Research Article

Explanation of Non-Iranian Students' Views on the Quality of Learning Experiences

Somayeh Akbari Farmad [1], Masoumeh Hashemi [2] and Somayeh Sohrabi [2, *]

[1]Departments of Medical Education, Virtual School, Medical Education and Management, Shahid Beheshti University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran
[2]Virtual School of Medical Education and Management, Shahid Beheshti University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran

*Corresponding author: Virtual School of Medical Education and Management, Shahid Beheshti University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran. Email: som_sohrabi@sbmu.ac.ir

Abstract

Background: Learning experiences help learners achieve educational goals and are usually related to the educational context that occurs in teaching groups, teacher-student relationships, and teaching-learning activities.

Objectives: The current study aimed to explain the views of non-Iranian students on the quality of learning experiences at Shahid Beheshti University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran.

Methods: This was a qualitative study with the directional content analysis method. The participants were 12 non-Iranian students studying in the last year or before the last year in medicine, nursing, and paramedical faculties of Shahid Beheshti University of Medical Sciences who were randomly selected from non-Iranian students for semi-structured oral interviews. The interviews continued until data saturation.

Results: After content analysis, 85 initial codes were extracted. Based on the relationship between the codes, 14 subcategories were obtained and placed into 4 main categories. The main categories were available resources, available content, learning flexibility, and the quality of professors' relationships with students.

Conclusions: Based on the results, the quality of learning experiences plays a critical role in effective learning. Paying attention to the experiences and viewpoints of non-Iranian students studying at Shahid Beheshti University of Medical Sciences is very important to improve the quality of learning experiences and attract non-Iranian students.

Keywords: Quality of Learning Experiences, Non-Iranian Students, Shahid Beheshti University of Medical Sciences

1. Background

What remains in an educational environment for students is an enjoyable learning experience and an unenjoyable learning experience. If the system is dynamic, the teacher-student relationship is of the desired quality, and the educational equipment is in the service of education, the learning experience will be pleasant. The term "quality of the learning experience" refers to the interaction between the learner and the external conditions in the environment where the learning responds to it (1).

The term "quality of the learning experience" was first introduced by Newman in 1990 and referred to students' perceptions about direct and non-direct inputs they receive from their college and school. Direct input refers to faculty investments in the curriculum in terms of curriculum content, resources, and flexibility of training programs; however, indirect input refers to the processes by which universities seek to enhance learning (2).

Resources include the quality and quantity of the library and facilities related to the computer site and research services. Content includes the quality of academic guidance and the value of the offered subjects. Learning flexibility consists of the opportunity to learn independently, the ability to choose different courses, and adequate classroom discussion. The quality of the relationship between faculty members and students can also be mentioned. If there are sufficient resources for the implementation of educational programs, the growth and development of students will be provided (3).

Increasing the quality of learning experiences can motivate an individual to do things related to education and continue their education with more motivation. Adequate resources, proper planning, and committed professors are among the factors that make up learning experiences that might have motivated students to increase academic efficiency (3). Austin has proposed three educational approaches to guide students. The first approach refers to the content of the content. The basic premise of this model

is that learners' learning and growth refer to the correct content of educational materials (4). The second conceptual framework for learner development is related to the resources available in colleges (5). The third approach focuses on the flexibility of educational programs tailored to the needs of students. The flexibility approach of educational programs is consistent with the research findings of numerous learning and development psychologists (6). This method emphasizes self-directed and selective learning and independent study. Schools' investment in content, resources, and learning flexibility can enhance students' growth and learning (7). Therefore, providing appropriate learning opportunities will lead to better growth and prosperity of learners.

If the same situation of teaching-learning experiences is matched to non-Iranian students, they will face various problems. Today, numerous countries worldwide seek to attract international students by expanding higher education activities beyond their geographical borders. Most countries in the world have extensive plans to increase the enrollment of international students (8).

Most international students who enter a new country to continue their education are very different from the host country in terms of culture, language skills, and educational experiences. The learning pattern that these students have already experienced can create problems in acquiring new knowledge because they cannot adapt to the new educational system; as a result, it will have consequences, such as academic failure (9).

2. Objectives

Since students' learning experiences can affect numerous factors related to the period of study, including scientific and professional development, and lead to short-term and long-term results and personal growth in various fields, the study of these experiences can provide important information that can be used to improve and modify learning experiences, and help attract non-Iranian students. In this regard, this study was conducted to explain the views of non-Iranian students on the quality of learning experiences at Shahid Beheshti University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran.

3. Methods

The present qualitative study was conducted using directional content analysis in 2020. The participants were 12 non-Iranian students studying in the last year or before the last year in medicine, nursing, and paramedical faculties of Shahid Beheshti University of Medical Sciences who

were randomly selected from non-Iranian students interested in participating in the study. The faculties were randomly selected from all the faculties in which non-Iranian students were studying. Interviews continued until data saturation.

