

## The Rules and Regulations of the Customer Orientation in Higher Education: Case Study

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### Abstract

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**Background and Objectives:** The rules and regulations related to educational and research services, especially those offered through universities and higher education institutions, are considered to be the most important service areas in each community that should be evaluated in the course of their final customers. This study was aimed to assess the status of customer-orientation from students' point of view through a case study of Sari Paramedical Faculty.

**Method:** This study used a descriptive-survey methodology. The statistical population consisted of students of Sari Paramedical Faculty in the academic year of 2016-2017, from whom a sample of 217 students was selected using stratified random sampling method. The tool for gathering data was a customer-oriented questionnaire in higher education with 34 items whose reliability coefficient was obtained using Cronbach's alpha formula (0.82). The content validity of the questionnaire was confirmed by the experts. Data were analyzed in two levels of descriptive (frequency, percentage, and mean) and inferential (binomial test, normality test, ANOVA, Leven test).

**Findings:** According to the results, the customer-orientation rules and structure in higher education, which includes feelings, reliability, content, attitude, and method of transfer, has been at a desirable level. Furthermore, no significant difference was observed between students' viewpoints by their field of study.

**Conclusion:** Competition in the educational services system, especially higher education rules and regulations, has led to the improvement and strengthening of the customer-oriented regulations process at the Paramedical Medical Faculty.

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**Keywords:** customer orientation, rules and regulations, tangibles, reliability.

### 1- Introduction

In order to improve the quality of the organizations as well as to increase customer satisfaction with the products, organizational thinkers have always made their efforts to update and match the characteristics of their products to the needs of customers and applicants. Furthermore, since the *primary customers* are the *students* and paying attention to students' needs and expectations are among the immediate and primary prerequisites for curriculum planning (Gorji et al 2017), therefore, *customer-oriented quality improvement* models can serve as a tool for measuring quality, continuous needs assessment and understanding the student's requirements with the professional characteristics needed in higher education (Arefi & Zandi, 2011). One of the biggest challenges of today's intensely competitive atmosphere is that organizations can contribute to fulfilling their mission through responding to their *customers* in the *shortest time*, with the *best quality* and the *lowest cost* (Nguyen et al., 2007).

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Today, organizations can create value through developing a customer relationship that is strong and continuous and successful organizations are only those that are able to keep their customers over the long term, so that the research suggests that some of the most successful corporations will enjoy a higher *survival rate (0.9%)*. Customer orientation mainly deals with the customer's well-being. To listen to the voice of the customers and to offer solutions based on their best interests and desires can help to realize this goal. The concept of customer orientation is defined by marketing researchers as either component of organizational culture or as a *corporate strategic orientation or behavior* (Jaworski & Kohli, 1993). Nobel et al (2000) have recently proposed a competitive culture approach in which a strategic customer-oriented approach has been described as part of a wider organization culture. On the other hand, we need to distinguish between *customer-led* and *market-led orientations*. Market orientation involves focusing organizational activities towards all market participants and all interest groups, whereas orientation towards customers involves the creation of bilateral relationships between customers and the organization. Market orientation focuses on creating a general competitive environment, while customer orientation is focused on meeting the needs and demands of individual customers (Korunka et al., 2007). Nowadays, in the management literature, the customer is described by a variety of titles, like partnership, chairman, capital and profit, and the final product of all the activities of organizations becomes visible in the customer's face and it is customer who assays the quality of products and organization's services and urges the organizations to compete with each other (Amiri, 2006). In addition, Shapiro (1988) defines customer orientation as "The dissemination of information about customers throughout an organization, formulation of tactics and strategies to satisfy market needs inter-functionally and achievement of a sense of company-wide commitment to these plans". At a global level, student's viewpoints are viewed today as an essential factor in quality monitoring at universities (Kebriyaie & Rodbari, 2005). As applicants and recipients of higher education, students can play an essential role in assessing the quality of higher education as well as its educational services. Academic customers are not always available; the number of customers during a given period is not the same in the next period. Some students get into and then go out the university and substitute with new comers (Shafizadeh, 2011). Some studies have been conducted regarding the customer orientation in higher education. For example, in a study by Budd (2017) entitled as undergraduate orientations towards higher education in Germany and England: problematizing the notion of 'student as customer', it was shown that some who have addressed it presumed a customer/consumer orientation in students and have been somewhat—but not entirely successful—in generating evidence to confirm those assumptions; two countries where the diffusion of market conditions in higher education policies has been somewhat contrasting. Distinctions between the German and English students did emerge, but these were less based on those countries' unequal engagement with tuition fees and rankings and more to do with other aspects of their university cultures and the world beyond their degrees. This suggests that how people approach their time as students is more complex than some of the literature assumes. In another study, Koris et al., (2015) reviewed student-customer orientation at a higher education institution: the perspective of undergraduate business students based on a validated model of educational experiences. The results of the study show that students expect to be treated as customers in some, but not all categories of educational experience that an HEI offers. Saunders (2014) also explored the combination of literature on the conceptualization of students as customers, and established a relationship between increasing students' perceptions of the development of free market logic in higher education. The results of this research showed that the customer orientation is incongruent with the college's academic life indicating the impacts of customer orientation on students' academic behaviors and decisions. Shams et al., (2012) also determined the criteria of customer-orientation in education based on the viewpoints of students at Isfahan University of Medical Sciences. The research population included all students in 7 schools of Isfahan University of Medical Sciences. The findings suggested that score of educational departments (53.45) was higher than the other criteria. Faculty (50.27) and educational processes (46.12) had the highest level of customer-orientation. However, management had minimal impact (40.56) on promoting customer-orientation. Gender and level of education were significantly associated with most customer-orientation criteria, i.e. women and master's course had the highest levels of customer-orientation criteria. In addition, Ebrahiminejad et al., (2013) examined the relationship between customer orientation and Beneficiaries' satisfaction with services of center of Postgraduate studies in Hormozgan University. The study population consisted of Graduate students and faculty in four departments of Hormozgan University. The results show that dimensions of customer orientation impact on beneficiaries' satisfaction in higher education system. Also, methods of service delivery have the greatest impact and feelings have the least impact on beneficiaries' satisfaction. At the end, according to the results, recommendations have been made for improving the situation of customer orientation in higher education. Samawi et al., (2008) also investigated customer orientation and its application in the higher education system: Higher Education in Khuzestan Province.

