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THE STUDY OF STUDENTS EXPECTATIONS AND PERCEPTIONS OF PHD COURSES (CASE STUDY: DISTRICT8 OF ISLAMIC AZAD UNIVERSITY)

***Farzaneh Hajiheidari¹, Parivash Jafari² and Hamidreza Arasteh³**

¹*Department of Higher Educational Administration, Science and Research Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran*

²*Department of Higher Education Management, Science and Research Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran*

³*Department of Educational Sciences, Kharazmi University, Tehran, Iran*

**Author for Correspondence*

ABSTRACT

The universities and research centers play the important roles in the scientific progress and development of countries all over the world. In this regard, the higher education especially the PhD course is more important with the aim at knowledge production, expanding the knowledge boundaries and training the special human resources. The aim of this research is to investigate the students' motivations, expectations and perceptions and comparing the results with objectives of doctoral courses. This research has qualitative type and its statistical population consists of PhD students in branches of Islamic Azad University in district eight. The semi-structured interview is the data collection tool; and the targeted selection is done on samples and the interviews continued until reaching the saturation point. The collected data is analyzed based on three stages, namely, the open, axial and selective coding. In general, the results indicate that there is a difference between the PhD students' expectations, motivations and perceptions; and the current expectations and perceptions are not considerably in line with achieving the goals and missions of PhD courses. On this basis, the current gaps can reduce the quality of courses and community uncertainly about the students' competence in the near future.

Keywords: *PhD Courses, Perceptions, Students' Expectations*

INTRODUCTION

The universities and higher education institutions play the key roles as the superior centers of thinking and the science production of community with thinkers' presence and activities for scientific advancement and making the thoughtful, belief, political and cultural movement of community purposeful. The university as the first basis of knowledge creation and transfer plays the fundamental role in both contexts of science production (research) and knowledge transfer (education) and its application (social service). In the new era of conflict and competition between communities, the countries further rely on the utilization of current knowledge and science more than the natural resources or existing industrial capacity, and finally depend on the amount of knowledge efforts and utilization of technology which create the creative and efficient human resource as the main factor in achievement of development (Sadeghi *et al.*, 2010). Therefore, the knowledge-based development requires training the efficient human resource and it is expected that an important part will be achieved at universities and especially in the form of higher education and PhD courses (Sadeghi, 2009). To accelerate the comprehensive development, the industrial societies have utilized the expansion of higher education as a strategy after the Second World War. In response to the growing process of globalization and close competition of countries to achieve the knowledge-based economy in Iran, the expansion of higher education courses has been accelerated as one of the requirements of developing the country over the past decade and has resulted in establishment of various Ph.D courses and the students' considerable growth. However, the number of individuals' demand for entering the doctoral courses has had increasing growth in recent years. These people apply got these courses with different motivations and expectations. However, the acquirement of further skills and expertise in field of study is generally the objective of universities for holding the higher education

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courses. The students, especially at PhD level, are expected to produce knowledge by efforts as well as acquiring the professional education (Fadaei, 1995). The results of some studies indicate the existence of gaps between objectives and missions of PhD courses and the students' motivations and expectations. For instance, Malek's research (2002), entitled as "The study of higher education in Iran" indicate that according to the professors' views, most of the students have chosen the PhD courses not for dominating the research and education, but only for achieving the top positions in the administrative system of country. Furthermore, in a study with the aim at investigating the status of higher education at Shahid Beheshti University, Yamani (2009) has concluded that the factor of degree-gaining is one of the main fundamental drivers in most of the Master and PhD students for continuation of education and entry the higher education courses is only important for most of the students and there are not any organized goals and motivations in students. Furthermore, the results of research by Nerad *et al.*, (2007) and Gardner *et al.*, (2007) indicate that there is a difference between the new students' perception of education with older students at this level of education. Moreover, the new students consider the PhD courses as a set of facts about a specific knowledge, and most of the students enter the higher education with aim at obtaining certain jobs and promoting the job status rather than the knowledge production and acquisition, while the students at higher levels consider this course as a new way to search and research in the world. Furthermore, the difference between the students' expectations of education, the perceptions which receive during the education at this degree and also the objectives which the higher education system has for training the PhD students seem to lead to the challenges and problems at this level. The more these three are different from each other, the more the challenges and problems will be enhanced in this regard. Therefore, the main research questions are as follows: What incentives, expectations and perceptions the PhD students have as the service recipients from PhD courses? What is the difference between the students' initial and current perceptions and expectations?

