A study of quality of educational services of Lorestan University, Iran

Accepted 28th January, 2013

ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to identify the current and desired status of the quality of educational services at Lorestan University (Iran) and its dimensions namely, tangibles, avouchment, responsibility, assurance and empathy as well as recognizing the gap of current and desired status. Descriptive method has been used in this study. The final sample included 320 undergraduate students who were selected by randomized stratified sampling method. In order to collect the required data, questionnaire measuring the quality of educational services were used. In addition, to analyze the data inference statistics such as paired-sample t-test and one-sample t-test were used. Results showed that the current state of the quality of educational services was significantly low (P< 0.01) as compared with the questionnaire's average index. In addition, the desirable quality of educational services was significantly high (P<0.01) as compared with the questionnaire's average index. Furthermore, the results demonstrated that students expectations and the current state were significantly different (P<0.01) with regard to quality of Lorestan University educational services. On the other word, there was a negative gap between the desirable state and the current state of quality of educational services at Lorestan University.

Key words: Quality, educational services, university, Lorestan.

INTRODUCTION

The main responsibility of universities is to provide and educate expert human resources, create new knowledge through conducting research as well as increase and disseminate knowledge. Consequently, this has resulted in the development of higher education and rapid increase in a number of universities, majors and levels of study as well as number of students (Farastkhah and Kebriyaie, 1998). Undoubtedly, quantitative development of higher education systems will result in various matters such as inefficiency of education, educational decline, and decrease in motivation to study among students, excess of human resources and eventually a waste of financial as well as human resources when qualitative development is overlooked.

Thus universities as one of the organizations which play an important role in scientific as well as cultural growth and development and in educating expert human resources must continuously improve their process of educational services in harmony with scientific and educational advances and in keeping with worldwide needs and criteria (Hoveyda and Molavi, 2008).

With a brief glance at the management literature, it can be claimed that so far quality development of industrial and economic organizations has been advertence. Since, concepts, methods and means of management in industrial and economic organizations have always been a subject of significance in such settings. Various organizations have been able to enhance the quality of their products. However, this has not been recognized enough in educational as well as academic institutes (Abadimehr, 2005). This is why higher education, particularly in developing countries, is faced...
with serious problems of enhancing quality (Oliveira and Ferreira, 2009). Similarly, higher education in Iran has been faced with numerous problems and challenges throughout the last two decades.

Challenges such as quantitative development of universities, increase in the number of students and the enormous excess of unemployed graduates are included among the problems that higher educational system of Iran has to deal with. It is faced with development of higher educational system without taking into consideration the current capabilities, economic, social and cultural potential of the society which will certainly lead to a decline in the quality of higher education (Zeinabadi and Pourkarimi, 2007). Educational systems as the most remarkable representation of human resources investment in order for the potential talents of human resources to blossom play a key role in a society. A great portion of budget and financial resources is allocated to these systems and considering its significance and role in the scientific, economic, social, cultural and political growth and development of society. It is thus vital that educational system quality be taken into account so that financial and human resources are not wasted. Consequently, taking into consideration the quality of higher education is one of the elements of developing sciences and social economics and achievement of desirable quality in education should be included among the strategies and politics of each society (Azizi and Yadboroughi, 2003).

**Concept of quality of educational services**

So far, various definitions have been adopted with regard to the concept of quality. Baker (1999) defines quality in education as a set of summations of an educational period. He claims that a period can be considered with quality which resulted in such outputs as production of a particular level of capability at the least possible time, meeting of skill needs and job career development needs (Bazargan, 2001). As was stated, quality is among those concepts that was first developed in industrial as well as economic section and later focused on customers and then quality came to be considered in such services as educational services. Therefore, it can be asserted that activities, elements and resource of educational services of universities are different from other services adducted by other organizations. Consequently the assessment of quality of educational services in educational organizations might be different from quality in other organizations.

According to Salis (1993) quality resources in education include well-protected buildings, outstanding teachers, purposeful and powerful value, care of learners, appropriate educational courses or a combination of these elements. On the other hand, purposes of program, educational program, the time and place where education is held, participants, teachers, educational tools, educational programs, educational activities, management and support, educational facilities, budget and educational credits are among the most important elements of quality of educational services (Sallis, 1993). Educational service is an activity or advantages that represent by one individual to another which is essentially invisible (Parasuraman et al., 1985).