In the beginning, the research objectives and the right to participate or refuse to participate in the interview were explained to the participants. After obtaining informed consent, the interview was conducted using four questions about the participants' experiences and views on learning experiences (Box 1). The interviews were conducted in coordination with the participants at their school. Each interview lasted 45 - 60 minutes. The entire interview was recorded after obtaining permission from the participants. The interviews were immediately transcribed, and the initial codes were extracted by reading the text of the interviews several times and immersing in them. The extracted primary codes were classified into subcategories based on semantic similarity. Finally, similar subcategories were semantically placed in the main categories. This study was approved by obtaining the ethics code (IR.SBMU.SME.REC.1399.051) from the Ethics Committee of Shahid Beheshti University of Medical Sciences.

Box 1. Interview Questions

Questions
What do you think about the available resources for learning?
What do you think about the available content for learning?
What do you think about the flexibility of learning at university?
What is your opinion about the quality of formal and informal relationships between university professors and students?

For the validation of the findings of this study, an attempt was made to provide an accurate interpretation created by the participants' minds by reviewing the texts of the interview. In addition, the different views of all the individuals involved in the interview were reflected in the results of the research. The transcripts of the interviews were referred to the interviewee for approval, and two researchers reviewed the coding.

4. Results

Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of the participants.

Twelve verbal interviews were carried out on six female and six male students. After initial coding, 85 codes were extracted. Based on the relationship between the extracted codes, 14 subcategories were obtained and placed into 4 main categories (Tables 2 - 5).

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics and Majors of Participants

Variables	No. (%)
Gender	
Female	6 (50)
Male	6 (50)
Age (y)	
19 - 21	3 (25)
22 - 24	6 (50)
25 - 27	3 (25)
Country of residence	
Afghanistan	4 (33.3)
Lebanon	3 (25)
Iraq	5 (41.6)
Participant's major	
Medicine	4 (33.3)
Nursing	6 (50)
Paramedical	2 (16.7)

Participants' own words and phrases were used for coding.

4.1. Available Resources

Based on the interviews with the students, four subcategories were obtained in the available resources section, namely classmates as a source of learning, teacher-centered learning, teaching equipment and teaching aids, and transfer of learning out of the classroom.

Participant No. 5 said: "My experience with learning resources at this university was not in a way that stimulated participation among students. Most activities are done individually and teacher-centered".

Participant No. 8 said: "Most of the time, what I saw with my own eyes is that the first and last letter is said by the professors; no other resources are taken into account."

Participant No. 3 said: "Up-to-date teaching methods, such as augmented reality and such teaching tools, are not widely used in this university."

4.2. Available Content

As a result of the interviews conducted with the students about the learning experiences in the available content section, three subcategories, namely updating the content, validating the content, and expanding content inclusion, were extracted.

Participant No. 10 said: "In our country, a series of courses is updated every year and brings new information that has emerged in medical science, but in Iran, some findings are perhaps from 10 years ago."

Participant No. 2 said: "My best experience in presenting material is when, after theoretical material, it was taught to us objectively in laboratories or hospitals."

Participant No. 11 said: "Early in my university entrance, it was very difficult because the presentation system was different from that of my country. The professors preferred to present complete theoretical material first and then go to examples or practical material if the volume of material increased, but in my country, during high school, we had a training session in the classroom for theoretical lessons; the next session, the same topics were taught in a challenging and practical way in the laboratory environment."

4.3. Learning Flexibility

Based on the results of the interviews about students' learning experiences in the field of learning flexibility in the university, four main categories, namely paying attention to the challenging environment based on the needs of the community, ensuring students' ability to solve problems and paying attention to their new ideas, paying attention to updating the organizational and administrative structure of the university, and providing an exciting learning environment, were extracted.

Participant No. 1 said: "I think the university learning environment should be like a community environment full of concerns and issues in which they teach us the skills to solve those problems."

Participant No. 9 said: "In Iran, students are not trusted much and are not given high-risk jobs; there is always a fear among students to take medical responsibility, which I think should be corrected. The professors can do it right and without mistakes with the students, helping do something and teaching the strength of courage."

Participant No. 10 said: "My experience of the Iranian learning environment is that it does not have medical sciences and standard learning environments similar to the world, and the context of this work requires an up-to-date environment, which of course requires a lot of budget and equipment."

4.4. Quality of Professors' Relationships with Students

Based on the interviews, students' learning experiences in the quality of formal and informal relationships between professors and students were divided into three main categories, namely establishing flexible relationships, recognizing the ability of each student, and participatory class management.