Objectives and Missions of PhD Courses

The experts believe that the PhD course is significantly important for two reasons; First, in terms of role which this course plays in rehabilitation of scientific career, and second, in terms of its impact on training the skilled labor for knowledge-based communities and economies (UNESCO, 2008). Training in doctoral period has very high scientific value and plays an important role in development of innovation and communities. Furthermore, the graduates of this course take the advantage of higher income and superior employment opportunities (Smith *et al.*, 2010). In this regard, the PhD students' activities play the significant role in research effort of universities and a considerable contribution in their research performance (Cullen *et al.*, 1994, quoted by Azizi and Bagheri, 2013).

In general, the bachelor degree is as the public education, and the master degree as the provider of advanced knowledge in a specialized field in higher education (Phillips and Pugh, 1996). The Doctor of Philosophy or PhD is an abbreviation of the Latin word, Philosophiae Doctor meaning the specialized Doctor in science. In fact, this degree indicates the "highest academic degree" or "the philosophy and superiority in scientific knowledge". The PhD degree is the highest global degree which is usually granted to people in various fields and after graduating in BS, MS, and passing a series of educational and research activities and providing an innovation in PhD course dissertation (Wikipedia).

The PhD degree means a license to teach and research as a faculty member at university. However, teaching and research are not the only reasons for gaining the PhD degree because the PhD refers to the vast path of progress outside the university (Phillips and Pugh, 1996). Providing the PhD dissertation, the student will become more knowledgeable and complex (Rudestam and Newton, 1992). This dissertation should create the differentiated assistance to subject and gives its new evidence. This new assistance is indicated by discovering the new facts and exercise of independent review and criticism (Cryer, 1996).

Generally, Green and Powell (2005) have explained the aim of holding the PhD courses as follows: 1) training the human resources for academic profession and playing the university professor role, 2) training the human resources for conducting the academic research and leading the research projects at universities and research institutes, 3) producing science and expanding the knowledge boundaries, 4)

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training the human resources for applied research in line with economic development, 5) high-level training to acquire the specialized knowledge and skills.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study has qualitative type. The statistical population of this study consists of PhD students in District 8 of Islamic Azad University. The semi-structured or depth interview is the data collection method, and the targeted sampling is done to conduct interviews. The interviews are implemented until the point of saturation and repeating the answers and even more. On this basis, the number of interviewees is equal to 45. The coding stage is done for data analysis after the interview. The coding is in fact the allocation of the closest concept to the smallest meaningful component in any part of collected data. For instance, if considering the implemented text of one or more interview as a part of collected data, it can be the basis for selecting a code. This coding is classified into three stages including the open, axial and selective coding based on Charmaz model (2010).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The first stage of coding which is called the open coding takes efforts to re-identify its implicit concepts and name the concepts without any restrictions because the open coding aims at dividing the set of collected data into the possible smallest components of concept (Charmaz, 2010; quoted by Mansourian, 2006). To avoid the clutter of obtained codes and determining a clear way for doing other coding steps, we have sought to classify the open codes of interviews with students separately and classify according to three main questions which are as follows:

- 1- The student's motivation and goal of study at PhD course;
- 2- The student's expectations of PhD courses;
- 3- The student's perception of PhD courses

Table 1: Open codes; student's motivation for education at PhD courses

Student's motivation for education at PhD courses		
No.	Components	Reference number
1	Getting a Ph.D degree	8
2	Promoting the job and achieving the higher post	14
3	Interest in field of study and continued education	13
4	Employing as the faculty member at university	17
5	Interest in conducting the interest	1
6	Education and deepening the specialized knowledge	8
8	Being the student of famous master in specialized field	2
9	Completing the information which is incomplete in master education	3
10	More help for community	1
11	Finding the right job	4
12	Obtaining the better social position	6
13	Making the family proud and being the model	2
14	Updating the scientific information	1
15	Encouraging the family to continue the education	4

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Table 2: Open codes; students' expectations of education at PhD courses

Students' expectations of education at PhD courses		
No.	Components	Reference number
1	Availability of all facilities proportional to the level of courses	18
2	Presence of proficient, competent and experienced professors	12
3	The use of modern methods of teaching and learning	6
4	Conducting the further scientific work and opportunity for deeper research	4
5	The possibility of being introduced for the latest scientific achievements in specialized field	6
6	Financial support of student by university for conducting the research	7
7	The dynamic academic and scientific environment	8
8	More specialized training different from the master course	8
9	Closer and cooperative relationship with teachers and utilization of their experiences	7
10	Learning the advanced techniques for research and reaching the scientific independence	5
11	The existence of better job opportunities in community	5
12	Acquiring the critical attitude towards the issues of specialized field	2
13	Mastery over the existing knowledge in the field of specialty and theorizing	1
14	Better social status for those with doctoral degrees	4
15	Support of students' research projects by organizations and industries	4
16	I had no particular expectations	1

