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Establishing Influence of Specific Academic Quality on Student Satisfaction

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Abstract

The continuous academic competition forces all universities to make a lot of efforts in order to attract and retain students, after graduation, by including them in next educational cycles, therefore, investigating students' satisfaction, considered the main higher education consumers, becomes a major premise for their intention to stay and learn in the same institution. In trying to understand the factors that exert a significant impact on student satisfaction in college years, we have developed a model to determine the influence of specific academic quality on student satisfaction recorded in economic faculties from Romania. The study highlights the causal relationship between specific academic quality and student satisfaction. The model was validated based on regression coefficients for a significance level below 5%. Findings reveal that the tangible elements of the university, the compliance with university's values and the reliability are variables with a significant impact on student satisfaction. In this respect, offering a modern material base, many classrooms, campus cleaning, meeting all the taken commitments, communicating the right information, the trust in the university programs and also the utility of the acquired knowledge are elements with a visible contribution in achieving Romanian students' satisfaction.

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Keywords: satisfaction, quality in higher education, university, students;

1. Introduction

In the last years, competition in Romanian academic environment has considerably intensified, on the one hand due to emergence of private universities and on the other hand, due to demographic evolution which resulted in the reduction of the number of potential students. In this context, researching on students' satisfaction as well as on the impact of quality on this variable leads to a more profound understanding of the main factors which determine students to continue their studies at the same university after completing the Bachelor's degree, provided that satisfaction influences the trust consumers have in the organization they collaborate with, (Omar, Nazri, Abu, & Omar, 2009) and it shapes the future behavioral intention. (Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Clemes, Gan, & Kao, 2008). Omar et al. (2009) consider that satisfaction is the most efficient and least expensive source of an organization's communication policy, as the satisfied consumers will share their positive experience with the others. But in the academic environment, students' satisfaction is strongly linked to the quality of higher education services

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as well as to the learning environment. Therefore, quality becomes a strong satisfaction determinant which significantly contributes to students' retention at the same university for further study programs.

The present article comprises three parts: the first part presents the current stage of knowledge regarding the students' satisfaction aspect and the influence of specific academic quality on this variable; the second part comprises the research methodology, the third part analyses the results and the last part includes the drawn conclusions and the suggestions regarding the researched topic.

2. Literature review

In all economic aspects of life, consumer satisfaction is considered to be a very important variable in earning consumer loyalty. At global level, competition in the academic field strengthens the strategic importance of researching on student satisfaction, who is perceived as the main consumer of higher education activities, with a view to adopting various efficient development strategies and also to attracting and retaining students for future study programs. Usually, it is much easier to keep a client than to attract a new one (Bodet, 2008), and satisfied consumers will be retained within the organization. As regards higher education institutions, it is simpler to retain students for further study programs (Master's, Doctoral Programs) than to attract other students, as the former ones are already the "clients" of the higher education institutions where they completed the Bachelor's degree. (Oliver, 1993; Babin&Griffin, 1998) Therefore, gaining certain competitive advantages represents a desideratum of any university. Ahmed et al. (2010) studied the impact of quality on students' satisfaction and motivation. The authors consider that in the education system satisfaction is the most important end towards which education should aim.

Analysing student satisfaction significantly contributes to the improvement of the relationships which develop between higher education institutions and students (Alves & Raposo, 2007). Cronin, Brady, and Hult (2000) identified a strong causal relationship between quality and consumer satisfaction. Al-Alak and Alnaser (2012) have also developed a model which expresses the relation between the quality dimensions of the SERVQUAL model and students' satisfaction. In light of the fact that each quality dimension exerts a positive influence on student satisfaction, the authors have concluded that guaranteeing academic quality contributes to the increase in consumer satisfaction. Abedniya et al. (2011) have created a model which reflects the relation between the perceived quality of the service and the consumer's satisfaction. Bigne et al. (2003) have also determined that the quality variable is strongly correlated to consumers' satisfaction. Douglas, Douglas and Barnes (2006) consider that in the UK higher education, students are seen as the most important consumers, being at the same time the direct beneficiaries of the provided education service.

