

Assessing the Educational Quality Model for International Students in Universities across Qom Province

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The present study was conducted to assess the educational quality model for international students in universities across Qom Province.

Methods: This study was applied in purpose and quantitative in method. The statistical population comprised all international students enrolled in universities across Qom Province, as well as the faculty members involved in their education ($N = 5,000$). A final sample of 385 valid questionnaires was analyzed. Stratified random sampling with proportional allocation was used. Data were collected using a researcher-made questionnaire, and the instrument was evaluated for both validity and reliability. Data were analyzed at the descriptive and inferential levels using SPSS and LISREL.

Results: The final educational quality model for international students comprises 6 main dimensions (causal conditions, central phenomenon, contextual conditions, intervening conditions, strategies, and consequences), 28 components, and 121 confirmed indicators. Structural equation modeling (SEM) results indicated that all five research hypotheses were supported. Notably, "strategies" exerted the strongest effect on "consequences" ($\beta = .69$), while "causal conditions" had a significant effect on the "central phenomenon" ($\beta = .62$). Furthermore, the coefficient of determination for the strategies variable ($R^2 = .54$) indicates the model's satisfactory explanatory power. Associate Professor, Department of Industrial and Technology Management, Faculty of Management and Accounting, College of Farabi, University of Tehran, Qom, Iran

Conclusions: The proposed model demonstrates sound empirical validity and adequate model fit. It provides a reliable scientific and operational basis for policymaking, strategic planning, and improving the quality of educational services in higher education institutions hosting international students.

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Introduction

In contemporary higher education, educational quality is defined as a dynamic and comprehensive process that focuses not only on the transfer of knowledge but also on empowering students for lifelong learning and responsible engagement in a complex world. The concept involves creating a responsive and effective learning environment, achieved through an optimal combination of instructors' professional competencies, curricula aligned with current needs, creative use of educational technology, and a continuous, formative assessment system (UNESCO, 2024, p. 49). For international students, educational quality is a multidimensional, intercultural framework focused on fostering a meaningful, relevant, and equitable educational experience for students studying outside their home countries. This framework entails designing and delivering instruction that actively recognizes linguistic, cultural, educational, and cognitive differences, integrates them into curriculum planning and teaching methods, and uses them as assets to enrich the learning of all students. Quality in this context requires integrating academic, linguistic, and psychosocial support into the core of the educational process, and its success is measured by criteria such as academic achievement, the development of intercultural competence, psychological well-being, a sense of belonging, and the assurance of equitable learning outcomes (OECD, 2025, p. 75).

The rapid internationalization of higher education has led to a dramatic increase in the number of international students worldwide. However, institutions often struggle to adapt and deliver effective, integrated educational quality for this diverse student population. The quality of education received by international students is recognized as a key factor in their academic success, life satisfaction, and psychosocial adjustment, and ultimately in enhancing universities' competitive position in the global higher education market (Li, 2023). Despite substantial investment, evidence indicates that many international students face barriers such as language gaps, cultural differences in teaching and learning practices, social isolation, limited access to support services, and curricula that are misaligned with their diverse needs (Smith & Zhao, 2025). These challenges not only affect their educational experience but may also lead to adverse outcomes such as academic stress, academic failure, and a low perceived quality of life (Chen et al., 2024).

In Iran, the internationalization of higher education has become a strategic priority, particularly in recent years, with an emphasis on policies of "attracting non-Iranian students" and "looking

inward" (in line with upstream documents such as the Seventh Development Plan) (Zarei et al., 2022). Nevertheless, despite the quantitative growth in international student enrollment, research evidence and field reports point to deep-seated challenges regarding the quality of education and the lived experience of these students at Iranian universities. Studies show that international students in Iran often face barriers such as a language gap (weak academic Persian skills), marked differences in teaching and assessment styles, unfamiliarity with universities' bureaucratic structures, limited social interaction with Iranian students, and the poor fit of some courses with their needs and sociocultural backgrounds (Nowroozi & Sajjadi, 2021; Mohammadi & Pirani, 2023). These challenges can lead not only to academic stress, feelings of isolation, and reduced satisfaction, but also directly and negatively affect their perception of educational quality, the academic identity of Iranian universities, and ultimately the success of the overarching "education export" policy (Rahmani & Karimi, 2024).

