

QUALITY AND PERFORMANCE IN ACADEMIC EDUCATION FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF STRATEGIC MARKETING

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Abstract: Knowledge is a long-term process which consists in acquiring information throughout life. We live in an era of technologic dynamism, where information means power. The organizations which are strategically oriented towards the individual knowledge of their customers, of their needs, the large analysis of the market phenomena, of the ongoing transformations, as well as the intelligent use of innovating techniques will have the decisive competitive upper hand.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Quality and performance are two words that should characterize any university activity. Our paper presents the particularities of this two terms in academic education including university marketing, the decision to follow university courses, particularities of the educational consumer behaviour.

2. OBJECTIVES

The general objective is to identify the particularities of the quality and performance in academic education from the perspective of the strategic marketing but in this paper we have also specific objectives that refer to the process of identifying the current state of knowledge in the field of quality and performance in academic education, identifying the role of the university marketing, identifying the particularities of the education consumer behavior.

3. METHODOLOGY

The methodology used in this paper includes the methods according to developed activities: *data collection* for tracing the general framework of the theme using the following types of information sources: reports, PhD documents, conference publications, ISI and CNCSIS articles, international databases, books, websites. After collecting data using a rich bibliography we made analysis to determine the particularities of the quality and performance in academic education from the perspective of strategic marketing.

4. UNIVERSITY MARKETING

Education is one of the sub-systems of the social system, with which it has a strong interdependence relation. It fully indicates the social requirements, having a decisive role in the training of the next generations at higher quality standards.

Strategic marketing is the process which helps create, implement and assess the strategic coordinates. Any education institution has a well-defined mission, and strategic marketing is subordinated to such mission.

Recent tendencies in the evolution of marketing, both at operational and at theoretical level, indicate a premonition of the dominant emphasis. Any organization, and any institution of higher education is interested in identifying the means to better the learning process and to satisfy the undergraduates' needs and wishes under highly performing conditions. At national level, on April 22, 1998, the MEN drafted order no. 3595. This decision stipulates the draw up and implementation of the strategic plans for the institutional development of universities in Romania. This reflects the national priority expressed through individual strategic objectives, with a time hierarchy. Such an approach is carried out with the help of strategic organizational planning. The strategic planning is a toll necessary for the management and

development of universities, by means of which they set up a constant dialogue with the Ministry of Education, Research, Youth and Sport. The strategic plan contains the research objectives stipulated by the university, for the creation of good infrastructures. At university level, the strategic plan is the decision-making support of the institutional development. Likewise, it is important to develop a strategic institutional thinking. In this respect, one has to envisage the mission, vision and values of the university.

The mission of the university is the most important element in the strategic plan. Each university has a certain mission it has to explain, to make known, in compliance with such mission, the higher education institution may formulate its objectives and strategies only following an extensive market research.

The vision of a university involves the area in the strategic management, a future condition which the higher education institution imagines and which it wishes to reach.

The strategic objectives take from the mission and vision of the university the fundamental ideas for the set up of a strategic competition. That is why we believe that it is important that the objectives be formulated so as to be accepted by all the participants in their implementation. It is also necessary for them not to have a character defined by rigidity, since, at a certain time interval, there may occur a situation which involves their amendment.

Accomplishing the strategic objectives involves three stages:

- drafting the strategy –the stage which involves the decision to adopt a given strategy;
- strategy implementation - the stage which involves the strategy operability;
- strategy assessment – the stage where the results obtained following the strategy implementation are assessed.

There is an almost natural reaction to reject any strategy which produces changes for the university. Most of the times, novelty gives birth to fear. An unprecedented fact in the history of educational institutions may create suspicion. Often, when faced with the need to adopt a new strategy, universities look for models, patterns, references which have been validated in practice.

“University strategic marketing projects its objectives for periods similar to the strategic management and through such objectives it strives to build and strengthen a better image of the university and of its

educational agenda. The effort is focused on the creation of brands at the level of learning curricula and at the level of the entire university. Strategic marketing cannot be implemented in a university by means of mere attributions distributed to its vice-rectors, but by creating a marketing department, specialized in drawing up and implementing marketing strategies, as well as in marketing research.”¹

For Romanian universities, strategic marketing is something new. Private universities use in their activity various marketing tools to attract high school graduates by promoting their educational offer. The recognized tools which help meet such objectives include: leaflets which contain the presentation of the faculties and the possibilities to find a job after graduation; meetings with high school students to have free talks and to encourage them to make questions; allowing high school students to come to the university grounds; adjusting the educational curricula to the real needs of the young and to the possibilities provided by the labour market in the current economic context.

Using the university marketing may help educational institutions with a better understanding of the exchanges on the market where they carry out their activity and with the identification of potential markets – potential undergraduates. Thus, there is need for high quality services.

