

Examining the Challenges Affecting the Quality of Educational Services in Islamic Azad University

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The objective of this study is to examine the challenges affecting the quality of educational services in Islamic Azad University and to provide solutions for improving them.

Methods and Materials: This qualitative study employed semi-structured interviews with five faculty members of Islamic Azad University who had managerial or research experience in educational service quality. Purposive sampling continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, and the collected data were analyzed using NVivo software and qualitative content analysis.

Findings: The study identified key challenges including managerial challenges such as lack of strategic planning and inter-unit coordination, educational content challenges such as outdated curricula and an overemphasis on exams, educational interaction challenges including weak communication between faculty and students, infrastructural challenges such as inefficient online education systems and lack of technology, and human resource challenges such as insufficient support for faculty and limited research resources.

Conclusion: The findings highlight the need for strategic planning, curriculum updates, enhanced educational interactions, investment in technological infrastructure, and faculty support to improve the quality of educational services in Islamic Azad University, with practical recommendations provided for addressing these challenges.

Keywords: Educational service quality, Islamic Azad University, managerial challenges, educational content, human resources, technological infrastructure

1. Introduction

The quality of educational services is one of the fundamental components in improving university performance and stakeholder satisfaction. Islamic Azad University, as one of the largest higher education institutions in Iran, faces multiple challenges in the quality of its educational services. These challenges have a direct impact on students' educational experiences, faculty members' satisfaction, and ultimately, the effectiveness of the educational system. Various studies have shown that the higher education system in Iran, particularly in non-profit and Azad universities, struggles with issues such as resource shortages, weaknesses in strategic planning, and lack of coordination in management (Aalaa et al., 2021).

Given the rapid changes in societal and labor market needs, universities are required to revise and update their educational content. However, investigations indicate that many educational programs in Iranian universities remain reliant on outdated, theory-based methods and have not adequately adapted to contemporary demands (Aliakbari & Saeedi, 2022). This misalignment has led to a decline in graduates' competencies in the job market, consequently reducing the credibility of universities (Boroumand et al., 2022).

One of the main challenges in Iran's higher education system is the weakness in macro-management and the absence of effective strategic planning. Studies have shown that many universities, due to their focus on financial matters and revenue generation, have neglected the development of long-term and sustainable plans to enhance educational quality (Dehnavieh et al., 2020). This issue is also evident in Islamic Azad University, where each campus operates independently, leading to inconsistencies in the quality of educational services across different university branches (Ezzati et al., 2023).

Another critical issue is the lack of support for faculty members and the insufficient resources available for research and teaching. Faculty members in many Iranian universities, including Islamic Azad University, face multiple pressures such as heavy workloads, financial constraints, and inadequate institutional support, all of which negatively impact the quality of their teaching and research (Hadian & Dalir-Naghadeh, 2025; Hadian et al., 2020). Additionally, weaknesses in utilizing educational technologies and inefficiencies in online learning systems pose significant challenges to improving the quality of educational services (Jafari, 2023).

Recent studies indicate that the effective use of educational technologies can play a crucial role in enhancing the quality of education. However, many Iranian universities have failed to leverage these tools properly (Sadeghi, 2024). In contrast, universities that have successfully implemented educational technologies have provided better learning experiences for students and increased their satisfaction levels (Shokrpour et al., 2024).

Beyond the aforementioned challenges, excessive emphasis on exams and grade-oriented education in Iranian universities has also been identified as a major obstacle to improving the quality of educational services. This approach has led students to focus more on memorization and obtaining high grades rather than developing analytical and practical skills (Rajabi et al., 2022). This issue is particularly evident in Islamic Azad University, where both students and faculty members have expressed dissatisfaction with this system (Farmad et al., 2022).

Findings from previous studies suggest that developing and improving the quality of educational services requires strategic planning, material and moral support for faculty members, updating educational content, and utilizing modern technologies (Ghalavand et al., 2022). This study aims to examine faculty members' perspectives to identify existing challenges and propose practical solutions to overcome them. In other words, the goal of this research is to precisely identify and analyze current challenges and provide strategies for enhancing the quality of educational services at Islamic Azad University.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study employed a qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews to investigate the challenges affecting the quality of educational services at Islamic Azad University. The research population consisted of faculty members of Islamic Azad University with managerial or research experience in the field of educational service quality. These individuals were selected due to their awareness and specialized experiences regarding the specific conditions of Islamic Azad University and the challenges associated with the quality of its educational services.

A purposive sampling method was used in this study. The selection criteria for participants included a minimum of five years of managerial experience or publication of scientific articles related to educational service quality. The sampling

process continued until theoretical saturation was reached, and ultimately, five faculty members participated in this study.

2.2. Data Collection

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews, allowing the researcher to deeply explore participants' perspectives and experiences regarding the challenges of educational service quality. The interviews were recorded and then fully transcribed.

Qualitative data analysis was performed using NVivo software and qualitative content analysis. This method is suitable for identifying patterns and extracting themes from textual data, enabling the researcher to identify key concepts related to educational service quality challenges. The data analysis process included several stages:

2.3. Data Analysis

First, the collected interview data were carefully reviewed. Then, the data were segmented into meaningful units, and initial codes were identified. In the next stage, similar codes were grouped into conceptual categories, and main themes were extracted. Finally, the primary and secondary themes were identified, and an initial conceptual framework was developed.

