Defining the Perception and Experiences of Educational Service Stakeholders

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Abstract

Background and Purpose: The office of educational services at universities is a very important division and it is necessary for employees to strive towards providing suitable services to students. The quality of educational services has always been a major concern for higher education managers. Interviewing stakeholders and experts increases our understanding of different aspects of the subject in order to create a native model with high performance capability based on existing conditions and the cultural and political infrastructure of our country. Therefore, we aimed to define the perception and experiences of educational service stakeholders.

Methods: In this qualitative thematic content analysis that adapted a deductive approach using Graneheim and Lundman's method. Initially, purposeful sampling was done to identify and select the students (as first level stakeholders) studying paramedical majors at one of the medical science universities of the country during the educational year 2015-2016. Altogether, 20 people were interviewed consisting of 6 students, 4 faculty members, 2 student affairs employees, 1 counselor, 2 education officers, and 2 education office managers).Data were analyzed and coded using MAXQDA software.

Results: Of the 400 initial codes extracted through data analysis, 336 abstract codes, 48 sub-categories, 20 categories, and 7 themes were obtained. The level of abstraction was different in the categories. The extracted themes were as follows: information gap before and after entering university, the difference between expected and perceived services and factors contributing to expectations, the university's approach in enhancing service quality, the student and management of educational problems, the system-student interaction in educational planning, and the professors' responsibilities and performance in enhancing quality, and the role on the university management system in enhancing the quality of services.

Conclusions: In the current educational management system, there are several gaps affective the quality of service providing such as the gap between the students' expectations and the management system, the gap between the perceptions of the university management and the designing and standardizing of services, the gap between standardization and presentable services, communicational gaps, and gaps between received services and expected services. Therefore, in a future study, we will define these gaps and present a model that could fill those gaps.

Keywords: EXPERIENCES, PERCEPTION, EDUCATIONAL STAKEHOLDERS, EDUCATIONAL SERVICES, QUALITY

Introduction

The quality of services universities provide is carefully monitored by governments due to

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their significant role in nurturing skilled and professional human resources (1, 2). As service providers, universities are currently faced with technology development, reduced expenses, governmental decisions, different budgeting and increased competition and are rapidly evolving to increase the service providing quality (3). The quality of provided university services to students is an important

concern for those involved in higher education. Currently, defining the scope, conceptualization, and determining the factors for the concept of quality is faced with theoretical and methodological ambiguity. Moreover, the root of most of these ambiguities is the lack of a suitable model or tool for measuring quality (4). The evaluation and monitoring of educational services should be done within a scientific framework based on a coherent model and method in order to be effective. By reviewing related literature, we find that there is no universal conceptual model regarding the quality of educational services and each researcher who has studied this area has stated a definition and presented different models for the quality of educational services with different approaches, each emphasizing on one aspect of educational service quality (5-8).

The office of educational services at universities is a very important division and it is necessary for employees to strive towards providing suitable services to students. The services provided by educational service managers are directly related to the students. In other words, since students have the most relations with the educational service office, the performance of the employees in this sector is highly influential in creating a positive attitude towards the overall university management. Students normally evaluate the whole university (except for course evaluation) based on the performance of the employees of the educational service department because of being more connected to this department. This issue increases the sensitivity and responsibility of the employees of this office. The educational service department is a system for providing services to students that should be able to meets the needs of students upon entrance, during their presence at the university, and upon graduation so that the concept of relationship with students takes a logical form at universities.

Educational services should be provided in a way that students feel that they are in a safe environment, in order to be mentally prepared to learn their courses (9). We are currently incompetent in understanding our customers and meeting their needs in our educational service providing, especially at universities. The first step towards optimal service providing is to understand customers and their needs and expectations. Since this is often difficult we try to avoid them. As a result, we would not increase quality no matter where we start from. Therefore, presenting a suitable model and preparing a valid and reliable measurement tool for assessing educational service quality is necessary. The experience of experts and stakeholders regarding educational service quality and recognizing local norms is very important in this regard. Interviewing stakeholders and experts increases our understanding of different aspects of the subject in order to create a native model with high performance capability based on existing conditions and the cultural and political infrastructure of our country. Therefore, we aimed to define the perception and experiences of educational service stakeholders.

Methods

In this qualitative thematic content analysis which adapted a deductive approach, using Graneheim and Lundman's method (10), the perceptions and experiences of educational service stakeholders, especially students, regarding the quality of the provided services was defined, leading to seven main themes. Initially, purposeful sampling was done to identify and select the students (as first level stakeholders) studying paramedical majors at one of the medical science universities of the country during the educational year 2015-2016. Semi-structured interviews were done and data were simultaneously analyzed using content analysis with a deductive approach. Then, theoretical sampling was done until data saturation. According to theoretical sampling, 16 faculty members and educational managers and employees were selected as second level stakeholders and

were interviewed. Data were analyzed and coded using MAXQDA software.