Moreover, the upstream documents of the Islamic Republic of Iran, particularly the country's Seventh Development Plan (2024-2028), emphasize expanding science diplomacy and increasing international student enrollment as key strategies for developing higher education. Attracting more than 320,000 international students has been set as one of the macro-level goals of the national higher education system. This approach aims to enhance the country's scientific standing, increase international scientific and cultural exchange, and strengthen the Islamic Republic of Iran's soft power globally. Within this framework, universities play a central role in achieving these goals; they are required to provide the infrastructure and conditions needed to attract and retain international students, and, by bringing foreign currency into the country, they create important capacity for strengthening scientific and research infrastructure. Despite this policy emphasis, a merely quantitative increase in international student enrollment cannot guarantee the achievement of the Seventh Development Plan's goals. The experience of successful higher education systems shows that the quality of education provided to international students is the main factor in their academic satisfaction, retention, academic success, and the transmission of a positive image of the host universities and country. If educational quality is neglected, increased enrollment may not only fail to achieve policy goals but may also result in reduced satisfaction, declining academic performance, and a weakened international reputation for universities. In any case, educational quality and the reputation of the national higher education brand should not be sacrificed for

quantitative targets. According to available estimates, the online education industry represents a business opportunity of approximately 140 billion US dollars by 2030, and universities should not fall behind in entering and competing in this arena. In other words, if our universities cannot enter this arena, within the next ten years they will no longer be able to set internationalization goals.

Several studies have addressed the topic of this research. For example, Naderi, Ghasemi, and Razavi (2025) proposed a conceptual framework of higher education quality suited to the context of Iranian universities. The study used a qualitative method based on document content analysis and expert interviews. The findings showed that educational quality is a multidimensional phenomenon encompassing educational, institutional, cultural, and managerial dimensions. The results indicate that focusing solely on quantitative quality indicators cannot capture the actual state of education. The proposed framework can serve as a basis for policymaking and quality assessment in education at the national level. Mousavi, Karimi, and Shahbazi (2025), focusing on the internationalization of higher education, examined the role of educational quality in attracting and retaining international students. The study used a survey method, and the statistical population comprised international students studying in Iran. The results showed that teaching quality, educational support, and faculty members' intercultural communication skills had the greatest effect on student satisfaction. The study concludes that educational quality is the most important component of Iranian universities' international competitiveness and emphasizes the need to improve educational quality as a prerequisite for internationalization. Ahmadi et al. (2025) examined the role of digital transformation in improving the quality of university education. The study used a descriptive-analytical method, and the statistical population comprised students and faculty members. The results showed that the purposeful use of educational technologies increased the quality of instructional interaction and active learning. However, insufficient training for faculty members limited the effectiveness of technology. The study concludes that the quality of digital education requires appropriate educational policymaking and human resource empowerment.

Yousefi et al. (2025) analyzed the relationship among educational quality, academic hope, and student retention at university. The study used structural equation modeling. The results showed that educational quality has both direct and indirect effects on student retention, and that this effect is strengthened through motivation and academic hope. The findings indicate that improving

educational quality is not limited to enhancing learning but also affects the sustainability of the higher education system. The study emphasizes the importance of a human-centered approach to educational quality. Nguyen and Tran (2025) sought to redefine educational quality for international students within a quality assurance framework. The results showed that components such as faculty members' pedagogical empathy, access to academic advising, and institutional flexibility play a key role in perceived quality. The study shows that traditional quality assurance systems inadequately capture the learning experience of international students and recommends incorporating experience-based indicators into the accreditation process.

Li and Chen (2025) examined the role of digital learning in the educational quality of international students. The findings showed that interactive online instructional design, timely feedback, and instructional flexibility have a direct effect on the quality of learning. The study concludes that the quality of international education in the digital age requires the integration of pedagogical principles, technology, and learning support.

Brown, Smith, and Doherty (2025), in a qualitative study, examined educational quality from the perspective of educational equity and faculty-student relationships. The results showed that transparency, mutual respect, and equal opportunity for participation in learning play a key role in the educational quality experienced by international students. The study concludes that hidden educational inequities severely undermine perceived quality. Garcia and Weiss (2025) aimed to determine the role of accreditation systems in improving the educational quality of international students. The results showed that universities that have incorporated internationalization indicators into quality assurance demonstrate better educational performance. The article emphasizes the convergence of accreditation and internationalization.

This study seeks to fill an existing theoretical gap in the literature. A comprehensive model that captures the interaction of multilevel factors (macro, meso, and micro) can provide researchers with a robust analytical framework and enrich the theoretical foundations of international education. Accordingly, the objective of this study is to assess the educational quality model for international students in universities across Qom Province.