Table 3: Open codes; student's perceptions of education at PhD courses

Students' perceptions of education at PhD courses		
No.	Components	Reference number
1	Lack of facilities	19
2	Greater emphasis for theoretical and practical teaching	7
3	Failing to meet the initial expectations	9
4	Similar course level to master and repeated master courses	17
5	Weak interactions between the teacher and student	8
6	Lack of supporting the student by university	7
7	Feeling of loneliness and abandonment during the conduct of student paper	7
8	Failure to meet the student's academic needs in accordance with the course level	11
9	Students' lack of motivation and negligence	7
10	Non-compliance with some courses with education curricula	5
11	The presence of good and knowledgeable teachers	7
12	Ambiguity of students' job future	15
13	Hardscrabble teachers and allocating less time for students	14
14	Students' different education level in the classroom	4
15	Lack of scientific dynamism at education departments	4
16	Assessment of student's ability by easy tests and based on the scores by teachers	2
17	Professors' boredom and non-interest	3

Axial Coding

After doing the open coding, another stage, called the axial coding, is occurred and it classifies the data. In axial coding, the process of allocating the codes to concepts in data is changed from totally open to

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selective type (Mansourian, 2006). In this section, it is sought to create the axial codes from the obtained open codes, and then the selective codes are presented according to the interpretation of these codes.

First Axial Code: The Students' Motivation and Objective of Education at PhD Courses

The student's motivation for entering these courses largely affects the final quality and the end result. The students showed three main axes for their main reasons and motivation to enter these courses as follows:

Job Employment or Promotion

The job employment or promotion is the incentive to try for every human being. The results of conducted interviews indicate that most of the individuals have motivation for being employed in ideal jobs especially the faculty member promotion of current job positions especially at the beginning of courses. Some comments in this regard are as follows: "I wanted to become a faculty member at university", "I am a teacher and I wanted to get a job promotion before retirement", "I am the faculty member with professor degree and I should promoted my job level", "I need to have a PhD degree to reach the desired post in office", "I could not find a job with a master's degree, but I think I will have more chance if I get the PhD degree", "I continued the education because I were unemployed and since the higher education has become a job now".

Gaining the PhD Degree and Promotion of Human Dignity

Some of the interviewees have chosen this level with the aim of gaining the PhD degrees and higher social status than others. According to some respondents: "I want to become a female doctor", "I want to make my family proud and become a model for them", and "the PhD degree has always been considered as a social dignity and value".

Interest in Education and Conducting the Research

The education and knowledge production are the main objectives of PhD courses. The results of interviews indicate that a small number of students have started the education at these courses due to the interest in education and ability to conduct the independent research and this issue is meditative. Some of the comments in this regard are as follows: "I was interested in studying and receiving the more specialized knowledge", "I wish I was a student for my teacher as he is so famous in this field", "I want to complete my scientific information which was not fully completed in master course", "I was interested in conducting research".

Second Key Code: The Students' Expectations of Education at PhD Courses

The university provides the service as a provider of service for customers and the students as one of main ones; these services should be in line with responding to students' needs and expectations. The interviewees had three axes of expectations about the PhD courses which were held as follows:

Expectations in Education Scope

The education scope was among the mentioned axes according to the students' expectations of university. Some of comments in this regard are as follows: "I expected to get familiar with the latest achievements of science courses", "I expected to be trained by knowledgeable and expert masters with appropriate teaching methods", "Professional and deeper presentation for students", "teaching the subjects which were not taught in bachelor and master degrees", "the teachers' scientific information should be up to dated and transferred to students".

Expectations in the Field of Research

In the second axis, some students expressed their expectations of research issues. The students' some of the comments are as follows: "I expected to provide the opportunity for deeper study", "I wish I could learn the advanced research methods", "I wanted a close relationship with my teacher in research project and to be in fact a research collaborator for him", "I was looking for a dynamic scientific environment", "During the PhD course, the university should connect the student with research centers".

Expectations in the Field of Providing the Academic Service

The third axis is associated with the expectations in field of service sector. The students' some of the comments in this regard are as follows: "I expected the university to provide the necessary facilities for students", "I think the university valorizes the PhD students and provides the specialized laboratory facilities for his activity".