Altogether, 20 people were interviewed consisting of 6 students, 4 faculty members, 2 student affairs employees, 1 counselor, 2 education officers, and 2 education office managers). 3 interviews with students were omitted. A total of 29 interview sessions were held each lasting for 58 minutes on average. The main questions were as follows:

What are the main components of educational service quality from the stakeholders' perspective?

What do you think about quality of services refers to?

How do you interpret educational service quality?

The issues that were assessed included service quality, expected services, satisfaction and its influential factors, customer and student orientation, satisfaction from education, organization and organizational culture, organizational atmosphere, relationship with students, systems for communicating with students, technical quality (tangible factors), performance quality (the processes of accepting students until graduation in each division related to the university), domains of service quality (tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, etc.), aim of entering university, and educational justice. Exploratory questions were also used during interviews. The researchers were also continuously involved with the study data. Moreover, the main researcher (as a faculty member) had 15 years of experience in educational and clinical domains as well as the research setting and educational processes.

The texts of the interviews were transcribed and the codes were extracted and the themes and sub-themes were discussed with the participants and their opinions were considered. Combining was used for data collection (structured interviews and assessing documentations). Documentations included all official letters related to educational services of the university.

Diversity was considered for selecting samples so that students of different majors with different educational levels, student counseling center, student affairs, educational experts and managers, and faculty members with work experience and different responsibilities were selected. We obtained the opinion of external observers indicating an agreement regarding the study flow and findings. All activities were accurately recorded and a detailed report was presented. After presenting the required information, oral informed consent was obtained from all participants. Also, their permission was obtained for recording the interviews. The participants were assured that their information would remain confidential. We presented the final results of the study with the participants.

Results

Of the 400 initial codes extracted through data analysis, 336 abstract codes, 48 sub-categories, 20 categories, and 7 themes were obtained. The level of abstraction was different in the categories. Table 1 shows the summary of the coding and categories and selected semantic codes.

Discussion

Information gap before and after entering university (Theme 1): This theme depicts the students' information gap before and after entering university. We found that there was a difference in the students' perceptions before entering university and after it and these perceptions could create some expectations for students upon entering university. The student experiences a new environment and has little information about it and does not obtain adequate information when entering university. Moreover, according to the interviews with the students, we found that each student has a specific goal for entering university and whether this goal is attained or not affects the student's satisfaction with the

Table 1. The summary of extracted codes, themes and categories

Document	Segment	Category/sub-category/abstract code
Theme 1: Information gap before and after entering university		
Counseling	The students are not interested in their major. They had initially liked better majors but since they could not get accepted they do not have a good feeling about their current major	Factors related to entrance/major selection/interest in the major
Student affairs	Most students had considered university as their dream palace, but when they entered they understand it is not like their dreams or what they had thought of.	Factors related to entrance/perceptions about university
Theme 2: The difference between expected and perceived services and factors contributing to expectations		Category/sub-category/abstract code
Student	It was not what I had expected. Not only the university building but also the behavior of the employees. We thought we are now "students" and can rule the world. That everyone would envy us and be proud of us. That we would be treated right and we are useful for the society. But we entered university and found that it's not really so.	Difference between expectations and reality
Theme 3: The university's approach in enhancing service quality		Category/sub-category/abstract code
Student	We entered university and found that in this university whatever students say is considered wrong by the managers. They don't really pay attention to students' ideas. Professors are important but students are more important because students are the product and output of universities. The students are a reflection of the professors' hardships.	Factors related to students/ students as the main stakeholders/students' participation in university affairs/not paying attention to the student
Theme 4: The student and management of educational problems		Category/sub-category/abstract code
Student	If you are unaware of the methods of bypassing problems they ignore you easily and don't solve your problem. We didn't know this in the first two semesters, but we found these shortcuts and how to behave. At the university you must coerce the employees to do your work. And what you were is important in getting your work done, if you're not like this (your hair being out..) your work won't get done.	Students and educational problems/ The students' performance in solving educational problems/ bypassing problems/ the effect of unconventional factors in solving the educational problems of the students
Theme 5: The system-student interaction in educational planning		Category/sub-category/abstract code
Student	The students is not seen or considered in educational issues. The students' requests are not discussed at the board of directors meetings, not even their written complaints. It is held with faculty members and they all know each other.	Educational planning/ system's role in educational planning/ consulting with students/ consulting with students in educational planning

Themes 6: The professors' responsibilities and performance in enhancing quality		Category/sub-category/abstract code
Faculty member	The professors, just like all people, are involved in their own daily problems. They are after issues not related to their academic role and they have concerns that interfere with their academic responsibilities. These problems play an important role in their academic role as professors. The weak support of the university is responsible for this. It's been a while that the professors are complaining about when they would get paid. They don't consider teaching as a source of financial support. If this need is not fulfilled it could affect their teaching. The professors have some weaknesses alongside the weak support of the university. The university should create a suitable condition for the professors to play their role effectively, but it doesn't and so quality declines.	Factors related to faculty members/recreational and educational facilities/ the support of the university
Theme 7: The role on the university management system in enhancing the quality of services		Category/sub-category/abstract code
Student	The facilities they had considered for other majors were not considered for us and we were not treated right. Majors such as dentistry, medicine, pharmaceutics and audiology were treated better. We understood this discrimination from the very beginning. We went to class with 65 other students. The professors came and thought they had to say something and go, no interaction, no feedback, no learning. Of course, they were not to blame, the classes were crowded and everyone was new and had come from high school and created noise. We passed the semesters like this and now we are in semester 6.	Factors related to managers/ support/ welfare services/ the primary needs of students

quality of provided services. Various factors during student life contribute to creating a positive attitude or a negative frustrated one towards the studied major (11).