Materials and Methods

Participants and Procedure

This study used a quantitative, descriptive design; it is applied in purpose and was conducted as a cross-sectional survey in terms of data collection. The statistical population comprised all international students enrolled in universities across Qom Province and the faculty members engaged in teaching them ($N = 5,000$), of whom 4,000 (80%) were international students and 1,000 (20%) were faculty members. Based on the Krejcie and Morgan table, the minimum sample size for a population of 5,000 was determined to be 357; after data screening and removal of incomplete questionnaires, 385 valid questionnaires were analyzed as the final sample. Stratified random sampling with proportional allocation was used, with the share of each group (students and faculty) allocated in proportion to its actual size in the statistical population. Data were collected using a researcher-made questionnaire developed from the qualitative interview findings and the existing literature and rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree). The study's credibility was evaluated in terms of validity and reliability. Face validity was reviewed and refined by experts in educational administration, and content validity was assessed using the content validity ratio (CVR); against Lawshe's critical value of .51, all components showed adequate content validity, with values ranging from .61 to .79. The instrument's reliability was assessed in a pilot study with 25 members of the target population using Cronbach's alpha; values for all components exceeded the .70 criterion, ranging from .81 to .95, confirming the reliability of the overall instrument. Data were analyzed at the descriptive and inferential levels using SPSS and LISREL.

Results

Of the 393 respondents, 314 (approximately 79.9%) were international students and 79 (approximately 20.1%) were faculty members. Including both groups made it possible to examine the educational quality of international students from two important perspectives: students' learning experience and faculty members' views. The normality of the variables was assessed using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov (K-S) and Shapiro-Wilk tests; the significance level for all dimensions of the model exceeded .05. The confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was based on the responses of 393 faculty members and international students at universities in Qom Province.

As shown in the figure, all factor loadings except for Item 26 (faculty members' academic, pedagogical, and intercultural competence), Item 33 (the university's educational structure and system), and Item 40 (quality of instructional interaction between faculty and international students) exceeded .60, indicating the strong explanatory power of the components in defining the "causal conditions" construct.

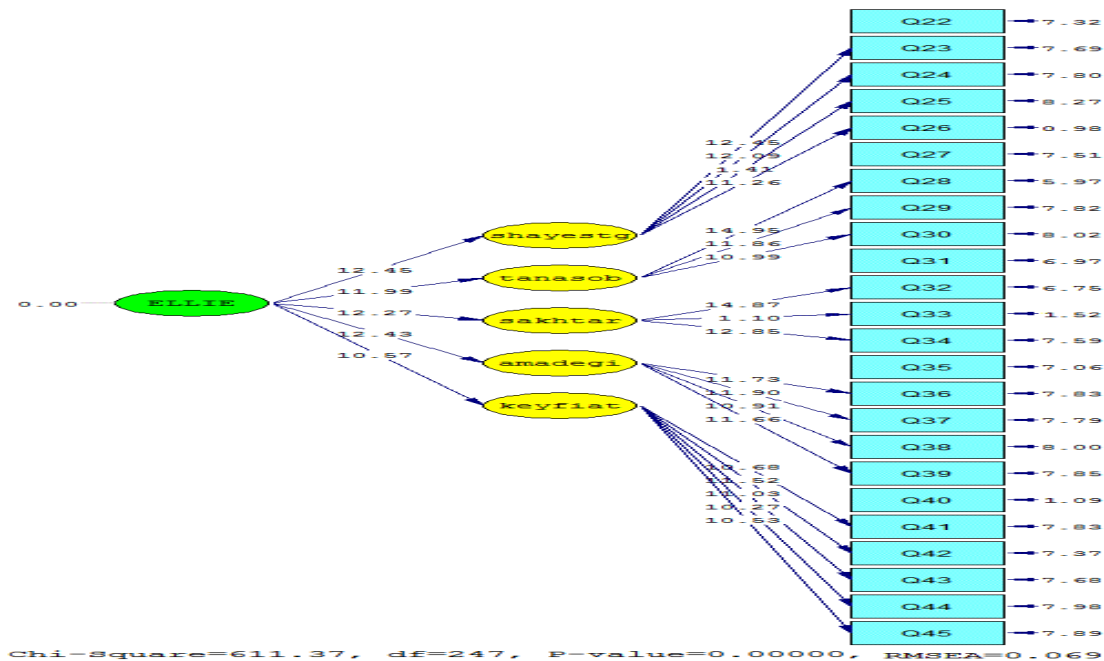


Figure 1. Significance Values (T-Values) for the Causal Conditions Dimension

The t-values ranged from 10 to 13, well above the critical value of ± 1.96 ; therefore, the relationships between the indicators and the construct (except for Items 26, 33, and 40) are significant at $p < .001$.