5. THE DECISION OF FOLLOWING A UNIVERSITY

Attracting the potential undergraduates becomes a more and more difficult task for universities. This reality is the consequence of economic tendencies due to the fact that the financial burden has moved, during the last few years, from the government to the educational institutions, the fees are considerable and the places free of charge are fewer and fewer.

It is important that universities carry out surveys among high school students to adjust their offer according to their real needs.

The process of identification and adhesion to one of the existing universities is done chronologically, by following a number of stages:

¹ Bratianu C., Pop N. Al., - *Managementul si marketingul strategic universitar* (Strategic university management and marketing) – Amfiteatrul economic, Nr. 22 _ iunie 2007 , pag. 14

- *the first stage* is the creation of a desire to follow university courses, a stage which begins in the childhood and which develops to a considerable extent in high school. Teenagers need models to guide them in choosing their academic trajectory, that is why we believe that high school teachers play a major role in their position of educators.
- *the second stage* involves the selection of a set of faculties and the admission in one or several of such faculties.

The decision-making process is highly complex and is influenced by a variety of factors. Among the most relevant we can mention: the tuition fee, the life cost, the admission method, job opportunities, facilities offered by the university. The selection involves the filtering of information, ideas, as influences by personal priorities, family, culture, character and personal ability in making decisions. Even for the persons who have access to quality information, the option assessment is a considerable challenge, since the educational product is intangible.

6. QUALITY AND PERFORMANCE IN ACADEMIC EDUCATION

The quality of the educational product has a big value for the consumer. “In a broad sense, quality is a high degree of excellence, the extent to which something corresponds to the purpose for which it was created. In a narrow sense, the approach defines the quality of a product or service as being the ability to meet the requirements, the lack of any flaws, the satisfaction of the customer’s needs at high standards.”²

The quality is a result if the comparison made not by the producer, but by the beneficiary, between what was requested and what was provided but does not appear from the comparative perspective of the producer. Regarding the education services, quality is highly determined by the beneficiary of the education act. At the end of courses, student can say that his experience was a quality one or not. Only after the completion of the courses the student can say how much the experience was qualitative or not and find the performance of the academic education process. Quality and performance are determined essentially by the student expectations in connection with the services provided. The customer's satisfaction is the only one that can measure quality, even if the interpretations of the needs and the expectations are so objective and especially subjective. The changing customers'

² <http://www.didactic.ro/files/16/auxlicteoretic.pdf>

perceptions is permanent, relying on raising awareness of the new technologies, of new discoveries, of the products or services offered by the competitors.

Quality presupposes value as well. The latter does not refer to price, but to measuring benefits derived from a product or service. For the student, quality becomes an essential variable, the only one which care increase satisfaction.

The executive manager of the organization has the responsibility for the quality. The other members of the management team have the role of facilitating the access to quality through guidance and information.”³

Quality can be achieved, maintained, or improved through quality management which consists of: quality control, improving quality, assuring quality.

Quality is obtained through several processes, permanently improved through :

- Projection of products and services which correspond the real needs of the customers
- Preventing actions which can cause dissatisfaction
- making the process of teaching more efficient
- providing products and services that can create student satisfaction
- punctuality of the teachers and staff

In education, the personal quality represents the basis of the quality of the education institution. This presupposes the existence of the actual performance - that is the real performance of a person at a certain point, and the ideal performance - which a person tends to attain. The ideal performance is formed during childhood and adolescence, the school having the duty to increasing its quality. Thus we consider it important for a teacher to be a good example, to be strict, to recognize the students' merits, to criticize without discouraging, to have a sense of humor and to offer the freedom of action.

Work in education also requires high competence for the teachers embodied in: the quality of teaching methods based on dialogue and interaction with the student, high quality in information provided to student, using a performance equipment.

³ Pop R., Suci, M.E., Suci, N – Educație pentru calitate – document auxiliar curricular pentru licee teoretice – Ministerul Educației Naționale, Proiectul Phare-RO, 9602-05, TTQM , București, 2000

For the students, a high level quality of the higher education offers the possibility of developing some competences which allows them, after graduation, practicing their profession at specific standards, as well as the continuous professional perfection, through active life long learning. Appears necessary to evaluate teachers regular and review their competence as it is reflected throughout the university. For the higher education institution and for its management, the reputation clearly reflects the superior quality of the education, both on a national and international level. Therefore the chances of attracting very well prepared students are bigger - since the quality of each year of study is conditioned by the previous year of study.

7. THE PARTICULARITIES OF EDUCATION CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

The education consumer has a certain behavior materialized in the totality of the acts and decisions regarding the recover of the opportunities in order to obtain and use the educative goods and the services. Therefore there must be taken into consideration certain actions: the perception of the stimuli, the mental processing of the information received form outside, so that the consumers might become aware of the education needs, being informed about the existing education needs, their content, their use, diversity and accessibility. The motivation is represented by the inner strength which leads a person to the action of buying, in order to satisfy one's needs and expectations. The reasons for research are several, some of which could be: the feeling of being pleased, the feeling of being creative, the level of the income, distance, education program, available time.

