sessions of the research considerably helped the friendly and intimate atmosphere of the interviews. The aim of the research was shared with the interviewees without any specific biases related to the research questions and institution. A great effort was spent on creating an atmosphere to be sure the interviewees understood that their university was selected as a case study and we were looking for the lived and experienced the perception of Iranian university students phenomenologically. The participators were provided with adequate explanations that the moral commitments of the present research were based on the fact that all the gathered information and evidence and the written texts of the interviews were merely utilized for purposes of scientific analyses and the objective was clearly the expansion and deepening of the scientific cognition in the field of the Iranian higher education specialized studies and the focus and emphasis of the current study was on the perception of students about Iranian universities. The explanations and circumstances were completely offered to the students and when even the slightest evidence of bias was felt, immediately the person in question was excluded from the study target and another person was substituted. Therefore, the purposive sample was finalized for interview regarding the diversity of disciplines, education periods, gender, being local or non-local, residence or non-residence in dormitories, and other physical characteristics related to the social stratification, lifestyle, religious or non-religious types, sociocultural distinction, social status, employed or unemployed and demographic information.

Twenty-five students (13 males and 12 females) with different disciplines were interviewed on the data saturation basis. After interviewing participant number 16, students' answers were repetitive and there were no new propositions for analysis, but in order to be sure all aspects are considered, 25 participants were interviewed. 250 main propositions were found from these interviews. After conducting deep, active and exploratory interviews, audio records and field-notes were transcribed, and the most important propositions were extracted with the "thematic analysis" method. The thematic analysis tool was adopted from Streubert and Carpenter (2010). First, the main propositions of each interview were extracted with a phenomenological approach. The relation of every proposition with research questions was checked. Then the theme of every proposition was explored. Finally, the phenomenological codes were explored.

The Thematic Analysis and the Study Findings

Findings showed that in total, about 30 percent of comments indicated positive experience 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 the student, sport, student vitality, Critical thinking, Variety and freedom of viewpoints and lifestyles, cooperative rate, Diversity of student association	39 codes
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, integration of 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, 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 a major, internalizing academic norms, internalizing academic discipline in classes and researches and defense of 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 president	10 codes
13.	The Curriculum	Required general and basic courses; transformative and updated curriculum based on the society and market need; the existence of optional and extracurricular training	11 codes
14.	The Academic competitiveness	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

A. Subcategories:

1. Student's life, growth, and development

Most attention of students participating in the research has been paid to students' life at universities. The most tangible lived experience for a student at the university is perhaps how pleasant it is for him/her to be in that university. The student has aspirations for a student living

in his/her mind since the decision for university entering. They expect comfort and joy. Through being at a university, they expect to experience a pleasant period of the most important part of their young lives and grow through these experiences, meet several inner needs and express their identities. As a result, as soon as the students were asked about their student lived experience, in the least excuse they talked about different aspects of their own students' lives. Some of their opinions are as follows: "A.T.," Male, B.A., Law, Non-local, Dorm. Resident complains of nutrition conditions, which is related to students' life "Food and nutrition is not very good, people are behaved in a very humiliating way, but the price goes up every year." Due to the importance of food needs for a human being, it is a part of students' life and its quality effects on their experiences "A.P.," Male, M.A., Biological Science, Non-Local, Dorm. Resident also suggests, "the president of the university needs to come to the restaurant monthly and see whether the food is edible or not" which showed improvement of this condition was important for students. Their mental health is also their concern like their physical health which is a theme of "students' life, growth and development." "A.R.," Male, M.A., Biological Science, Non-Local, Dorm. Resident says, "Vitality and mental health of the students is not as it should be ... there are few sports halls." He continues the interview and points to a strange issue that may, with an ultimate shame, interpreted as the "academic unpaid labor": "Most professors put their jobs on students' side, and students lose other opportunities." He pointed to the one-sidedness of passing courses at the university and lack of extra-curricular enthusiasm in student's life, compared the situation of the university with some smaller higher education institutions, "In small universities, the scientific associations have better conditions." Therefore, they are looking for academic vitality as well. Diversity of student association and cooperative rate were conceptualized as other themes of students' life. "A.P.," Male, M.A., Biological Science, Non-Local, Dorm. Resident explained, "The university students in other cities are more willing, their happiness is even greater. Scientific community here is very poor. The place they have most activities belongs to Basij Organization (mobilization)." "L.R.," Female, M.A., Computer Science, Non-Local, Dorm. Resident believes that student vitality is less than other universities in Tehran, no extra-curricular programs, just routine classes and says, "Students don't have juvenility." This was a frequent theme in the interviews and ensured that student's life is one of the weakest experienced parts of the students at a large old comprehensive university located in Iran's capital. "P.M.," Female, M.A., Literature and Humanities, Local stated, "In the university, the student scientific association is not strong and does not do a lot of things. Most of the institutions are for special occasions." The few programs are mostly organized by official institutions and they lack the necessary variety as well. "P.M.," Female, B.A., Geology, Local expressed,