Table 1. Factor Loadings and T-Values for the Components of Causal Conditions

Components	Standardized factor loading (λ)	t-value	Result
Faculty members' academic, pedagogical, and intercultural competence	.98	12.45	Significant
Fit of the curriculum and educational content with international students' backgrounds	.96	11.99	Significant
The university's educational structure and system	.94	12.27	Significant
Academic and language preparedness of international students	.96	14.43	Significant
Quality of instructional interaction between faculty and international students	.97	10.57	Significant

These results indicate that the construct has satisfactory convergent validity and that the selected indicators are significantly related to the concept of causal conditions. In other words, each component contributes substantially to explaining the latent dimension, and the measurement model for this construct shows considerable statistical stability.

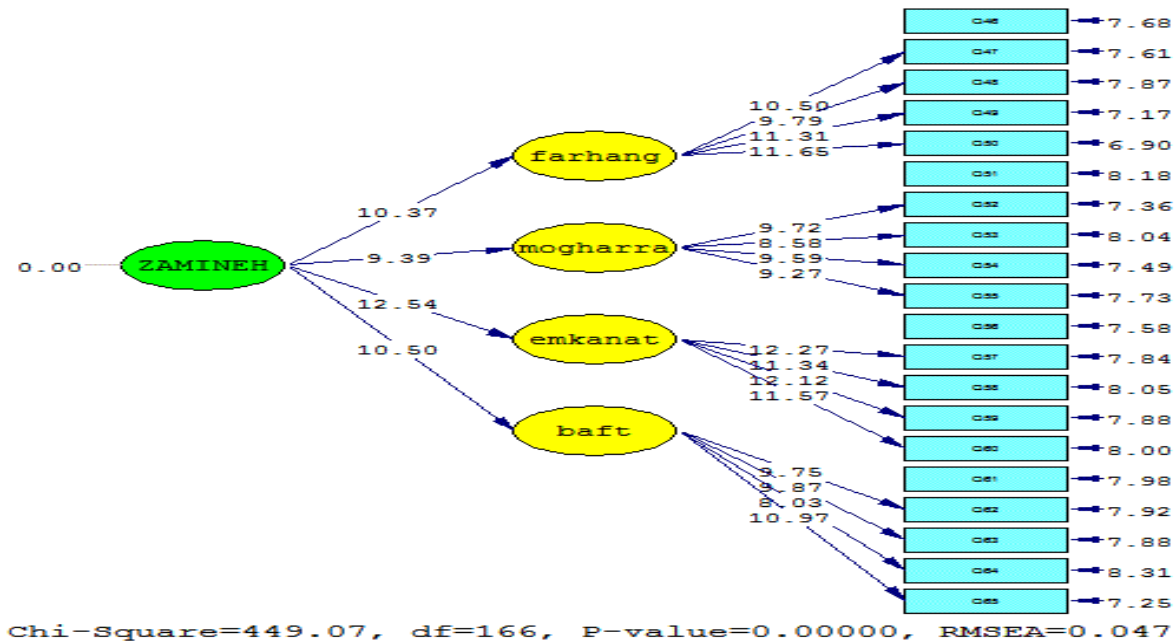


Figure 2. Significance Values (T-Values) for the Contextual Conditions Dimension

The t-values ranged from 9 to 13, well above the critical value of ± 1.96 ; therefore, the relationships between the indicators and the construct are significant at $p < .001$.

Table 2. Factor Loadings and T-Values for the Components of Contextual Conditions

Components	Standardized factor loading (λ)	t-value	Result
The university's educational culture and attitude toward students	.93	10.37	Significant
The university's governing educational structures and regulations	.90	9.39	Significant
The university's facilities, infrastructure, and educational resources	.93	12.54	Significant
Sociocultural and religious context	.89	10.50	Significant

These results indicate that the construct has satisfactory convergent validity and that the selected indicators are significantly related to the concept of contextual conditions. In other words, each

component contributes substantially to explaining the latent dimension, and the measurement model for this construct shows considerable statistical stability.