The difference between expected and perceived services and factors contributing to expectations (Theme 2): This theme depicts the difference between expected services and perceived ones as well as factors creating those expectations. A little while after entering the university, the students would gradually understand the differences between their expectations and the reality. Therefore, some things might be better than what they had expected and some things might not. According to the interviews and the students' opinions, we found that students enter university with certain expectations and these expectations are moderated by interacting with other students and the academic system. These expectations can be divided into different levels; needed service and the student's demand. A suitable service is the least service students accept without being dissatisfied. Presenting services at levels lower than this level would lead to the students' dissatisfaction and hopelessness.

Moreover, predicted services are levels of service that students really expect to receive (12). From the interviews, we found that by interacting with the academic system, there are some expectations students have and some expectations are predetermined for them by the system such as the wording and behavior employees and faculty members have. Some expectation re further created by interacting with peers. Ultimately, students compare these expectations with the perceived services and thus an interpretation of service quality is formed in their minds which could lead to their satisfaction or dissatisfaction.

The University's approach in enhancing service quality (Theme 3): This theme indicates the university's approach and prophecy for improving its overall quality, including the quality of provided services. The management department's approach regarding all university goals, plans, and processes for enhancing quality is rooted in this theme. There are different approaches to quality. In the perfectionist approach, the university's quality is defined by its ability to expand human knowledge and discovery and

create though and meaning. In the application-oriented and client-oriented approach, quality is determined by student and personnel satisfaction of productions, outputs and results (13,14). From another perspective, the quality of higher education depends on the ultimate value added which is created at national and international levels. For this aim, the value of initial, intermediate, and final outputs is measured against its inputs. The quality of higher education depends on the extent to which the university can meet the expressed or potential needs and expectations of its stakeholders. In this approach, quality is a combination of effectiveness, efficacy, responsiveness, and innovation. We found that students and employees perceive the university management perspective as a top-bottom view and the students do not practically consider themselves as the most important stakeholders and in some cases not only their least expectations are not fulfilled, they are also disrespected.

The student and management of educational problems, the system-student interaction in educational planning, and the professors' responsibilities and performance in enhancing quality (Themes 4, 5, and 6): The services that students should receive and managers should design, plan, and present include technical and functional aspects. Technical quality is what the students actually receives as the result of his/her interaction with the university as a service-providing organization. It consists of services related to educational and course planning, services professors provide, and student-related services. In an academic system, students expect a good interaction between these three aspects. They expect professors to play their role effectively with respect to teaching, evaluation, etc. Moreover, they expect the university and the educational system to be able to design and implement a suitable program by consulting with students and also, students are expected to play their role effectively and continue their education

by being responsible, committed, and motivated.

Considering the different type of power sources and learning conditions, three sources of power can be defined for classes: institutional power (organizational or legal), cognitive power (knowledge and expertise), and emotional power (authority and role model). It is necessary to exert emotional and cognitive power proportional to institutional power (15.16). According to the opinions of the participants, operational quality is related to how an individual attains technical outcomes. This aspect of quality refers to the conditions of service providing and is actually the recognition of characteristics related to service quality and its different dimensions (tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy). In this regard, educational justice is a dimension that most students mentioned when talking about the professors' teaching and evaluation and discrimination between majors. Therefore, this dimension was added to the other dimensions. Moreover, the physical appearance and tangibles was a dimension students mentioned not to be effective on the quality of provided services. They stated that other aspects were more important.

The role on the university management system in enhancing the quality of services (Theme 7): This theme operationally assesses the process of designing and implementing service quality and relations with students. The university management system should receive student expectations from different channels and then design and standardize services in concordance to these expectations using a process-oriented approach no a task-oriented one. In this process the management should maintain its relationship with the stakeholders. According to the stakeholders' opinions and the documentations, as well as the researchers' experience, we found several gaps in the educational system requiring more attention. Including gap between the students' expectations and the management system, the gap between the perceptions of the university management and the designing and

standardizing of services, the gap between standardization and presentable services, communicational gaps, and gaps between received services and expected services.

Conclusion

By assessing these themes and documentations as well as a review of related literature, we found that in the current educational management system, there are several gaps affective the quality of service providing such as the gap between the students' expectations and the management system, the gap between the perceptions of the university management and the designing and standardizing of services, the gap between standardization and presentable services, communicational gaps, and gaps between received services and expected services. Therefore, in a future study, we will define these gaps and present a model that could fill those gaps.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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