In fact, service in a university as a nonmaterial need is required by students. Awareness of service quality and attempt to improve it would lead to the offering of services of high quality in universities by which means an increase in the students, satisfaction can be expected through increase of quality level which can also affect the achievement of scientific, technical, economic and social goals. On the other hand, it can be asserted that measurement of service quality offered in any organization is the infrastructure and prerequisite for any action and reform aimed at partial quality of the services offered. Thus it can be said that quality of educational service indicates a process during which individuals learn skills, knowledge and tendencies specific to them to play their own roles including various activities such as educational programs, learning research, social services, equipments, professors and educational staff.

### Assessment of quality of educational service

Quality assessment of products with material nature does not seem to be difficult but it is highly difficult and complex regard to the section of services particularly educational services with long-term goals. However, quality of higher education services offered can be evaluated from various viewpoints and by using numerous models. Birnbum considers three viewpoints of competency, socialism and individualism. Ratcliff (1997) suggests different examples of quality evaluation in higher education in various countries. In a number of countries the evaluation method is based upon the external critics, in some others upon effectiveness of programs as well as teaching and learning improvement of quality while in a few it is based upon common patterns (Ratcliff, 1997). Obviously one of the most important matters that organizations deal with in competitive contexts is awareness of customers, satisfaction and of their opinions regarding the performance and services of organizations. Similarly Zethaml (1981) emphasizes the students, understanding on the ground that they have often participated in service production. Students demonstrate what they expect of the services offered. Such measurements may indicate an expected gap in return for the received services (Zeithaml, 1981).

On the other word, gap is the difference between the students’ expectation of desirable condition and their understanding of the current situation of the university educational services.
One of the models for measuring services quality used as many studies is the service assessment inventory or SERVQUAL which was presented by Parasuraman et al. (1985) in mid-1980. The SERVQUAL inventory, in its general status, includes 22 components; the first series of which measures the level of desired of particular service by the respondents while the second series of which measures the recognized current level of services offered by the organization (Aghamolaei et al., 2006). It is noteworthy that SERVQUAL is a combination of the two words, service and quality.

Using the SERVQUAL model to evaluate the quality of services offered in any organization, many different reforms and modifications can be carried out and benefited from in order for the organizations to achieve their goals. For example, evaluation of quality of educational services at Lorestan University can lead to improvement and enhancement of quality based on the students’ viewpoints and attitudes, meeting of students expectations in advance, benefit from a comparison of various student groups expectations and also from partial quality of educational services of university also reducing the distance between the students views and expectations would result in the solving of large number of problems and challenges of the university and also provoking the feelings of loyalty and empathy among them. The final form of the SERVQUAL model consists of the five dimensions of tangibles, avouchment, responsibility, assurance and empathy, which is explain below (Parasuraman et al., 1985).

**Tangibles**

This dimension assesses the service quality. They consist of modern equipments, remarkable physical equipments, staff with tidy appearance as well as organized documents.

**Avouchment**

It focuses on accomplishing tasks promised to be carried out till a definite time, demonstration of honest interest in solving customers’ problems, modification of services as soon as possible and presentation of true and correct reports.

**Responsibility**

The staff tells the customers exactly what services they do, are always willing to help the customers and in general they are ready to answer the customer’s questions.

**Assurance**

In this dimension, the staff’s behavior leads to the customers trust and gradually, customers feeling of security in their interaction with the organization, staff’s constant courtesy towards customers and enough knowledge of staff to answer the customer’s questions.

**Empathy**

With regard to this dimension, the staff’s features include individual attention to customers, appropriate working hours for all customers, willingness of most benefit for customers and consideration of the customer’s special needs.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

Up till now, various studies in or out of the country have been done but nor has been conducted with regard to the evaluation of the quality of educational services of universities which indicate that the students’ expectations differ from the current situation and there was essentially a negative gap. For example, Aghamolaei et al. (2006) showed that there was a negative gap in the current and desirable situation of quality of educational service and its five dimensions at the University of Medical Sciences, Hormozgan. In this regard, Ararabi and Esfandiari (2005) concluded that there was a negative gap among the management students’ opinions. In addition, in a study conducted by Zavvar et al. (2007) using the SERVQUAL model concluded that there was negative gap between the students’ expectations and understandings of the quality of educational services presented at Payam-noor universities of east and west. Azerbaycan et al. (2005), carrying out a similar study, reach the above mentioned results as well. Using the SERVQUAL model, Bradley (2006) concluded that the quality of educational services offered at the Chinese’s universities had a negative gap with what was expected. Chua (2006) conducted a research at Rison University of Canada. He demonstrated that at the management college the most negative gap was related to the dimension of avouchment while the least negative gap was observed at the dimension of assurance. Similarly, Ruby (1998) in his study found out that students had reported negative gap at such dimensions as assurance, responsibility, avouchment and empathy and positive gap at tangibles.