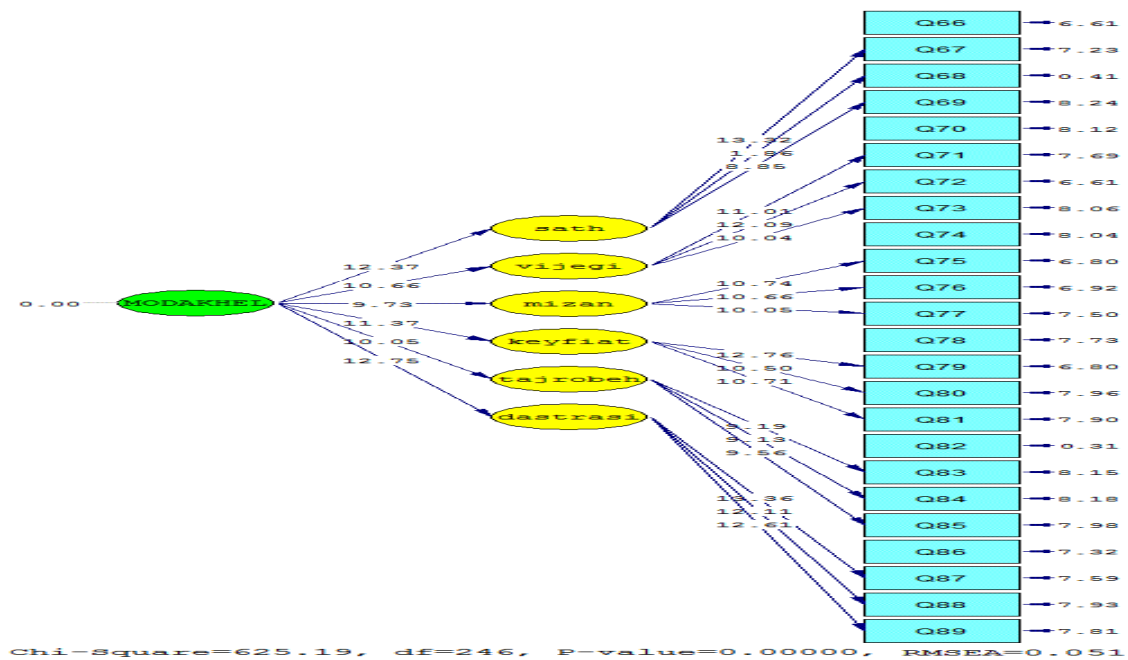


Figure 3. Significance Values (T-Values) for the Intervening Conditions Dimension

The t-values ranged from 9 to 13, well above the critical value of ± 1.96 ; therefore, the relationships between the indicators and the construct (except for Items 68 and 82) are significant at $p < .001$.

Table 3. Factor Loadings and T-Values for the Components of Intervening Conditions

Components	Standardized factor loading (λ)	t-value	Result
Level of academic and administrative support for international students	.95	12.37	Significant
Personal, motivational, and academic characteristics of international students	.92	10.66	Significant
Students' degree of cultural and social adjustment	.93	9.73	Significant
Quality of informal relationships and student support networks	.97	11.37	Significant
Experience of cultural acceptance or rejection in the university environment	.91	10.05	Significant
Access to academic, language, and psychological counseling services	.90	12.75	Significant

These results indicate that the construct has satisfactory convergent validity and that the selected indicators are significantly related to the concept of intervening conditions. In other words, each

component contributes substantially to explaining the latent dimension, and the measurement model for this construct shows considerable statistical stability.