The cultural activities inside the university are done just by Basij and the Supreme Leader Institution. . . . Also most of these camps and visits are for pilgrimage purposes, that's good and should be there, but if each faculty organizes field trips and museum or university visits tailored to the needs of each field, that will be great.

They also expect to have joy and variety of freedom of viewpoints and lifestyles in the students' life. "M.N.," Female, B.A., Management and Accounting, Local, also brings focus to this point, "In cultural activities, Basij and the Leadership Institution are more active than Scientific Associations for special occasions." A key point here is that students are not initially devoid of youthful enthusiasm and have dreams, but during the study period, these potential energy sources begin to decline. "P.R.," Female, M.A., Mathematics Science, Non-Local, Dorm. Resident explains,

When guys initially enter the university they've good vitality and enthusiasm, but after a while they don't have that enthusiasm. The university atmosphere is such that students can't be happy. I don't know why. They enter the campus with high energy but after one or two months they lose their juvenility and vitality.

What is the reason? On the one hand, it is related to deficiencies in the program, the university administration and disregarding student's life. On the other hand, other factors unitedly steal the passion and joyfulness of students' life. There are plenty of factors outside and inside the university, but one of the most important factors is concerns of students about their own future. As "M.G.," Female, M.A., Environmental Science, Non-Local stated, "Student juvenility is little, all are concerned about the future, mostly regarding occupations and jobs."

2. Management and leadership style

The human relations management and leadership style in college were the other important topics which had most references in the interviews and it was obvious that the participants in the research are highly sensitive to them. They expect to see strategic planning thinking. Students are curious to what extent managers are people-oriented and servants. "M.M.," M.A., Law, Non-Local, Dorm. Resident says, "We see directors and managers in the university who not only are not accountable, but they simply do not know how to answer either, and unfortunately I do not know how they have entered the system (obtained the position)," "The president of the university manages behind the closed doors!" Therefore, academic integration was conceptualized as one of the themes in "management and leadership style." "A.T.," Male, B.A., Law, Non-Local, Dorm. Resident believes, "The staff are good and have friendly relationships, but the deans have weak relationships with the students" and "the authorities don't listen to us and aren't accountable, whenever they're absent we're told that they're at meetings." "R.G.," Male, M.A., Behavioral Science, Non-Local, Dorm. Resident said, "high-rank managers, especially the president of the university, aren't easily accessible." "A.R.," Male, M.A., Biological Science, Non-Local, Dorm. Resident emphasizes,

If the president exists, he is for the students and faculty and has to schedule appointments to visit them. I wish our officials (the university president) had much more contact with the community body (students) in the society and university. When you have contact with people, you become aware of their concerns, you get criticism which will cause dynamism and progress.

3. Faculty members

One of the other issues that involves lived and experienced perception of the students participating in the study is the "faculty members." Those that have the most interaction with their students. Students sit in their classes, listen to their words, gestures and expressions, and experience their scientific level, thinking way and ethics; through which satisfying or unsatisfying feeling appears. How much are teachers important and significant for students? Or aren't? They are among the people having the most impression on students and their characteristics form students' personality. Knowledge and expertise is one of the themes of this subcategory. "P.R.," Female, M.A., Mathematics Science, Non-Local, Dorm. Resident says, "You really learn in classes of some of our teachers... and when you want to choose supervisor some of them praise themselves a lot, but after being supervisor they don't spend time for students!" Participants in the present study counted some of the quality characteristics of the

faculty as knowledge and expertise, ethics and character, as well as having the opportunity to stay on campus and being available and accountable to students regarding science, education and research. They were also unhappy that the faculty members are not available enough, due to being so busy and having job engagement such as consulting organizations, teaching ... that students cannot contact them easily. Thus, they are looking for “commitment to education and research” which was conceptualized as one of the themes of Faculty members.