The post-consume behavior is appreciated through estimating the satisfaction index. (www.didactic.ro/files/15/marketing_educ_1_.doc - *Marketing Educațional*) The graduates of a university have the capacity of making certain appreciations regarding their level of expectations during the study years.

Thus the education consumer's behavior is influenced by several categories of factors: cultural ones (culture, under culture, social class), social ones (reference groups, family, social status), psychological ones (motivation, learning, attitude), personal ones (age, occupation, life style, personality, self concept).

People make easy or complex decisions every day. Decisions regarding education are considered to be complex ones since it reflects the result of an analysis to which several elements contribute:

- long term self image
- the cost of the decision which might involve major economic sacrifices
- personal and social risk of making a mistake
- the pressure of the group of making a certain choice or acting in a certain way

The decision of attending the courses of a certain university begins much earlier before applying to a university. It is a decision which might affect one's carrier, friendship, life satisfaction. It is important for the university managers to understand all these aspects which the education services consumers have to deal with.

There are some factors which determine directly the choice of a certain university:

- its location
- employment possibility, the reputation and professional orientation
- the social-economic status which it confers to students

It is important that both the students and the higher education institutions be capable of answering questions like: what are we studying?, why are we studying?, how are we studying?, for a better evaluation of the performances. For the former question, the answer must be formulated so as to fulfill the requirements in the job market, for the latter the answer must underline the idea that the quality study leads to the overall evolution of the society, and for the third question we believe it is necessary an application study, concentrated on real life models, with many examples, so that the students might know how to apply the theory presented in the lectures.

“Having the European Union as foundation, Magna Chartam Universitarum adopted in 1988 and the Convention from Lisbon from 1997, developing a Europe of Knowledge, as well as the international recognition of the diplomas. The declaration from Bologna in 1999 starts a major process whose purpose is harmonizing the structures of the higher education systems at a European level. In 1999 Romania signed this declaration taking over the responsibility of implementing the objectives established by this in the Romanian higher education. The process from Bologna focuses on student-centered learning. In order to achieve this, students, teachers and the education institution bring their

own contribution.”⁴ In this type of learning – “the student, the future expert, is no longer seen as a passive subject in the education process, he is consider partner of the trainer in the achievement of knowledge and is an active part in the accomplishment of the education activities, in the qualitative evaluation and in the shaping of the academic route.”⁵. Therefore, teaching is not limited to the more transmission of knowledge, but it combines instruction with formation and learning with evaluation. The teacher no longer delivers “knowledge as a product”, but he/she concentrates on the " knowledge as process" model, emphasizing the need to learn, the motivation, student orientation.

“In the new education system the professor is given the guidance role, which facilitates the student's learning process. Guiding the student is done through applying the knowledge and presupposes a critical selection of the materials, being in close relationship with the personal interests and capacities.”⁶

In the context of a society centered on knowledge, orientation towards excellent and the growth of performance represents one of the priorities of the scientific research which takes place in the universities, having direct effects on the economic growth, assuring jobs and promoting competitiveness.

From the perspective of education that is student central point (the trend toward customer orientation manifested in the economic), he is encouraged to participate in his own development. Teachers avoid sharing their knowledge for granted and they are not pretending any more the students learn by heart.

From the point of view of the student centered learning, the students participates in his/her own development. Thus the teacher gives up at delivering a speech and asking the student to memorize the information; the student is treated like a subject of the instruction, as an active and responsible participant, who must act to mobilize intellectual forces, to manifest his/her thirst for knowledge, initiative to propose solution for

⁴ (<http://ns.upt.ro/pdf/calitate/REFERAT.pdf>)

⁵ Teodorescu L. L., *Invățământul centrat pe student – reper principal al procesului Bologna*, Buletinul AGIR nr. 1-2/2009 aprilie-septembrie, Universitatea „Politehnica” din Timișoara

⁶ <http://ns.upt.ro/pdf/calitate/REFERAT.pdf>

problems, to collaborate with other students, to come up with new ideas, to formulate conclusions, to bring arguments, to communicate, to collaborate with the other students and teachers.

The higher education institutions make it possible the interaction between the student and the teacher. The university must create the necessary conditions and to provide a modern material basis, programs and services centered on relation, on the student's involvement, on modern teaching-learning-evaluating techniques, programs and services focused on networking, involvement of student.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This research presents the importance of quality in academic and the critical need to establishing strategies to render superior performance and significant competitive advantage. For the universities adopting some strategies which might permanently increase their efficiency and performance continues to remain a challenge. Increasing the quality presupposes change, change means innovation and the innovation brings progress. Adapting universities to new internal and international conditions represents a strategic process in which the higher education institutions must reconsider the mission for which they have been created and to project a vision which might allow them the placement in the new international academic spectrum.

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