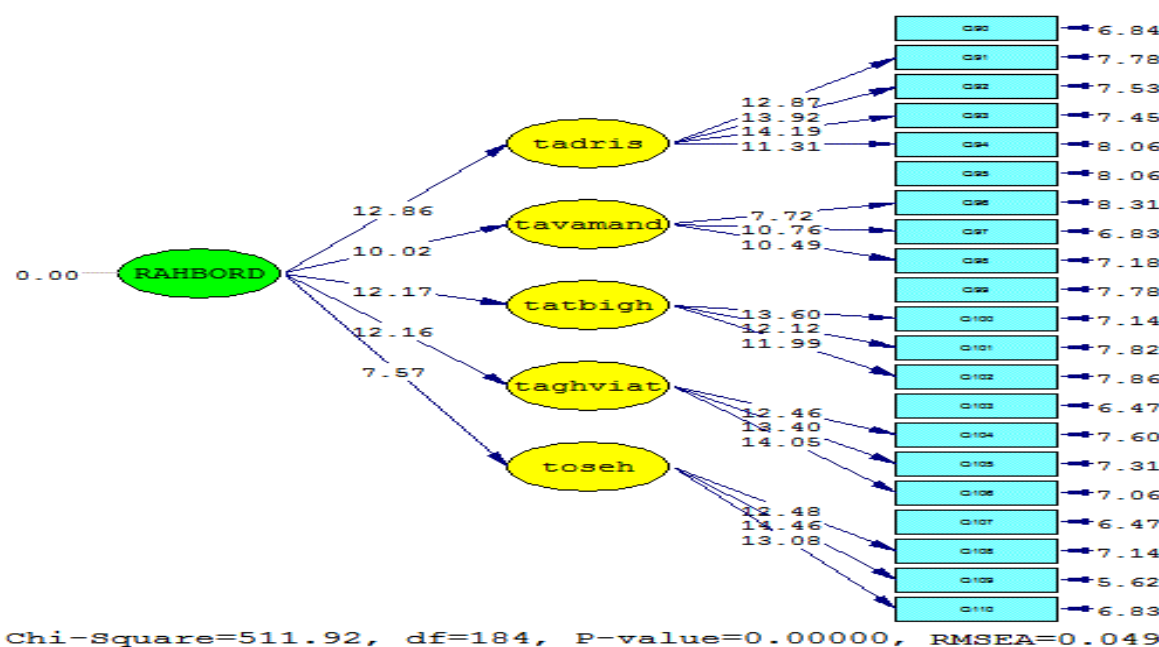


Figure 4. Significance Values (T-Values) for the Strategies Dimension

The t-values ranged from 7 to 13, well above the critical value of ± 1.96 ; therefore, the relationships between the indicators and the construct are significant at $p < .001$.

Table 4. Factor Loadings and T-Values for the Components of Strategies

Components	Standardized factor loading (λ)	t-value	Result
Use of flexible, culturally responsive teaching methods	.96	17.59	Significant
Faculty empowerment and training in international education	.98	14.45	Significant
Adapting educational programs to the needs of international students	.94	14.53	Significant
Strengthening instructional communication, feedback, and classroom interaction	.92	15.82	Significant
Developing academic support services specifically for international students	.63	14.96	Significant

These results indicate that the construct has satisfactory convergent validity and that the selected indicators are significantly related to the concept of strategies. In other words, each component contributes substantially to explaining the latent dimension, and the measurement model for this construct shows considerable statistical stability.

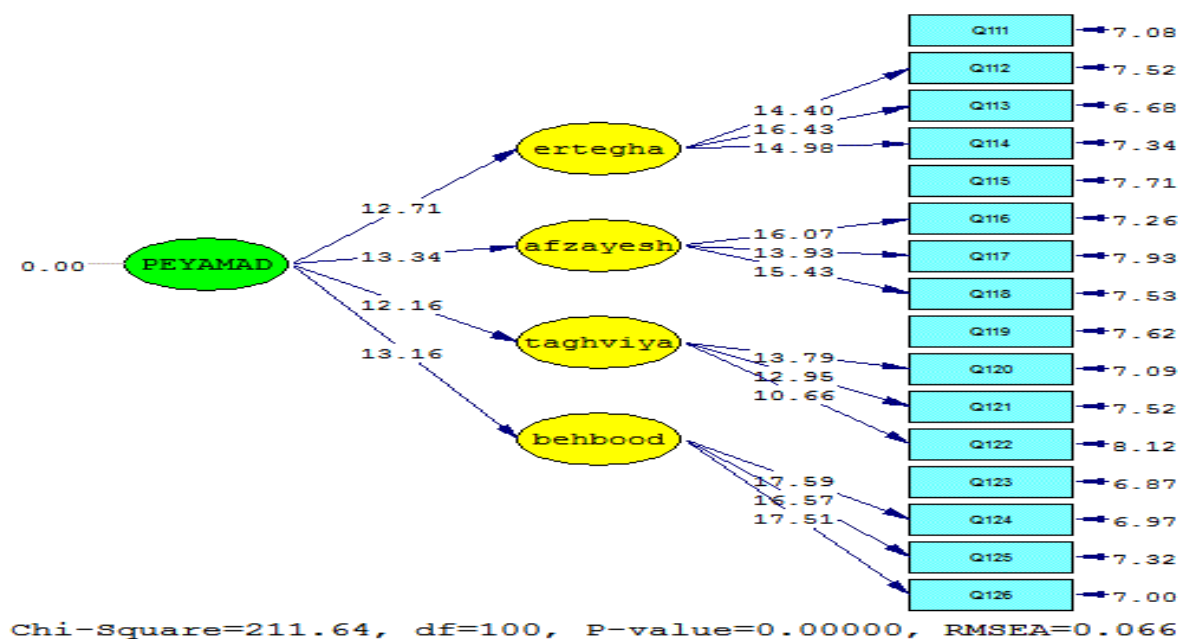


Figure 5. Significance Values (T-Values) for the Consequences Dimension

The t-values ranged from 12 to 14, well above the critical value of ± 1.96 ; therefore, the relationships between the indicators and the construct are significant at $p < .001$.