4. Teaching and learning

If students are sensitive to teachers they are right, since teaching and learning are major pillars of the university specific tasks, so that teachers have the most important role in its quality. The quality of academic teaching and learning in our interviews was one of the most mentioned ones. “Some teachers are up-to-date,” on the contrary, “there are some teachers who do not have the presentation quality so that if you don’t attend their classes and study by yourself, you’ll get better results than attending a 1.5-hour class and after that study the lessons again and experience a lot of mental stress,” “we have some teachers who possess high levels of knowledge but are weak at knowledge transmission.” Students expect to “avoid memory oriented learning” as one of the themes of teaching and learning so the eyes are stared at the teachers: “the exam night studying tradition still exists among the students but teachers have no plan to change it,” “they didn’t teach us how to write a scientific paper in undergraduate period; they keep saying it’s too soon, but in other universities I see students who write papers,” and unfortunately, “teachers who had course plan for a long time, now just by giving seminars to the students have relaxed themselves. There’s no supervision on their activities.” In her opinion, teachers do not teach and waste the time of class for students’ presentations. “Developing creativity and knowledge skills” was conceptualized as a theme of teaching and learning.

5. The quality of academic provisions

Physical facilities, library, lab equipment and the Internet were other topics of interest and sensitivity to students, so it was conceptualized as the quality of academic provisions. It is one of the major facilities of a good university in the student's viewpoints. When a university opens but does not have the necessary facilities it is the violation of the motive, it seems as if you invited someone to a dinner party but did not prepare any food. “M.M.,” Male, M.A., Law, Non-Local and Dorm. Resident says, “The faculty library gets full with 20 to 30 people, no room for study, even the central library has a small room and I don’t see any dynamism in the library.” Others say, “There are not enough English references in the library,” “the theses which belong to the university may not be found in the library!” “for a university with more than ten thousand students, there is a library with a capacity of less than a hundred chairs,” “the labs don’t have any equipment. The students suffer from internet conditions with unstable and low bandwidth.”

6. The academic justice

Now we reach to one of the most crucial points emphasized by a significant part of the research participants. This topic was so much repeated that we can certainly state that it is located on the center of our students’ experiences in universities. This is nothing but the uneasy feeling of discrimination. Even if there is not really any discrimination, the nature of this frequent feeling in interviews which iterates as different interpretations could be a sign for us to be curious about it in our universities. The students’ critical looks are focused on our actions

and behaviors and they want to make sure that our behavior in teaching and evaluation, distribution of opportunities and chances of excellent learning and academic education are equal and far from discrimination. “Teachers partly show more attention to students who graduated from this university which causes a kind of discrimination,” “Discrimination by professors exists more or less on campus, for example, about students who graduate from other universities and come for a doctoral interview. Teachers accept their own students more,” “sometimes they practice discrimination in giving scores to their own students or individuals who have theses with them,” “teachers practice discrimination in giving scores, supervising the students etc. they don’t behave equally,” “The teachers give better scores to their fellow citizens.”

7. Facilitating

Administrative bureaucracy and labyrinthine regulations which were conceptualized as facilitating have badly occupied the minds of participants in the research. With a lot of stress, the interviewed students spoke about paperwork to perform their administrative affairs and unnecessary formal reference to bylaws and regulations. In the active conversation that we had with them, we found that actually none of them denied the rules, laws and norms and only complained about administrative annoyances caused in doing their academic, training and student affairs and the response time as well as spending unnecessary time. The attitude of managers and employees was important to them and their experience told them whether the base was on the facilitation or creating obstacles and excuses.