Table 2. Main Category, Subcategories, and Initial Codes Related to the First Question of the Research

First Question: What Do You Think About the Available Resources for Learning?		
Main Category	**Subcategory**	**Initial Codes**
Available resources	Classmates as a source of learning	Leading learning toward participation among students Learning from classmates Group effort to learn
	Teacher-centered learning	Trying to use balanced learning channels
		Seeking help from the teacher and their availability at all times
		Providing a calm environment
		Not relying solely on the teacher as a source of learning
	Teaching equipment and teaching aids	Not using textbooks only
		Objectivity of training
		Using various resources and training software
		Providing laboratory equipment
	Transfer of learning out of the classroom	Objectifying materials
		Using the environment Managing the study environment
		Exchange of experiences with professors abroad
		Transfer of learning from the classroom to the outside environment
		Providing educational platforms at the level of hospitals and clinics

Participant No. 12 said: "My first experience with professors was not very pleasant. Some professors had a formal relationship, and others were flexible."

Participant No. 7 said: "One of my friends and I were in the same class with two different abilities and two different interests, but one of our teachers had the same expectation and did not try to understand our differences; the homework was very heavy for my friend, and the teacher paid no attention to this issue. He said that you should be able to grow to the same level and be successful in your work."

Participant No. 2 said: "My best experience of the classroom environment is with the lessons that the teacher asked us about classroom management and asked for our opinion on classroom work."

5. Discussion

In this study, four subcategories were obtained in the available resources main section, namely classmates as a source of learning, teacher-centered learning, teaching equipment and teaching aids, and transfer of learning out of the classroom. The findings are consistent with the results of studies by Schneider and Willingham. In the aforementioned studies, the lack of practical training and practical training equipment has been mentioned as a deterrent to effective learning experiences (6, 8).

The increasing changes in human society and the complexity of living standards require individuals to have a transformational and specialized view of teaching and learning. In modern educational approaches, the student is not only an accepting being but an active being and participatory in the teaching and learning process, and the available resources have a great impact on learning. As the learning environment and resources become stronger, there will be more learning and sustainability.

In the present study, learning experiences in the available content section had three subcategories, namely updating the content, validating the content, and expanding content inclusion. The results of this study are consistent with the results of studies by Bostan. In this regard, Bostan concluded that the quality of teaching and learning is one of the most important issues that should be considered. In Bostan's study, participating in class discussions, using practical examples to understand the content, and relating what they learned to their professional and occupational needs were some of the most important things that health education students achieved (10).

Undoubtedly, the educational content is one of the three basic pillars of education, along with the teacher and the learner, which gives meaning and concept to the educational process in any group and age group and at any time and place (11). The rapid changes in modern technology are increasing the importance of the educational content among the aforementioned pillars at every moment as much as it eliminates the need for a teacher in numerous educational processes (12). The e-learning process is

Table 3. Main Category, Subcategories, and Initial Codes Related to the Second Question of the Research

Second Question: What Do You Think About the Available Content for Learning?		
Main Category	**Subcategory**	**Initial Codes**
Available content	Updating the content	Using up-to-date research-based content
		Paying attention to virtual content
		Learning content production software
		Making content available at all times
		Paying attention to providing accurate content with high validity
		Paying attention to content updates
		Paying attention to new ideas in medical science in content presentation
		Introducing technology in content presentation
		Paying attention to the multimedia content
	Validating the content	Objectivity of content
		Paying attention to practical examples of content Teachability of content
		Ease of learning content Paying attention to attractive content
		Implementing content
	Expanding content inclusion	Content on the basis of the objectives of the course Measurable content
		Paying attention to the needs of the medical community and the need of the community in the provision of content
		Paying attention to the simplicity and accessibility of content
		Paying attention to the needs of the audience in providing content
		Paying attention to educational elements of content

part of these technological advances that have overcome education's temporal and spatial constraints. Today, with new tools designed in the field of information and communication technology, it is easy to cover individuals in any group and community with any language, nationality, and culture in any part of the world (13). Appropriate educational content developed using the latest scientific achievements, and educational technology can play a critical role in the effectiveness of educational processes and play a major role in the educational resources used in education (14).

In this study, learning experiences in the field of learning flexibility had four main categories, namely paying attention to the challenging environment based on the needs of the community, ensuring students' ability to solve problems and paying attention to their new ideas, paying attention to updating the organizational and administrative structure of the university, and providing an exciting learning environment. The obtained results are consistent with the results of research by Schunk. Flexible learning creates a focused learning environment for the learner that fits different learning styles and preferred learning environments. It allows learners to have part of the training in the virtual environment and part of it in the classroom, which is also called combined learning (15, 16).