Table 5. Factor Loadings and T-Values for the Components of Consequences

Components	Standardized factor loading (λ)	t-value	Result
Enhanced learning, academic progress, and academic success of international students	.95	12.71	Significant
Increased educational satisfaction and a positive study experience	.84	13.34	Significant
Strengthened sense of belonging and academic retention of international students	.87	12.16	Significant
Improved educational and international reputation of universities	.91	13.16	Significant

These results indicate that the construct has satisfactory convergent validity and that the selected indicators are significantly related to the concept of consequences. In other words, each component contributes substantially to explaining the latent dimension, and the measurement model for this construct shows considerable statistical stability.

To examine the relationships among the constructs of the conceptual model, the hypotheses derived from the structural model were tested using standardized path coefficients, t-statistics, and significance levels. Path coefficients indicate the strength and direction of the effects of

independent variables on dependent variables, and the t-statistic is used to assess the significance of these relationships. In this study, $t > 1.96$ at the .05 level was used as the criterion for significance. The results of the hypothesis tests and path coefficients are presented below.

Table 6. Path Coefficients and Hypothesis Tests for the Educational Quality Model for International Students

Path	Path coefficient (β)	t-value	p	Result
H1: Causal conditions → Central phenomenon	.62	9.84	< .001	Supported
H2: Contextual conditions → Strategies	.41	6.73	< .001	Supported
H3: Intervening conditions → Strategies	.36	5.98	< .001	Supported
H4: Central phenomenon → Strategies	.57	8.46	< .001	Supported
H5: Strategies → Consequences	.69	11.27	< .001	Supported

The results in Table 6 show that all relationships predicted in the conceptual model are statistically significant; therefore, all research hypotheses were supported. The path coefficients show that causal conditions have a relatively strong and significant effect on the central phenomenon ($\beta = .62$). This finding indicates that the set of fundamental conditions and factors identified in the qualitative phase of the study plays a decisive role in shaping and enhancing the educational quality of international students. Strengthening these factors can therefore improve the state of the central phenomenon in the higher education system.

The results for the second hypothesis show that contextual conditions have a positive and significant effect on strategies for improving educational quality ($\beta = .41$). This indicates that appropriate organizational, managerial, and structural foundations in universities can enable the effective formulation and implementation of strategies to improve the educational quality of international students.

The results for the third hypothesis show that intervening conditions have a positive and significant effect on strategies for improving educational quality ($\beta = .36$). Although this effect is smaller than that of some other paths, it still plays an important role in how educational strategies are implemented. This finding indicates that environmental, managerial, and operational conditions can influence the process of realizing educational strategies.

The results for the fourth hypothesis show that the central phenomenon has a positive and significant effect on strategies for improving educational quality ($\beta = .57$). This finding indicates that a precise understanding and explanation of the dimensions of international students'

educational quality can help in designing and implementing appropriate strategies for improvement in this area.

Finally, the results for the fifth hypothesis show that strategies for improving educational quality have the strongest effect on their consequences ($\beta = .69$). This finding indicates that the successful implementation of educational strategies can lead to positive consequences such as greater academic satisfaction among international students, better teaching-learning processes, improved scientific and cultural interaction, and a stronger academic and international standing for universities.

Overall, the hypothesis testing results show that the conceptual model has adequate explanatory power and that the relationships among its constructs are significantly supported by the empirical data. These findings indicate that improving the educational quality of international students requires simultaneous attention to causal conditions, contextual conditions, intervening conditions, and the design of effective strategies in the higher education system. The coefficients of determination are presented below.

Table 7. Coefficients of Determination (R^2) for the Endogenous Variables

Endogenous variable	R^2	Explanatory power
Central phenomenon	.38	Moderate
Strategies	.54	Relatively strong
Consequences	.48	Moderate to strong

The coefficient of determination indicates the extent to which the independent variables explain the dependent variables in the model. As shown in Table 7, R^2 for the central phenomenon was .38, indicating that causal conditions explained approximately 38% of the variance in the central phenomenon, which reflects moderate explanatory power for this construct. R^2 for strategies was .54, indicating that contextual conditions, intervening conditions, and the central phenomenon together explained more than half of the variance in this variable, which reflects relatively good explanatory power in predicting strategies for improving educational quality. Finally, R^2 for consequences was .48, indicating that strategies for improving educational quality explained a substantial portion of the variance in consequences. This result highlights the important role of educational strategies in achieving desirable outcomes in the education of international students. The effect sizes of the structural model relationships are presented next.