According to the findings of this research, the customer orientation of the two universities was not at the desired level. There was also a significant difference between the viewpoints of students and faculty members of two universities regarding the level of customer orientation and the highest and lowest customer orientation level was belonged to feelings structures and delivery, respectively. According to the results, the educational departments of agronomy and *plant* breeding, biotechnology, agricultural machines, plant medicine, penology and horticulture had more similar and consisted educational needs and departments of and *agricultural extension* and education, animal sciences and food industries also had different needs. One of the indispensable necessities for the survival of any educational system is to deliver more services to university customers and to improve their quality. In this regard, higher education and paying attention to customer orientation, especially among students, are the main pillars in the widespread development of every educational system. With regard to the above descriptions, this research was essentially sought to present a customer-oriented review of higher education at Sari Paramedical Faculty.

## 2- Method

This study used a descriptive-survey methodology. The statistical population consisted of students of Sari Paramedical Faculty in the academic year of 2016-2017 (N = 909). *Krejcie* and Morgan table was used to determine the sample size. The sample size was considered 271 students. Stratified random sampling method was used to select the subjects according to the field of study, so that students in eight disciplines (operating room (N =51), anesthetics (N =49) emergency medical aids (N =11), occupational therapy (N =22), information technology (N =24), medical laboratory (N =54), radiology (N =54), history of medical science (N =5) were investigated (see Table 1 for Frequency of subjects surveyed). The data gathering tool was a researcher-made questionnaire of customer orientation in higher education. This questionnaire consists of 34 items with five main variables (12 items for feelings, 10 items for reliability, 5 items for content, 3 items for attitude, and 4 items for method of delivery). The responses were scored in a Likert scale (very high, high, moderate, low and very low). To determine face and content validity of the questionnaire, it was provided for relevant faculty members and the experts of the field. In addition, in order to determine the reliability using a pilot, 30 questionnaires were distributed among the respondents and the reliability coefficient was calculated  $\alpha = 0.82$ . To analyze the data, descriptive statistics (frequency distribution, mean and standard deviation), and inferential statistics (t-test, one-way test, Normality test, ANOVA test, Leven test and independent t-test) were used.

## 3- Findings

According to the findings of Table 1, the majority of the participants were male in terms of gender. Based on marital status, 5% of the participants were married and 95% single. In terms of education, 98% of the participants were undergraduate students and 2% graduate. Finally, the medical laboratory science and radiology disciplines had the highest rate of participation while history of medical sciences had the lowest.