Finally, the last finding of this study was students' learning experiences in the quality of formal and informal relationships between professors and students divided into three main categories, namely establishing flexible relationships, recognizing the ability of each student, and participatory class management. The obtained results are consistent with the results of Schneider's study (6). Schneider also referred to teacher relationships in the educational system and concluded that the quality of formal and informal relationships is problematic from social, cultural, and economic points of view. The most critical issue and the most important skill while teaching is to establish the right communication between the teacher and the students. If this relationship is well established, educational goals will be achieved with greater quality and ease.

The current study had limitations, that are as follow: (1) the research was conducted at Shahid Beheshti Univer-

Table 4. Main Category, Subcategories, and Initial Codes Related to the Third Question of the Research

Third Question: What Do You Think About the Flexibility of Learning at University?		
Main Category	**Subcategory**	**Initial Codes**
Learning flexibility	Paying attention to the challenging environment based on the needs of the community	Paying attention to interaction with the outside environment, the stimulus environment, and the challenge of learning
	Ensuring students' ability to solve problems and paying attention to their new ideas	Paying attention to the creative environment in learning
		Moving to give opinions Paying attention to group discussions in consolidating learning
		Stimulating students' motivation to learn
		Paying attention to students' needs in learning
		Creating a learning environment based on students' abilities
		Valuing experience and experiment
		Creating ideation classes
		Ensuring students' ability to learn
	Paying attention to updating the organizational and administrative structure of the university	Lack of teacher-centered learning environment Delegating authority to students to manage the classroom
		Updating the learning environment
		Delegating authority to students to produce content and present it in an exciting way with the facilitating role of the instructor
	Providing an exciting learning environment	Using all the senses in learning
		Paying attention to the tactile experience with the learning content
		Creating a learning environment based on direct observation of facts
		Paying attention to creating an enjoyable learning space
		Providing a suitable space for multiple learning activities

sity of Medical Sciences in 2020, and the obtained results cannot be generalized to other times and places; (2) this research has been done at Shahid Beheshti University of Medical Sciences, and its results can not be generalized to other universities and higher education centers because the conditions and criteria of different universities are different and certainly affect students' learning experiences; (3) in this study, only interviews were used to collect data and therefore, it is not a comprehensive study.

Practical recommendations for the university to improve the quality of education are as follows: (1) it is suggested that classmates be used as a learning resource in the field of available resources; (2) in addition to the textbook, the teacher is considered a valuable source of learning, and his experiences in teaching are used; (3) teaching tools and equipment and teaching aids for universities should be equipped with application software to make learning effective; (4) learning should not be limited to the classroom environment and should be used outside the learning environment; (5) teaching content should be taught objectively to increase the effectiveness of the content; (6)

it is recommended to provide a challenging and creative learning environment; (7) it is recommended to change the organizational and administrative structure and architecture of universities to make learning more effective; (8) it is recommended to provide an exciting learning environment for learning; (9) it is recommended that professors have flexible relationships with students; (10) it is recommended to deal with students according to the ability of each student.

5.1. Conclusions

Based on the results, the quality of learning experiences plays a critical role in effective learning. Paying attention to the experiences and viewpoints of non-Iranian students studying at Shahid Beheshti University of Medical Sciences is very important to improve the quality of learning experiences and attract non-Iranian students.

Acknowledgments

Table 5. Main Category, Subcategories, and Initial Codes Related to the Fourth Question of the Research

Fourth Question: What Is Your Opinion About the Quality of Formal and Informal Relationships Between University Professors and Students?		
Main Category	**Subcategory**	**Initial Codes**
Quality of professors' relationships with students	Establishing flexible relationships	Paying attention to the teacher-student friendship
		The teacher's humor
		Paying attention to the balance between formal and informal relationships
		The teacher not using excessive disciplinary rules The need for the teacher to use verbal and non-verbal skills in relationships
		The need for the teacher to use words and phrases to honor the student
		The need to provide encouragement in public and administer punishment in secret
	Recognizing the ability of each student	The need for the professor to be aware of the mental state of his students
		Paying attention to the ability of everyone to present assignments
		Not comparing students with each other
		The need for justice among students by the professor
		The need to inform the professor of psychological issues in developing relationships
		The need to be flexible about students in proportion to their potential
		The need for the professor to pay attention to the personality of each student with any ability and mental capacity
	Participatory class management	The need to pay attention to students' opinions in classroom management and administration
		The teacher's attention to the purpose of presenting each subject for more understanding
		Not paying attention to one or more specific students by the teacher
		The need for the teacher to pay attention to feedback results from classroom management
		The need for mental balance for the teacher
		Expanding relationships
		The need for the teacher to administer punishment and provide encouragement in a balanced way

cal Sciences, which was approved by the Ethics Committee of the university. The authors would like to express their gratitude to the participants for their sincere cooperation.

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Informed Consent: Informed consent was obtained from the participants.

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