“A.T.,” Male, B.A., Law, Non-Local, Dorm. Resident says, “to do administrative affairs, the procedure is too slow and time-consuming. There’s a kind of paperwork... bylaws are formal. Wherever they find their own benefits they apply them and when they don’t see any benefits they ignore the bylaws...” “A.T.,” Male, M.A., Behavioral Science, Non-Local, Dorm. Resident states, “Administrative procedures are too time-consuming and bureaucratic, perhaps you want to send a letter via automation system for the vice-president of the educational affairs. It’ll take a couple of days to do it.” “A.R.,” Male, M.A., Biological Science, Non-Local, Dorm. Resident has a disappointing experience, “Administrative procedures are too time-consuming, and they aren’t accountable. Although you submit all needed documents, they don’t respond to your request.” “S.M.,” Female, M.A., Environmental Science, Non-Local, Dorm. Resident has a similar story, “administrative procedures here are awkward as other places. They enjoy keeping you waiting. They dally and make excuses putting off your job till another day.” Another one says, “I have some friends who were busy for a very small administrative request for six months!” this is the reason that most people are fed up with bylaws and distrust them which has a damaging impact on the normative essence of universities: “Bylaws are formal writings on paper.” To all of us who are eager for internationalization of higher education of our country, it is painful when an overseas student such as “A.S.,” Male, M.A, Economic and Political Science, Non-Iranian (Tajikistan) and Dorm. Resident says, “Personally, once I got my letter of introduction from the Ministry of Science it took about two months to reach the university and I left behind for one semester. I think it is not a good administrative procedure!” Therefore, they all expected a removing of administrative annoyances and of annoying process which were conceptualized as themes of facilitating.

8. The campus atmosphere

The other issue of focus for students to have a positive sense of living in a university is the campus atmosphere, its beauty, its spatial elements, and architectural symbols and the

suitable accommodation which were all conceptualized as themes of “campus atmosphere.” University students who were interviewed typically spoke with pleasant feeling about the natural beauty of its campus and mountainside position, the trees and the parrots that fly across and the eye-catching pavilions. Even if it was exhausting climbing uphill, it is worth for its beauties: “I like the campus atmosphere, it’s beautiful. When you walk you have a nice feeling.” But, these students were unhappy because “the university doesn’t have a façade” and “as a university symbol it lacks the façade to show that there exists a university here!” University façade is also another theme for a campus atmosphere.

9. The organizational culture and the career life quality

A good university is not kept alive only by its space, architecture and trees, but students look for a more important condition behind the physical appearance of the university; in organizational culture, atmosphere of groups and the character and behavior of teachers and their relationships with each other and the positive interactions or possibly destructive relationships and alienations there which were all conceptualized as themes of the organizational culture and the career life quality. This is why we see the students participating in the research are concerned about the factionalism, groupings, contamination of academic affairs with love and grudge and quarrels existing behind the seemingly courteous characters of some teachers, “it seems there is factionalism” some students feel that “there is factionalism in the university and teachers side with a particular political party.” Others apparently see: “there is, unfortunately, no interactions between professors” and more surprisingly some students conclude, “some teachers are jealous of each other!” “A.R.,” Male, M.A., Biological Science, Non-Local, Dorm. Resident inferences, “the student is the loser of these factionalism quarrels of the teachers and due to the contradiction of beliefs and views, finally, the student is negatively affected.” Students expect for staying away from factionalism and corruption that was conceptualized as a theme of the organizational culture and the career life quality.

10. The scientific and academic norms.

Participants in the study, regardless of the extent they themselves comply with the scientific and academic norms, these norms still influence their beliefs. It is again due to the complexities of the Iranian society and culture that individuals complain about not conforming to the norms by others, even if they themselves cannot actually adhere to these norms. They complained of “written theses that enter into the library while they contain mistake with no review by professors.”

11. The cultural and social missions of the university

What is the philosophy of higher education? What are the task-specifics of a university? Is it enough that the research and learning in its specialized meaning happen there and finally train and provide expert manpower and offer specialized services to the market, industry and the work world, and as known recently does entrepreneurship and production technology and wealth? Or not? Universities are also social and cultural institutions and the public welfare objectives, expectations and aspirations are implicit in its historical philosophy and have the mission of intellectualism, criticism and social enlightenment and missions of the community's cultural and social demands in its nature? Students participating in the study typically are attached to the latter. They perceive the university as an institution for thought, criticism, questioning and seeking reality. As a result, they are sorry that do not see vitality in students, “it is interpreted that they want students to spend more time on studying,” “talking about

freedom of opinion in the university is pointless, there is no freedom of opinion,” “the cultural activities inside the university is done just by Basij and the Leadership Institution.” Therefore, they expect for “students’ cooperation in various associations,” “cultural and social vitality in students,” and “social and cultural development of students” which are conceptualized as themes of “the cultural and social missions of the university.”