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Third Axial Code: Student's Perception of PhD Courses

In this section, the students are asked to express their subjective perceptions of how this course is held with regard to the period of study at this course. The received responses can be classified into 4 main categories as follows:

Perceptions in the Field of Academic Levels of Courses

The scientific levels of course and the way of and performing the teaching and research activities were the most important mentioned issues. The interviewees' some of the perceptions of academic levels of course are as follows: "The students have so different academic levels and this can hurt the best students and make problems for teaching process", "Most of the courses are theoretically presented, but we need more practical work", "Some teachers have no acceptable academic levels", "we had good teachers, but the students made problem by not spending the time and no motivation to study", "Some teachers do not teach according to the syllabus and curriculum materials and only teach those subjects they are skillful in", "a professor teach several specialized courses", "the education level has no significant difference with master course", "the whole time is spent on low-quality presentations by students in PowerPoint in the classroom without adding something else to our knowledge, or at least criticizing the student's work", "My imagination of PhD course was totally different with what I saw".

Perceptions of Service for Students

Some students' perceptions of their service are as follows: "The university does not support the students neither in the field of financial sources, nor the facilities and research in other organizations", "We had no access to updated articles and scientific resources", "we wandered the hallways without a place to relax and study", "we should attend in classroom in a certain time and leave the university as the staff leave, even if we are doing the research work by professor at the library".

Perceptions in the Field of Future Career

Some students have provided the perceptions in the field of future career and the community consideration of PhD course students.

The students' some of the comments are as follows: "I am so nervous about my future career because my classmates are unemployed", "I thought I could find an appropriate work if I learned the PhD course, but the community is saturated by those with PhD degrees, and even the employers prefer to employ those with lower degrees".

Perceptions of Student-teacher Interaction

Another category refers to the student's perception of interaction between student and teacher especially those who were at the research stage. Some comments are as follows: "The student has very weak relationship with teacher", "I am at the stage of presenting the dissertation, but I always feel alone because my teacher has no cooperation with us", "I think the student should be as a research cooperator for professor, but unfortunately this view does not exist", "Our teachers have not taught any practical issue, thus they avoid the interaction with students", "We have spent more money for traineeship course, while the teacher does not accompany the student and leaves us by ourselves and we should obtain the license of traineeship by Nepotism".

Selective Coding

The third phase of coding compares the concepts extracted from data. At this stage, we make strength for coding process according to the identified codes and concepts at two previous stages and the next stages are facilitated by emphasizing on the sections which play the main roles in developing the theory (Mansourian, 2006) and thus all subsidiary categories are systematically connected to core category (Hariri, 2006).

The total selected codes are about three selected codes as follows:

The first level includes the students' financial and economic incentives. The interviews indicate that most of the PhD students' main incentives are about finding the better jobs. This promotion includes the cases such as obtaining the proper job or employing as the faculty member at university, promotion from the coach to assistant professor for faculty members, increasing the salary and job promotion for those with jobs or retirement with higher salary.

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The second level refers to the scientific motives. From the interviews with students, some of them mentioned the scientific motives for entering the doctoral courses. These individuals considered the cases such as the need to deepen the obtained knowledge, interest in specialized field, more specialized training, and interest in conducting the research, up to dating the scientific information, and completing the knowledge during the master course.

The third level refers to the social and cultural motives. Some of the students have started these courses only to get degrees and the titles of "Ms or Mr. Doctor" in this period. Furthermore, some people also consider the PhD degree as the functional tool for promoting the social status or gaining the better positions in the field of their political activities.

The total selected codes in the field of students' expectations of education at PhD courses can be considered about four selected codes:

The first level refers to the expectations of teaching-learning environment. In the first comment, a large number of people referred to the expectations of PhD courses covering the teaching-learning environment. These expectations included the cases such as the quality of professors' teaching, the presence of knowledgeable and master professors in the field of specialized course, specialized training compared to the lower levels, the application of modern methods of teaching and more practical work, dynamic scientific environment, and close collaboration between the professor and student.

The second level includes the expectations about responding to PhD students by society and university. These expectations include the cases such as the facilities and equipment (like the laboratory, greenhouse, agricultural land, specialized workshop, access to the latest scientific achievements, etc.). In terms of students' views at PhD courses, further facilities should be provided for students due to the total different nature of PhD course and more concentration on doing the research activities of university; and the other institutions relevant to the specialized course should provide the required support for student's research activity.

The third level refers to the expectations of future career opportunities. In terms of students' views, they initially expect to not be concerned with their future career and find the job proportional to their expertise after graduation.