To enhance the reliability of the analysis, a double-coding method was used. In this process, the data coding was

conducted separately by the researcher and an independent analyst, and the level of agreement between the codes was calculated to ensure the stability and accuracy of the findings.

3. Findings and Results

The qualitative data analysis revealed that the initial coding phase involved identifying the primary challenges affecting the quality of educational services at Islamic Azad University. At this stage, interviewees' responses were divided into meaningful units, and each unit was assigned an initial code. These codes represented the key concerns of faculty members, including the absence of strategic planning, lack of coordination among university units, misalignment of curriculum content with contemporary needs, ineffective student-faculty interaction, outdated teaching methods, excessive theoretical orientation in education, weak utilization of technology, inefficiency of online systems, lack of faculty support, insufficient resources, revenue-driven priorities, and excessive emphasis on grading. This stage laid the foundation for identifying themes and developing the conceptual framework, demonstrating that managerial challenges, educational content, interactions, infrastructure, human resources, and financial priorities play a role in diminishing the quality of educational services.

Table 1

Initial Coding Phase

Meaning Unit (Response)	Initial Code
"The biggest challenge is the absence of strategic planning and coordination at the university's macro level."	Absence of strategic planning
"Each university unit operates as if it were independent, leading to inconsistencies in educational quality across different locations."	Lack of coordination among units
"Rapid changes in societal and labor market needs have caused curriculum content and educational structures to lag behind."	Misalignment of curriculum content with contemporary needs
"There is a lack of real interaction between faculty and students. Classroom environments are often rigid and one-sided."	Ineffective student-faculty interaction
"The educational system is still based on outdated methods that are not aligned with current needs."	Outdated teaching methods
"Education at Islamic Azad University is excessively theoretical and disconnected from real-world applications."	Excessive theoretical orientation in education
"Technology is not effectively utilized in these universities."	Weak utilization of technology
"Online classes and learning management systems often resemble marketing stunts rather than actual learning tools."	Inefficiency of online systems
"There is insufficient support for faculty members."	Lack of faculty support
"Faculty members who are overburdened or lack resources and facilities cannot provide high-quality education."	Insufficient resources and facilities for faculty
"Universities prioritize revenue generation over quality education."	Revenue-driven priorities
"Islamic Azad University places excessive emphasis on grades and exams."	Excessive focus on grading

In the thematic identification phase, initial codes were compared and grouped into conceptual categories. These categories included sub-themes and main themes derived from the extracted codes. Managerial challenges included weaknesses in macro-management and lack of organizational coordination. Educational content challenges encompassed outdated curricula and their detachment from real-world applications. Educational interaction challenges

involved a lack of two-way engagement and inefficiency in teaching methods. Infrastructural challenges encompassed weak utilization of technology and inefficiency in digital systems. Human resource challenges included insufficient support for faculty and research resource limitations. Lastly, financial challenges were characterized by revenue-driven priorities and an excessive focus on grading.

Table 2

Thematic Identification Phase

Initial Code	Sub-Theme	Main Theme
Absence of strategic planning	Weakness in macro-management	Managerial challenges
Lack of coordination among units	Lack of organizational coordination	Managerial challenges
Misalignment of curriculum content with contemporary needs	Outdated curriculum content	Educational content challenges
Excessive theoretical orientation in education	Disconnection from real-world applications	Educational content challenges
Ineffective student-faculty interaction	Lack of two-way engagement	Educational interaction challenges
Outdated teaching methods	Inefficiency in teaching methods	Educational interaction challenges
Weak utilization of technology	Inefficiency in educational technology	Infrastructural challenges
Inefficiency of online systems	Ineffective use of digital tools	Infrastructural challenges
Lack of faculty support	Weak institutional support for faculty	Human resource challenges
Insufficient resources and facilities for faculty	Limited research resources	Human resource challenges
Revenue-driven priorities	Reduced focus on educational quality	Financial challenges
Excessive focus on grading	Exam-oriented education	Educational content challenges

In the conceptual framework development phase, the main and sub-themes were further examined and organized into a conceptual framework. This framework defines the objectives and descriptions for each category of challenges, illustrating that improving the quality of educational services

requires attention to strategic management, curriculum updates, enhanced educational interactions, strengthened technological infrastructure, faculty support, and revised financial policies.