12. The academic autonomy and adequacy

They do not see the dignity and esteem of the university as it has to be. “M.M.,” M.A., Law, Non-Local, Dorm. Resident says, “If the president of the university is elected by its own faculty members, it will be much better than the election of individuals who have no familiarity with the university.” The university is an intellectual and professional institution and, consequently, it has to be managed according to professional and meritocratic principles as one of the themes of the academic autonomy and adequacy, “if the president is an expert then the management will be efficient.” Another student says referring to the selectivity of university president as another theme of this category, “Sometimes we see presidents in the universities that instead of interacting with students and solving their problems, transact with pressure and influential groups.” “The experience I had of two first-ranked universities shows that they just want to pass the academic year and go into holidays, spend their governmental funds and fulfill a minimum of affairs” and as another interviewee says “our university is the executor of other bodies’ programs rather than having its own programs” and the academics have the least roles in being involved in their own affairs, “I don’t think that the planning and decision making is done with teamwork and cooperation, it is more self-centered than being cooperative.”

13. The curriculum

Boredom and uselessness of a large part of the general courses are another bitter experience for students. “A.T.,” Male, B.A., Law, Non-local, Dorm. Resident says, “We waste our time with passing the general courses, neither we nor they (teachers) do enjoy the classes. The general courses should be appropriate for modern life, such as computer classes, language and so on.” This topic has been repeatedly stated in different ways in the interviews, “General courses are really weak and just waste of time,” “Neither the teachers are serious about general courses nor the students do like to attend these classes and most of them are absent from general course classes and they are unmotivated.” The student interviewees suggest solutions to these problems, “Instead of these, workshops can exist to teach healthy lifestyle.” So “required general and basic courses,” “transformative and updated curriculum based on the society and market need,” and “the existence of optional and extracurricular training” are conceptualized as themes of the curriculum.

14. The academic competitiveness

Progress, innovation and dynamism are not possible without competitive conditions. The country needs a healthy competitive environment for the emergence of initiatives, creativity and innovation. Interventions are initiative-burning and the equalizing views prevent growth and development. Either the competition is inside a university among students, teachers, departments, disciplines and faculties or it is in the society among the universities especially in regional levels and global competitiveness. “H.Y.,” Male, Ph.D., Behavioral Science, Non-local and Dorm. Resident says, “In our discipline, the university is the best one in higher education field and can compete with other universities and in the country and also in the region. The validity of the academic degree was very important for me in selecting the

university.” In other interviews some aspects of competitiveness were mentioned, “The law students are proud of being the best of law in this country,” “the university is good in some fields, and the validity of the university among departments, disciplines and faculties is different.”

15. Internationalization

Students are enthusiastic about the internationalization of their universities and take even the slightest evidence such as the specialized international conference at the university as a good omen, in other words, “international cooperation” and “glocalization of academic activities” are conceptualized as themes of internationalization. “For our discipline that insurance conferences were held twice, I met insurance companies, became completely familiar with organizations. Some people had come from foreign countries” They wish and need to study in a university with global view, relationships and academic scientific interactions, but they do not see these realized in the university, “The university doesn’t have enough connections with the universities of other countries and has no letters of understanding or information and knowledge exchange. No cooperation in the student acceptance and teacher recruitment.” Few students from other countries come to study in this university which indicates our weaknesses in the internationalization of our higher education. When a student from countries such as Tajikistan or Syria have a lot of problems in one of the most renowned universities, the condition will be obvious for other countries in the world and for nationwide scale universities regarding our retard in the internationalization of our universities. “A.S,” Male, M.A, Economic and Political Science, Non-Iranian (Tajikistan) and Dorm Resident says,