The total selected codes for students' perceptions of education in PhD courses can be considered about four selected codes:

The first level refers to the perceptions of teaching-learning environment. Most of the interviewees allocated their perceptions about the issues associated with education and research activities. The more the student was at higher semesters and especially at the stage of developing the dissertation, the more he expressed increased perception about these courses. This level covers the cases such as the similarity of level of course to master and bachelor courses, the lack of students' fulfilled scientific needs, the lack of scientific dynamism in educational groups, the functional weakness in professors, and lack of expertise for teaching, the professors a lot of occupations and spending less time to student, in addition to greater emphasis on the theoretical teaching rather than the practical work.

The second level refers to the perceptions about the responsiveness of university and community to students. In terms of students' views, the university is not responsive enough considering the received fees and its missions and the community as the user of students' service is not responsive enough. The issues such as the lack of support for doctoral students' research, and lack of cooperation with student in industry and service sectors are among the students' perceptions.

The third level refers to the perceptions of future career. Most of the interviewees came to this conclusion that the future career, which they had imagined at the beginning of these courses, would not be achieved and they were in doubt about the community's use of their expertise.

Discussion

The higher education courses especially the PhD courses are the driving force of scientific and industrial research and can lead to growth and development of communities. If the PhD course is considered as the system which produces the knowledge, the qualified researchers and providing the new aid in relevant scientific field can be considered as its most important outputs. The policies of higher education systems

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for establishment and then the qualitative and quantitative growth and development of PhD courses in addition to the increased social demand for entry to these courses indicate the need for deeper investigation of these courses.

The students enter these courses with different incentives and subjective background and expect the university to provide the standard education and training service proportional to the level of courses. On the other hand, the difference between the preliminary expectations and current perceptions has led to the challenges and problems in the quality of courses and graduates. However, based on the results of interview, there is a deep gap between the individuals' incentives and their expectations of education in PhD courses with perceptions they have after entry to these courses. Therefore, there is a difference between the efforts of university to train the students with drawn initial objectives, as the most important ones are the knowledge production and expanding the knowledge boundaries and educating the skilled human resources in target knowledge.

Based on the results of interviews and implemented coding for students' expectations and perceptions and comparing these results with objectives of doctoral courses, the most important issues, which the lack of attention to them reduces the quality of courses, are as follows:

- The research results indicate that a large number of students enter to these courses with the aim at acquiring the degree, promote the job and being as the faculty member at university, and thus are without the necessary incentives and abilities to acquire the specialized knowledge. This indicates that the degree orientation is created at PhD courses from the lower levels, and thus it has led to the reduced quality of courses and uncertainty about the credit and position of PhD degree. These results are consistent with the research by Malek (2002) and Yamani (2009).

- The research function, knowledge production and expanding the knowledge boundaries are the most important goals and missions of PhD courses. However, a few interviewees have had the objectives of conducting the original research and help to produce knowledge during this course, thus they do not take necessary effort to provide the appropriate research work. Furthermore, the students' perceptions indicate that the plans and the way of providing the research and education service at university are not at the levels under which the interested and motivated students are able to achieve the mentioned goal. These results are consistent with the research by Nerad *et al.*, (2007).

- The graduates are expected to be masters in advanced methods at the end of courses as well as conducting the independent original research based on their own abilities; the PhD dissertation is one of its most important achievements. Furthermore, the social, scientific and organizational leaders are expected to be trained among the graduates of PhD courses. The study of students' perceptions indicates the existence of numerous obstacles to achieving these goals. On the one hand, the students has no enough incentives and knowledge for education at this level, and on the other hand, the university has not been able to provide the necessary standards for achieving the above-mentioned objectives. Therefore, the better evaluation and monitoring is required for quality of holding these courses. These results are consistent with findings by Gardner *et al.*, (2007).

- The PhD courses should be designed is a way that they are able to educate the students a variety of skills including the skill for critical analysis of scientific literature, establishing the communication and effective teaching, writing and publishing the scientific papers, teamwork and networking, entrepreneurship, organizational leadership and other skilled required for applying the specialized knowledge. However, based on the research results (even if a few results), the interviewees mentioned their expectations, but the students' perceptions indicate the weak professor-student communication and the lack of comprehensive curriculum for educating these skills, thus the universities need to reconsider their formal and informal curricula and have supervision based on doing the professional tasks of education groups.

- According to the nature of PhD courses, there is a need for close interaction with faculty members as the experts with students as well as the university support especially in the field of finance and access to necessary facilities in order to produce knowledge and provide the research which can solve the scientific problems of society. However, the students' perceptions indicate that some professors have no

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constructive interactions with students during the education stages and the university has not provided the necessary facilities for students. Therefore, despite these obstacles, we cannot expect the student to produce knowledge by their activities or provide the high quality and applicable papers.

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