In order to determine the academic quality, several authors have used the SERVQUAL model (Parasuraman et al., 1985, 1988, 1991, 1994). According to the authors, the model comprises two forms: the perceived quality – that is to say the consumer's judgment regarding the activity he/she benefits from, and the expected quality, i.e. what the consumer would have wanted - manifested through an attitude resulted from comparing the expectations and the performance perceived by the individual (Llosa, Chandon, & Orsingher, 1998). Given the fact that the SERVQUAL model has been criticised (Buttle, 1996), in the specialized literature, Cronin and Taylor (1992) have developed the SERVPERF model which includes the same 22 items of the SERVQUAL model, but it refers only to perceptions, excluding thus the expectations, measuring hence the performance of the provided service. Arambewela and Hall (2006) explain the significance of each dimension: tangibility comprises – physical facilities, equipment, staff and communicational resources; assurance – refers to the ability to fulfil the commitments made and to provide in a correct manner what has been promised in order to gain the consumer's trust; responsiveness - refers to the desire to readily help clients; reliability supposes the manifestation of an affable attitude in relation to consumers as well as the capacity to inspire confidence, and empathy includes the personalized attention towards consumers.

3. Research methodology

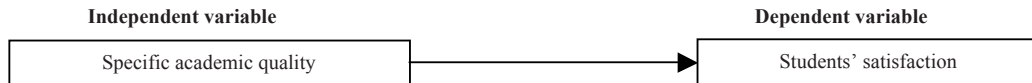
Having as a starting point the studies in the specialized literature regarding the impact of academic quality on students’ satisfaction, we have carried out a research on a sample of 310 students enrolled on economics faculties in Romania. The SERVPERF model, which determines the performance of the education services, represented the main framework of the research. We adapted several items specific to this model to the characteristics of the Romanian higher education, and thus we chose for the present research three independent variables: *the tangible elements* of the university, *the compliance with university’s values* which mirrors the relationship between the university and the students and *the reliability* which it transmits to the exterior. In the next stage, it was determined the impact of these variables on the dependent variable, i.e. students’ *satisfaction*.

The objectives of the research aim at determining the impact of these variables on students’ satisfaction. The research hypotheses are presented in table no. 1 below:

Table 1. Research hypotheses

H ₁	The tangible elements of the university exert a significant impact on students’ <i>satisfaction</i> during undergraduate years.
H ₂	The compliance with the university’s values seen as a specific quality variable of education services exerts a significant impact on students’ <i>satisfaction</i> during undergraduate years.
H ₃	Reliability exerts an impact on students’ <i>satisfaction</i> during undergraduate years.

Therefore, the conceptual research model comprises the following components:



The quality perceived in higher education can be described through students’ satisfaction by resorting to a set of specific university characteristics (Munteanu, Ceobanu, Bobâlca, & Anton, 2010, p. 126) such as the ones referring to the campus and the services provided there.

4. Results analysis

The purpose of the research conceptual model is to identify the impact of specific academic quality perceived through three independent variables - *the tangible elements* of the university, which include 6 items, *the compliance with university’s values*, which comprises 4 items and *the reliability*, which encompasses 3 items, upon a dependent variable - i.e. the *satisfaction* of the students enrolled in Romanian faculties studying economics at Bachelor’s degree level. After analysing the respondents’ distribution based on the scalar level of appreciations, it can be observed that the distribution is normal (Gauss curve) with significant weights of appreciations for attributes having high values (4-5 grades). The item which registered the most responses, i.e. 234, through which students expressed their total agreement is *“Commitments are always fulfilled”*; this was followed by the item *“The university owns modern equipment”*, with 228 responses out of a total of 310 responses. Students’ satisfaction is analysed in terms of 6 items, as it can be seen in table no. 2 below:

Table 2. Absolute occurrence frequencies of the student satisfaction items

No.	ITEMS	Frequency				
		Total disagreement		Total agreement		
		1	2	3	4	5
STUDENT SATISFACTION						
1.	I was satisfied with the university whose courses I attended.	4	9	40	135	122
2.	The university always provided me useful knowledge.	5	17	58	132	98
3.	The university always provided me an adequate environment for personal and intellectual development.	3	20	55	116	116
4.	If I made a request (consultations, issuance of certificates, documents, etc.), I always received a response in due time according to the quality standards.	11	27	54	87	131

5.	I am satisfied with the university’s infrastructure.	0	16	19	33	242
6.	In comparison with another university, I am satisfied with the education institution where I am a student.	2	9	46	148	105

Source: personal research carried out with the help of the program SPSS Statistics Version 19