The authorities of the university spend more time to accept overseas students rather than making up for shortcomings... the actual performance of the university regarding courses is good, but the kitchen facilities in dorms aren’t enough, dorms’ studies aren’t adequate, not enough dorms. They’re not clean and my friends don’t keep quiet. The staff behavior and attitude isn’t interesting, especially the secretaries of the teachers don’t treat well; before I came here I thought the university with this reputation would be at least more disciplined than my previous university, but after I came I saw no order and didn’t like the attitude and behavior of some staff and the performance of university administrators who are you trying to say positive, ignore defects, is not acceptable. I think we’re fooling ourselves. Rejecting criticism is a big flaw that I see here ... an opinion poll from us isn’t serious, although sometimes that we are asked to give opinions also are explicitly asked to say positively!

16. Reputation and social brand

A university can make progress when it possesses an efficient framework for internal and external evaluation, exposes itself to public judgment via a networked national- and international-scale validation owns structures and processes for internal and external audit, deploys quality requirements and standards, builds a monitoring system and promotes its status in rankings. The interviewees show that they do not accept studying in a university with eyes wide shut. “R.G.,” Male, M.A., Behavioral Science, Non-Local, Dorm. Resident says, “One of the reasons I chose this university is because it possesses famous and expert professors who are renowned in national level and most of their books are taught in classes and are references for exams.” Another one says, “When I heard that it’s among the eight high-rank universities I

got motivated to choose it.” Another one stated, “I follow the university’s ranking, now it’s fourth or fifth.”

17. Training qualified graduates

With their words, it is obvious that they have entered the university with some expectations. “R.G.,” Male, M.A., Behavioral Science, Non-Local, Dorm. Resident says, “Education here builds kind of a social base for individuals.” “A.R.,” Male, M.A., Biological Science, Non-Local, Dorm. Resident is proud, “Graduates of this university usually reach high positions” although career future concerns are always with them. As “F.A.,” Female, M.A., Mathematics Science, Non-Local, Dorm. Resident states, “My career future isn’t clear” and “S.M.,” Female, M.A., Environmental Science, Non-Local, Dorm. Resident is annoyed and says, “The University didn’t provide educational and career opportunities for me, the teachers don’t want the students to take part in their projects and I haven’t found a suitable job yet” and others say similarly, “The University didn’t give me any occupational, research or other chances.” So, they expect universities to “make opportunities and chances to alumni” as a theme of training qualified graduates.

18. The production of knowledge, entrepreneurship, and specialized services to the community and social responsibility

Iran's universities were the first-generation education universities for a long time. Since the 2010s, with the development of higher education and the impact of growing information and communication technologies in the world and its influence in Iran, a trend of increasing academic articles began. But the academic articles are one of the markers of the second-generation research universities. Our universities have not yet reached impressive achievements in terms of connection with industry, the world of work and the services, and social responsibility and are certainly far from the third-generation entrepreneur universities. The research participants did not have a successful experience of the subject: “The quality is low, and they aren’t active enough in research fields,” “the university doesn’t have connections with industry, there’s no bridge between the university and industry. If a thesis has any output, that’ll be a book or paper,” “the universities are currently in the course of generating articles, but it is important that through this direction, universities can produce the required social technologies, useful inventions appear which will be the sources of blessing and goodness for the society.”

B. Major categories and hypothesized propositions resulted from the research

The phenomenological approach helped us to bring about a relatively rich description of the student lived experience at the university. 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).

Moreover, as shown in the figure 1 through the frequencies of the emphases of the students participating in the study, some hypothesized propositions were also resulted which may be tested by a survey method; three main hypotheses are: 1. There is a directed relationship between the university’s institutional assets and its activity manners which complies with the word of Shiekh Bahayi as an Iranian proverb which means “Nothing more than what is inside

the jug will leak outside.” In other words, university’s institutional index effects on the university’s process as its activities. Therefore, University’s institutional index which consists “faculty members, the quality of academic provisions, the academic autonomy and adequacy, and the curriculum,” effects on its activities. 2. There is a directed relationship between the university’s processes and activities, and its products, outputs and consequences; this also complies with another Iranian proverb which is part of a lyric by Hafiz: “You reap what you sow.” In other words, output is directly related to input and process, and eventually, the consequences of actions are seen. 3. There is a directed relationship between the difficulties of the university’s assets and difficulties in its achievements. This also complies with another Iranian proverb which is part of a poem by Ferdowsi: “The flowing water is muddy from the headwaters.” Thus, we cannot expect something satisfying when the input and process are unsatisfying.