Table 3

Conceptual Framework Development Phase

Main Theme	Sub-Themes	Description and Objectives
Managerial challenges	Weakness in macro-management, lack of organizational coordination	Strategic management and coordination among university units to enhance the quality of educational services.
Educational content challenges	Outdated curriculum content, disconnection from real-world applications, exam-oriented education	Curriculum and teaching method revisions to align with societal and labor market needs.
Educational interaction challenges	Lack of two-way engagement, inefficiency in teaching methods	Strengthening faculty-student interactions and implementing modern teaching methodologies.
Infrastructural challenges	Inefficiency in educational technology, ineffective use of digital tools	Improving technological infrastructure and its application in enhancing educational quality.
Human resource challenges	Weak institutional support for faculty, limited research resources	Supporting faculty members and providing resources to improve education and research quality.
Financial challenges	Reduced focus on educational quality	Revising financial policies and priorities to place greater emphasis on educational quality.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study revealed that managerial challenges, educational content, educational interactions, technological infrastructure, and human resources are

among the most significant barriers to the quality of educational services at Islamic Azad University. The results indicated that the absence of strategic planning and lack of coordination among university units were identified as major managerial challenges. These findings align with the study by Dehnavieh et al. (2020), which demonstrated that many

higher education institutions in Iran struggle with weak management and a lack of strategic planning (Dehnavieh et al., 2020). Additionally, the research by Ezzati et al. (2023) emphasized that lack of coordination and weaknesses in macro-policy planning negatively impact the quality of educational services, and Islamic Azad University is no exception to this issue (Ezzati et al., 2023). The findings of this study underscore the importance of establishing a cohesive and coordinated managerial framework to enhance the quality of educational services.

Furthermore, challenges related to educational content included outdated curricula, excessive theoretical orientation, and an overemphasis on exams. These findings are consistent with the studies of Aliakbari and Saeedi (2022) and Boroumand et al. (2022), which stated that many academic programs in Iranian universities are outdated, leading to a decline in education quality and inefficiency of graduates in the job market (Aliakbari & Saeedi, 2022; Boroumand et al., 2022). Similarly, Farmad et al. (2022) showed that excessive emphasis on exams and grade orientation reduces students' creativity and competencies, a trend also observed at Islamic Azad University (Farmad et al., 2022). The findings of this study highlight the necessity of revising curricula and designing educational programs based on societal and labor market needs.

Educational interaction challenges were another key finding of this study, particularly the lack of effective faculty-student interaction and the inefficiency of traditional teaching methods. These results align with the study by Hadian et al. (2020), which found that inadequate faculty-student interaction is one of the most significant challenges in higher education in Iran (Hadian et al., 2020). Jafari (2023) also pointed out that traditional teaching methods and failure to integrate modern technologies limit educational interactions and reduce education quality (Jafari, 2023). The findings of this study emphasize that strengthening educational interactions and employing modern teaching methods can contribute to improving the quality of educational services.

Regarding infrastructural challenges, this study found that weak utilization of educational technologies and inefficiencies in online learning systems were major obstacles to improving the quality of educational services at Islamic Azad University. These findings are consistent with the research of Sadeghi (2024) and Shokrpour et al. (2024), which indicated that many Iranian universities face multiple challenges in adopting educational technologies, negatively impacting education quality (Sadeghi, 2024; Shokrpour et

al., 2024). Additionally, Moshtari et al. (2023) noted that the optimal use of educational technologies can play a crucial role in enhancing the quality of educational services, yet many Iranian universities have failed to effectively utilize these tools (Moshtari et al., 2023). The findings of this study highlight the need for investment in technological infrastructure and faculty training to ensure the effective use of these technologies.

Human resource challenges were another significant finding of this study, particularly the lack of support for faculty members and limitations in research resources. These results align with the study by Hadian and Dalir-Naghadeh (2025), which found that faculty members in many Iranian universities face high workloads and resource shortages, negatively affecting their teaching and research quality (Hadian & Dalir-Naghadeh, 2025). Moreover, Aalaa et al. (2021) stated that financial and moral support for faculty members plays a crucial role in improving the quality of educational services (Aalaa et al., 2021). The findings of this study emphasize the importance of supporting faculty members and ensuring sufficient resources for research and teaching.

This study had certain limitations that should be considered when interpreting the results. One major limitation was the small sample size, which was restricted to faculty members of Islamic Azad University, potentially limiting the generalizability of the findings to other universities. Additionally, the qualitative nature of the study and the use of semi-structured interviews may have introduced biases due to researcher interpretation. Another limitation was the lack of comprehensive and up-to-date resources on the quality of educational services in Iranian universities, which restricted access to complete and detailed information.

Future research can validate and generalize the findings of this study using quantitative methods and larger sample sizes. Additionally, conducting comparative studies between Islamic Azad University and other public and non-profit universities can lead to a more precise identification of challenges and solutions for improving the quality of educational services. Examining the impact of educational technologies and virtual learning programs on the quality of educational services is another important area for future research. Furthermore, studying international experiences in improving the quality of educational services and comparing them with the situation in Iranian universities can provide effective strategies for enhancing education quality.

The findings of this study demonstrated that improving the quality of educational services at Islamic Azad University requires actions such as developing comprehensive strategic plans, fostering coordination among university units, revising curricula and teaching methods, strengthening educational interactions, investing in technological infrastructure, and supporting faculty members. Organizing training workshops for faculty members on the use of modern technologies, increasing financial and moral support for faculty, and designing educational programs based on societal and labor market needs are among the measures that can contribute to enhancing the quality of educational services at Islamic Azad University.

Authors' Contributions

Authors equally contributed to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were under the ethical standards of the institutional and, or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

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