**Table 1: Frequency of population and statistical sample**

Components	Sub-component	Frequency of population	Percent	Frequency of sample	Frequency of sample
Sex	Male	866	95	274	91
	Female	43	5	24	9
	Total	909	100%	271	100%
Marital status	Married	55	6	13	95
	Single	854	94	258	5
	Total	909	100%	271	100%
Educational level	Undergraduate	894	98	266	98
	Graduate	15	2	5	2
	Total	909	100%	271	100%
Field of study	Operating room	171	19	51	19
	Anesthetics	164	18	49	18
	Emergency medical aids	35	4	11	4
	Occupational therapy	75	8	22	8
	Information technology	85	9	24	9
	Medical laboratory	178	20	54	20
	Radiology	186	20	54	20
	History of medical science	15	2	5	2
	Total	909	100%	271	100%

Since based on the results of the normal test related to the research variables in Table 2, the p-value is less than the significance level (0.05), so we can conclude that the research variables are not normally distributed. Therefore, in order to test the hypotheses of the research, we used non-parametric tests (binomial test) except for main component. In addition, since the calculated average value is greater than the theoretical value (3), therefore, we can say that the students had a positive attitude or perceptions towards the customer orientation component of higher education (tangibles, reliability, content, attitude, and method of delivery).

**Table 2: Normality of data and average students' attitudes of customer orientation**

Component	Mean	SD	Normality of data	Significance level
Tangibles	4.11	0.41	1.57	0.014
Reliability	3.74	0.60	1.92	0.001
Content	3.75	0.55	1.45	0.029
Attitude	4.05	0.66	2.95	0.000
Method of delivery	4.10	0.53	2.59	0.000
Customer orientation (main component)	4.00	0.42	0.751	0.625

Based on the binomial test results related to the tangibles variable in the customer orientation in Table 3, the proportion of students scored less than or equal to 3 was zero and those scored greater than 3 was 0.100%. Furthermore, according to the significance value less than 0.05, the proportion of students with a score of less than or equal to 3 was greater than those scored greater than 3. As a result, we can claim that from the perspective of students, the tangibles variable in the customer orientation has been very favorable; in other words, nearly 100% of the participants in the study rated the status of tangibles variable very favorably.

**Table 3: Students' beliefs about the tangibles variable with binomial test**

Variable	Score	number	Ratio	Sig
Tangibles	less than or equal to 3	0	0.0	0.000
	Greater than 3	271	0.100	

Based on the binomial test results related to the reliability variable in the customer orientation in Table 4, the proportion of students scored less than or equal to 3 was 0.09 and those scored greater than 3 was 0.91. Furthermore, according to the significance value less than 0.05, the proportion of students with a score of less than or equal to 3 was greater than those scored greater than 3. As a result, we can claim that from the perspective of students, the reliability variable in the customer orientation has been very favorable; in other words, nearly 91% of the participants in the study rated the status of reliability variable very favorably.

**Table 4: Students' beliefs about the reliability variable with binomial test**

Variable	Score	number	Ratio	Sig
Reliability	less than or equal to 3	24	0.09	0.000
	Greater than 3	247	0.91	

Based on the binomial test results related to the content variable in the customer orientation in Table 5, the proportion of students scored less than or equal to 3 was 0.10 and those scored greater than 3 was 0.90.

Furthermore, according to the significance value less than 0.05, the proportion of students with a score of less than or equal to 3 was greater than those scored greater than 3. As a result, we can claim that from the perspective of students, the content variable in the customer orientation has been very favorable; in other words, nearly 90% of the participants in the study rated the status of content variable very favorably.

**Table 5: Students' beliefs about the content variable with binomial test**

Variable	Score	number	Ratio	Sig
Content	less than or equal to 3	26	0.10	0.000
	Greater than 3	245	0.90	

Based on the binomial test results related to the content variable in the customer orientation in Table 6, the proportion of students scored less than or equal to 3 was 0.10 and those scored greater than 3 was 0.90.

Furthermore, according to the significance value less than 0.05, the proportion of students with a score of less than or equal to 3 was greater than those scored greater than 3. As a result, we can claim that from the perspective of students, the attitude variable in the customer orientation has been very favorable; in other words, nearly 90% of the participants in the study rated the status of attitude variable very favorably.

**Table 6: Students' beliefs about the attitude variable with binomial test**

Variable	Score	number	Ratio	Sig
Attitude	less than or equal to 3	28	0.10	0.000
	Greater than 3	243	0.90	

Based on the binomial test results related to the method of delivery variable in the customer orientation in Table 7, the proportion of students scored less than or equal to 3 was 0.04 and those scored greater than 3 was 0.96. Furthermore, according to the significance value less than 0.05, the proportion of students with a score of less than or equal to 3 was greater than those scored greater than 3. As a result, we can claim that from the perspective of students, the method of delivery variable in the customer orientation has been very favorable; in other words, nearly 96% of the participants in the study rated the method of delivery variable very favorably.