Based on the analysis, it can be noticed that the item towards which most of the respondents, i.e. 242, manifested total agreement is "I am satisfied with the university’s infrastructure", this being followed by the item "If I made a request (consultations, issuance of certificates, documents, etc.), I always received a response in due time according to the quality standards." with 131 responses. With a view to analysing the influence of specific academic quality, expressed through three independent variables, on students’ satisfaction – analysed as a mean of its 6 component items, the results of the regression model are presented in table no. 3 below:

Table 3. Results of the regression model

	Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	Student satisfaction	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1.	Tangible elements	0.476	0.072	0.428	6.662	0.000
2.	Reliability	0.198	0.046	0.272	4.316	0.000
3.	Compliance with university’s values	0.211	0.056	0.156	3.760	0.000

Dependent variable: students’ satisfaction

Source: personal research carried out with the help of the program SPSS Statistics Version 19

In the developed model (Figure 1) it can be observed that the *tangible elements* variable exerts the greatest impact on students' satisfaction, the regression coefficient value being 0.476. This includes 6 items related to the modernity of the equipment owned by the university, to the campus facilities, to the characteristics of the academic staff, to the equipment owned by the university, to the existence of a sufficient number of lecture and seminar rooms in the higher education institution so that the academic activities should take place in normal conditions, as well as to the campus cleanliness. At the same time, the *compliance with university's values* dimension registered a regression coefficient value of 0.211. This comprises 4 items related to the fulfillment of commitments, to the strict observance of the deadlines set for each activity, to the accuracy and quality of the information transmitted during lectures and seminars, as well as to the politeness involved in the relationship with the academic staff. The *reliability* dimension has in view 3 items which refer to the trust which the higher education institution enjoys among the public, to the training of the academic staff in what concerns the subject they teach, as well as to the usefulness of the acquired knowledge during undergraduate years in relation to the labor market.

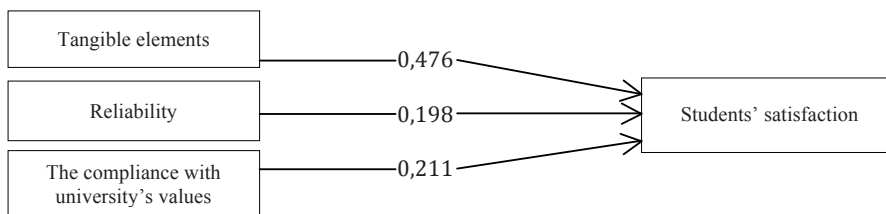


Figure1. The validated model of the research

Source: personal research carried out with the help of the program SPSS Statistics Version 19

The R² value of the model is 0.527, consequently it can be asserted that the variation of the specific academic quality explains the 53% of the students' satisfaction, while other factors not included in the model account for the rest of the percentage. The F value is very high (113,610) and Sig. is 0.000 and this fact confirms the validity of the model.

5. Conclusions and suggestions

Price, Matzdorf, Smith, and Agahi (2003) studied the impact of the facilities offered by higher education institutions on students' decision to enroll in a certain university. Our research it can be observed that the facilities offered by the higher education institution materialized through *tangible elements* exert the greatest impact on students' satisfaction. Given that this variable is an antecedent of students' loyalty towards the university (Bodet, 2008), we consider that the permanent preoccupation with the improvement of the tangible elements represents a premise of the increase in students' satisfaction level, which is materialized in the intention to continue studying at the same university after completing the Bachelor's degree. At the same time, *the compliance with university's values* as a specific dimension of academic quality contributes to students' satisfaction. Therefore, the professionalism of the academic staff as well as the strict observance of commitments and deadlines represent elements which directly contribute to students' satisfaction. Consequently, we suggest that the academic management should constantly preoccupy with the development of favorable working conditions in the higher education institution based on a good collaboration between different departments and students. Moreover, the results of the research point out the existence of a causal relationship between *reliability* – as a dimension of specific academic quality and *students' satisfaction*. In order to satisfy students and to ensure their retention in the higher education institution for future study programs, the university has to earn the trust of the public. This is a variable that is built in time and depends on the institution's compliance with all academic and non-academic aspects, this being a mirror of the university's past. Furthermore, the high-qualified academic staff as well as the topical and high-quality information transmitted during lectures and seminars are elements that significantly contribute to students' satisfaction.

Hence, the three hypotheses of the research were validated. The increase in the satisfaction level of students gives the university the possibility to obtain various competitive advantages which contribute to the attraction and retention of students for future study programs so as to ensure the development of the higher education institution and the successful continuation of its activity in a competitive and globalized world.

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