Taking into consideration the literature concerning the variable under study, the main aim of this research is to realize the current and desirable status of quality of educational services at Lorestan University.

Accordingly, the enquiries of the research are as follows:

1. What is the current status of quality of educational services at Lorestan University regarding assurance, responsibility, avouchment, empathy and tangibles?
2. What is the desirable status of quality of educational services at Lorestan University regarding assurance, responsibility, avouchment, empathy and tangibles?
3. What is the distance between the current and the desirable status of quality of educational services and its dimensions namely assurance, responsibility, avouchment, empathy and tangibles?

### METHOD

The present study is a descriptive research, a type of survey study. In this method, the desirable and current state of quality of educational services is studied in relation to dimensions of assurance, responsibility, avouchment, empathy and tangibles at Lorestan University. In a descriptive research, the researcher does not interface with the situation, state and role of variables nor does he or she tamper with or control them, simply studies and describes what is there. Participants in this study included all of Lorestan University undergraduate students up to some 6500 students. A number of 364 students were selected as the statistical sample by using Chertsey and Morgan table. In order to select the sample, the randomized stratified sampling method was used, because taking into consideration the various colleges and demographic variable as place of residence, academic year and gender of students, the randomized stratified sampling method is the most appropriate method to select the subjects.

To collect the required data for analyzing the hypotheses, the quality of educational services questionnaire that was developed by Sarhangi in 2010 was used. This questionnaire consists of 37 short statements, rated within a five-degree Likert range (very high, high, middle, little and very little). The reliability coefficient of the questionnaire was calculated as 0.91 using Cronbach’s alpha; this shows that the reliability of the questionnaire is acceptable. After distribution of adequate questionnaires, some of these were not returned while some were returned incompletely filled. Therefore only 330 usable questionnaires were included in the analysis. Moreover, to analyze the data, inference statistics such as paired-sample t-test and one-sample t-test were used.

### FINDINGS

Table 1 shows results of one-sample t-test of difference between the current status of quality of educational services and its dimensions that is, assurance, responsibility, avouchment, empathy and tangibles and the questionnaire average (cut point). These results (t=13.88; P<0.01) indicated that the current state of quality of educational services with the average of 95.52 is significantly lower than the questionnaire average (111). These results are true of all the dimensions of quality of educational services of university. On other words, the current state of educational service quality of the university is lower than the required average. In addition, the achieved average (95.52) concerning the current status of quality of educational services of the university compared with the maximum score of the questionnaire being 185 indicated that the current status has only a little more than half of the students expectations. Student’s expectations of the current status of quality of educational services in such dimensions as assurance, responsibility, avouchment, empathy and tangibles results showed that these dimensions were significantly low.

Table 2 shows results of one-sample t-test of difference between students expectations (desirable state) of quality of educational services and its dimension, i.e. assurance, responsibility, avouchment, empathy and tangibles and questionnaire average (cut point). Results indicated that the desirable status or students expectations of quality of educational services with an average of 158.36 is significantly higher (t= 39.65, P<0.01) than the questionnaire average (111). These results were true of all the dimensions of educational service quality. On the other word, student’s expectations of the university educational service quality were higher than the required average. Furthermore, comparison of the average achieved (158.36) concerning the desirable status of the university educational service quality with the maximum score of the questionnaire being 185 showed that students expectation are close to quality ideals of educational services, only a little less than 20% away. Concerning dimensions of desirable status of educational service quality, namely assurance, responsibility, avouchment, empathy and tangibles, results suggested that student’s expectations were significantly high with regard to these dimensions.

Table 3 shows results of paired-sample t-test based on difference between facts (current status) and expectations (desirable state) of quality of educational services and its
dimensions that, is assurance, responsibility, avouchment, empathy and tangibles. These results suggested that the current status of quality of educational services of Lorestan University, with an average of 95.52, differed significantly \((t=36.44; p<0.01)\) from the desired status or from what the students expected from educational service quality having an average of 158.36. Results also indicated that there was a significant difference between student's expectations and the current state regarding dimensions of assurance, responsibility, avouchment, empathy and tangibles of quality of educational services at Lorestan University. Reviewing of average achieved concerning quality of educational services of this university and its various dimensions, one can conclude that student's expectations from quality of educational services of the university are significantly higher than the current state in this area. In other words, there was a negative gap between the current status and the desirable state of Lorestan University quality of educational services.