**Table 7: Students' beliefs about the method of delivery variable with binomial test**

Variable	Score	number	Ratio	Sig
Method of delivery	less than or equal to 3	12	0.04	0.000
	greater than 3	259	0.96	

Then, the disagreement among students' views was reviewed by their field of study. The results of Table 8 showed that the significance level of the Leven test is greater than the error level ( $\alpha = 0.05$ ) and the null hypothesis based on the homogeneity of the variances is confirmed. In addition, since the calculated F value in the customer orientation variable in higher education with degrees of freedom of 363 and  $df = 7$  at 95% confidence level ( $\alpha = 0.05$ ) is smaller than F of the critical value; therefore, we can conclude that there was no significant difference between customer orientation variables according to the students' field of study.

Components	Fields of study	Mean	SD	significance level of Leven's test	f	Significance level
Customer orientation in higher education	Operating room	4.14	0.39	0.741	2.531	0.016
	Anesthetics	3.74	0.39			
	Emergency medical aids	3.74	0.39			
	Occupational therapy	3.94	0.45			
	Information technology	3.89	0.38			
	Medical laboratory	4.10	0.45			
	Radiology	3.95	0.39			
	History of medical science	4.03	0.23			

#### 4- Discussion

The rules and regulations under a customer-oriented approach for higher education can lead to increased student satisfaction, for the qualitative and quantitative improvement of higher education and the services provision based on the needs and aspirations of the students encourage them to continue their education. An application of customer-oriented strategies for development of higher education programs may lead to better accomplishments for universities. Studies have shown that focusing on job incentives, the proper conduct of the system of suggestions and most importantly, social health, can help to better shape the customer-oriented strategy (Gorji et al, 2017; Ashlaghi et al, 2016; Darabinia et al, 2018). In this regard, the present study evaluated the customer-oriented components of Sari paramedical university in five dimensions of feelings, attitude, reliability, content and method of delivery from student's perspective. The findings of this research showed that expectations of the students were met with tangibles and were reported at a desirable level; they asserted that the available library resources were sufficient and of quality.

In addition, the students stated that they were satisfied with the facilities and equipment of the laboratory and workshop and educational media, educational spaces, classrooms, conference hall, laboratory, workshop, field training spaces and educational environments for thesis presentation and student's research provided for them. Therefore, according to this finding, the paramedical faculty has been able to provide acceptable and desirable tangibles customer orientations for the students; these results are consistent with the findings of the studies by Budd (2017) and Sahney (2016). In addition, the results of this study in relation to other customer-oriented structures in higher education, i.e. reliability, showed that this variable was at a desirable level and the conditions for acquiring the actual and practical experience of teaching skills were well-established in the university space as well. Students were able to easily participate in the conferences and workshops hold in different parts of the world and inside the country. They also received appropriate guidance and directions for choosing some careers option related to medical professions. Furthermore, the faculty offered appropriate and useable facilities for continuing higher education and facilitated the process of familiarizing and visiting the medical activities of the region. To conduct research activities, facilities and study opportunities have been appropriately granted to students resulting in high reliability among students as university customers. These results were consistent with the findings of the studies by Koris et al., (2015), Saunders (2014) and Sahney (2016). The findings regarding the content component revealed that students were satisfied with the appropriate presentation of the content-oriented theoretical training programs designed by the group to attract customers in higher education and were able to succeed in this regard. In connection with another customer-oriented structure in higher education, the findings also showed that change in faculty attitudes in favor of customer was at the optimum level and the management support of the creativity and achievements of the students accompanied by financial and scientific support of the faculty have been evaluated at a desirable level. Effective and timely changes in educational affairs by the department's management have been beneficial to the student resulting in the student's satisfaction with the attitude of the faculty in terms of customer orientation which were in line with the findings by Budd (2017) and Sahney (2016). With regard to the method of delivery component, the result showed that the students were satisfied with the information delivery methods offered by faculty for customer orientation objectives. It can be acknowledged that the effectiveness of the educational information system on the developments occurred within specialized fields of study as well as the educational information system with regard to teaching skills and techniques, educational counseling and the accountability of the authorities to the problems and issues of students and faculty members have been aimed to support the ultimate faculty customers. These findings were not in line with the results of research studies by Samawi et al., (2008). In summary, we can deduce from the findings that customer and stakeholder satisfaction at the paramedical faculty has been evaluated at a desirable level so that students from all fields of study had the same viewpoint and opinion. As the time passes, universities have adopted a new approach to the final customer and have taken the issue of competition in the educational system quite seriously, because the ultimate goal of the educational system for achieving open education is realized in the presence of students as customer. Therefore, by adopting appropriate strategies and solutions to address the needs of their customers i.e. students through changes in their practices and attitudes, officials and authorities tried to attract and retain their current customer at the university. These results were consistent with the results of studies conducted by Budd (2017) and Sahney (2016) and Pitman (2016) and were not in agreement with the findings of Shams et al., (2012), Ebrahimi et al., (2013) and Samawi et al., (2008).

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