Table 8. Effect Sizes (F^2) of the Structural Model Relationships

Structural relationship	f^2	Effect size
Causal conditions → Central phenomenon	.34	Large
Contextual conditions → Strategies	.18	Medium
Intervening conditions → Strategies	.14	Medium
Central phenomenon → Strategies	.29	Medium to large
Strategies → Consequences	.41	Large

Overall, the coefficients of determination and effect sizes indicate that the research model has adequate explanatory power and that the relationships among its constructs can acceptably explain the phenomenon under study. The results of the structural model analysis further indicate that the conceptual model has adequate empirical validity and that the relationships among the research variables are supported in line with the proposed theoretical framework. It can therefore be concluded that the proposed model adequately explains the mechanisms affecting the phenomenon under study and provides a reliable basis for testing the research hypotheses.

Discussion

The objective of this study was to assess the educational quality model for international students in universities across Qom Province. Of the 126 indicators identified, 121 were confirmed; the final structure of the model therefore comprises 121 indicators, 28 components, and the same 6 main dimensions. Five indicators (Items 26, 33, 40, 68, and 82) were removed because of low factor loadings or lack of statistical significance. This is a normal part of validating measurement models and reflects the scientific refinement and greater precision of the model's structure.

The CFA results showed that the factor loadings of all indicators exceeded the .40 criterion and that their t-values fell outside the ± 1.96 range. This indicates that the indicators have adequate explanatory power for measuring their respective components and that there is a significant and acceptable relationship between the indicators and the latent constructs of the model. In other words, each indicator contributes substantially to measuring the components of international students' educational quality, and these components, in turn, significantly form the main dimensions of the model. These results indicate adequate convergence among the model's components and confirm the conceptual structure derived in the qualitative phase of the study.

Methodologically, confirmation of the model's six-dimensional structure through CFA indicates that the theoretical framework, based on the grounded theory paradigm model, has adequate

internal coherence. In this framework, causal conditions are treated as the factors that shape the phenomenon of educational quality; contextual and intervening conditions as the settings and factors that affect how it is realized; strategies as managerial and educational actions; and consequences as the outcomes of implementing these strategies. Statistical confirmation of this structure indicates that the conceptual relationships among these dimensions were also observable and measurable in the empirical field of the study.

The results of this section also show that the extracted components and indicators form a coherent system constituting a single construct, the "educational quality model for international students." In other words, all identified dimensions and components interact to create an integrated conceptual framework that can serve as a basis for analyzing, evaluating, and improving the educational quality of international students. This coherence shows that the proposed model is not merely a collection of disparate factors but a systematic structure with meaningful internal connections among its parts.

Finally, after the statistical analyses and validation of the constituent factors, the final educational quality model for international students was developed. Based on 6 main dimensions, 28 components, and 121 confirmed indicators, the model offers a comprehensive picture of the factors affecting international students' educational quality and its consequences. It can therefore be stated with reasonable confidence that the proposed model is valid and applicable and can serve as a scientific framework for planning, policymaking, and improving the educational quality of international students in universities, particularly the Islamic Azad University, Qom Branch.

Overall, a comparison of the present findings with previous studies shows that the results are consistent with both Iranian and international research in many respects and underscore the role of educational, cultural, institutional, and support factors in shaping educational quality. What distinguishes the present study, however, is that it explains these factors within a comprehensive paradigm model and in the specific context of universities in Qom Province, an issue that has received limited attention in previous studies. Therefore, in addition to confirming previous findings, the present study provides a coherent conceptual framework that can contribute to a deeper understanding of the mechanisms affecting the educational quality of international students in Iran's higher education system.

In any scientific study, despite the researcher's efforts to design and carry out each stage carefully, some factors can affect data collection, the analysis of findings, and the generalization of results. Identifying and honestly reporting these limitations not only contributes to the transparency and scientific credibility of the study but also enables a more accurate interpretation of the results and informs future research. Accordingly, the present study acknowledges the following limitations. The questionnaire and interviews relied on respondents' self-reports, which may have been influenced by personal perceptions or social desirability bias.

The indicators and components examined were limited to those extracted from the qualitative data and the literature, whereas other factors may also affect the educational quality of international students.

The study focused on the perspectives of students and university experts and may not fully capture the views of other higher education stakeholders, such as national policymakers or employers.

Time constraints prevented a longitudinal examination of changes in educational quality over longer periods.

With regard to the component "effective learning experience in an intercultural educational setting," it is recommended that university vice-presidents for academic affairs, in collaboration with teaching and learning centers, prioritize designing and delivering classes based on active and collaborative learning approaches. To this end, multicultural group activities, problem-based tasks and case studies with an international focus, and attention to students' cultural diversity in teaching can create a richer and more effective learning experience for international students.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the ethics committee of Islamic Azad University. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

All authors contributed to the study conception and design, material preparation, data collection, and analysis. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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