Figure 1. A Model for desired University based on students’ lived experience

Some other hypotheses resulting from the three main hypotheses are: 4. The governance conditions of the university is related to the academic autonomy and scientific freedom. Thus, when there is a lack of autonomy and scientific freedom, management and leadership in university has been defaced. 5. Also, there is a relationship between the faculty quality and the academic teaching and learning quality. In other words, high faculty quality leads to high teaching and learning quality and vice versa. Moreover, 6. here is a relationship between the faculty quality and the graduates’ quality. 7. There is also a relationship between the campus atmosphere and the teaching, learning quality. 8. There is a relationship between the campus atmosphere and the knowledge production quality. 9. There is a relationship between the campus atmosphere and the graduates’ quality. 10. There is a relationship between the student’s life quality and his/her growth and pride, and teaching, learning quality 11. and also the graduates’ quality. 12. There is a relationship between the university culture, the faculty career life quality, and the teaching, learning quality. 13. There is a relationship between the university culture, the faculty career life quality, and knowledge production quality. 14. There is a relationship between the university culture, the faculty career life quality, and the graduates’ quality.

Discussion

The result was as follows:

One. 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. When the conditions in an old senior public university are like this, it is probably similar in other universities, so we also need to fulfill serious studies.

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, but not just with the minds but also with their bodies and a variety of 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, as well. This is an expectation which is less satisfied. One of the repetitive propositions indicated that the 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 an expertise to the students, training, testing and issuing certificates. In addition to knowledge transfer, the participants in this study have other expectations from the university: meaning, relationship and identity, and the like. Is this expectation met? A qualitative research cannot extend a rule to a wider realm of the society but can show the depth of the feelings and perceptions. Students participated in our study who not only are not pleased and satisfied with the life in the university but they also confront a variety of uncertainties and concerns. Unemployment or lack of relevant work after graduation is only one of these serious concerns.

Three. Different kinds of the managerial, financial and political troubles prevent the studied Iranian university from achieving success in the development of students. 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 does and 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. A teacher who is lettered and teaches well is necessary for their points of view but not adequate, because they want teachers to build a friendlier relationship with them.

Five. It seems that the Iranian student atmosphere according to the results of the current case study is going through a period of academic elitism and 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. Moreover, the students participating in the study speak about behaviors such as factionalism, personal quarrels, jealousy etc. among the teachers.

Six. Compared to the colorful organizations having abundant modern facilities which have been establish during past years by the 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 model of university in the eyes and minds of students in Iran that is a university with academic autonomy which its president is elected by its own faculty members. The university has a substantive difference 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. The participants in the study feel that the university where the study took place does not benefit from such a position and independence which certainly negatively affects their educational behaviors.

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 is out of their tolerance. If injustice and discrimination is so annoying and bizarre then woe to when a student sees this in his/her instructor's behavior. If the teachers do not have a moral and meaningful leverage on the students, they will not be able to efficiently impress them. Do teachers really discriminate? Not obvious. But it is the discrimination sensation that is evident among the students in the current study. It is absolutely certain that the Iranian university studied here has failed to build generalized satisfaction and trust among the young student generation.

Nine. Some other pieces of research show that Iranians are typically emotional. Their language is rich with emotional and sensational propositions (Moiiede Hekmat, 2011). They are friendly and expect that their friends back them. The warm and informal relationships are more important for them than the cold, relationships. Perhaps a cold, undesirable and emotionless behavior, legal though it is, may offend them (Farasatkah, 2015). That is why the maximum strict regulations and bureaucratic procedures have been reflected very uncomfortable in the lived perception of the university students.

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 ideological interferences of the government in these programs, weaknesses in needs assessment, planning or implementation have resulted in the opposite and contrary outcomes. The participants in the study are fed up with most of these courses. The phenomenon of the student alienation from academic curricula may distort the effectiveness of the academic education in Iran.

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