**DISCUSSION**

One of the results of this research showed that Lorestan University level regarding quality of educational services as well as regarding its dimensions that is, assurance, responsibility, avouchment, empathy and tangibles is low. This result is line with the results achieved through other studies. For instance, Jourabchi (2002) concluded in his research in 2001 that the University of Medical Sciences, Qazvin is of low standard. On the contrary, Abili and Hodavandi (2004) reported that there was a desirable context of education for the institutes offering services to Irankhodro Corporation. This indicates that the nature of education of university differs from that in professional organizations or that there are more suitable conditions in such organizations regarding facilities and preparations for the celebration of short – term courses and work shops. Furthermore results achieved in other universities are indicative of the low quality of educational services in some universities (Aghamolaei, et al., 2006; Aarabi and Esfandiari, 2005; Zavvar et al., 2007; Ahmadi and Ghilichi, 2005).

Other results of this study were suggestive of the fact that the students had overestimated the describe status. In one sense, what they expected of Lorestan University was too high. Similarly, Zavvar et al. (2007) found that what the students of East and West Azerbaijan Payame noor universities had expected of quality of educational services had been evaluated high (Zavvar et al., 2007). Therefore this study showed that there was a negative gap between the desirable state (their expectations) and the current state of quality of educational services and its dimensions, that is, assurance, responsibility, avouchment, empathy and tangibles.

As stated, a large number of studies carried out in and out of the country are in line with the results of this study (Aarabi and Esfandiari, 2005; Chua, C. (2006). For example the results of Aarabi and Esfandiari (2003) resulted that there was a gap between the expectation and understanding

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**Table 2.** One-sample t-test results to determine the desired status of quality of educational services.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Desired mean</th>
<th>S.D.</th>
<th>Questionnaire Mean</th>
<th>df.</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Quality of work life</td>
<td>158.36</td>
<td>21.69</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>329</td>
<td>39.65</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assurance</td>
<td>26.23</td>
<td>3.78</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>329</td>
<td>39.51</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibility</td>
<td>25.62</td>
<td>4.01</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>329</td>
<td>20.94</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avouchment</td>
<td>55.04</td>
<td>8.18</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>329</td>
<td>42.24</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathy</td>
<td>30.02</td>
<td>4.65</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>329</td>
<td>35.21</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tangibles</td>
<td>21.43</td>
<td>3.53</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>329</td>
<td>33.06</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 3.** Paired-sample t-test to compare current and desired status of quality of educational services.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Current Status</th>
<th>Desired Status</th>
<th>df.</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>S.D.</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>S.D.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of work life</td>
<td>95.52</td>
<td>20.24</td>
<td>158.36</td>
<td>21.69</td>
<td>329</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assurance</td>
<td>15.93</td>
<td>4.30</td>
<td>26.23</td>
<td>3.78</td>
<td>329</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibility</td>
<td>15.38</td>
<td>4.45</td>
<td>25.62</td>
<td>4.01</td>
<td>329</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avouchment</td>
<td>33.50</td>
<td>7.25</td>
<td>55.04</td>
<td>8.18</td>
<td>329</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathy</td>
<td>17.44</td>
<td>4.87</td>
<td>30.02</td>
<td>4.65</td>
<td>329</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tangibles</td>
<td>13.25</td>
<td>3.63</td>
<td>21.43</td>
<td>3.53</td>
<td>329</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
of production, executive and comprehensive management courses regarding quality of educational services dimensions (Aghamolaei, et al., 2006). Bradley, using SERVQUAL model, also concluded that quality of educational services offered at the Chinese universities with what is expected (Bradley, 2006).

Even though, the review of literature in this area is indicative of the fact that some universities do not have the desirable quality of educational services, it can be asserted that this similarity of the quality being low in higher education centers is relative as presence of a gap between the desirable and the current state of quality of educational services of universities varies in intensity. Nevertheless, results of this research show the presence of a negative gap between the student’s expectation of quality of educational services and the current status in this area. This may result from various factors. Some possible factors include: educational conditions governing the country and region, a shortage of enough budget for higher education centers or misuse of present credits in this area, varying management policies of universities, overemphasis of quantity in higher education centers, rapid increase in number of students and lack of a suitable viewpoint for higher education on the subject of education, etc.

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