Developing Marketing Higher Education Strategies Based on Students' Satisfaction Evolution in Time

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The educational system worldwide is currently under the spotlight as it shows significant signs of an ongoing crisis in its search for resources, visibility in the crowded market and significance to the ever-changing society. Within this framework, higher education institutions (HEIs) are taking significant actions for maintaining students as clients of their educational services. As competition on this market is becoming stronger, HEIs face difficulties in keeping students, leading them to a continuous evaluation of student satisfaction indicators. Beyond HEIs' managers, researchers in marketing higher education have contributed to the development of a comprehensive literature where still very few have forwarded a longitudinal research model for student satisfaction evaluation despite the need for such approaches. Given this context, the current paper presents a first step towards a longitudinal study as it displays, in a compare and contrast vision, the results of two different quantitative research projects developed in the same student community, with the same objective, but conducted in two different years. Among the most significant results of this research refer to an important decline in students' satisfaction with a significant increase in the number of students that have a neutral perception. This is highly expected to determine a major impact on university's overall performance and, therefore, it constitutes a strong

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argument for determining underlying causes, and especially developing the appropriate marketing strategies to tackle with these issues. Based on this result and other similar research outcomes, strategic and tactic recommendations are granted in the final part of this paper.

Keywords: student satisfaction, marketing, higher education
JEL Classifications: M31, I23

Introduction

One of the fundamental needs of communities refers to passing on to the younger generation the culture heritage through education (Cummings, 2003). This specific human need is currently experiencing what one might call an identity crisis determined by the pressure of the globalised world. Within the globalisation framework, challenges arise from the fact that most types of borders are obsolete: from borders between countries to borders between disciplines in any study level, but especially in higher education where an emphasis on a trans-disciplinarily approach to teaching-learning is an increasingly defining feature. Additionally, education in the 'post-industrial era focuses less on the transmission of new knowledge, but more on modelling new behaviours, including abilities to solve problems and participate in decision-making process' (Zaharia, Avram and Eftimie, 2011). The educational crisis is the main engine moving educational systems worldwide towards a major reform which brings a wide range of transformations both in scope and diversity especially within higher education (Altbach, Reisberg, Rumbley, 2009). Abolishing or decreasing the borders' strength, HEIs are now facing an increasing competition that justifies their interest and willingness to market themselves more explicitly (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2010). Altbach, Reisberg and Rumbley (2009) second this argument as they state that adopting a market orientation approach in managing HEIs seems the natural consequence of the shift occurred on the early 21st century, when higher education has become a competitive enterprise. Since higher education is defined by special features, the marketing instruments and policies need to be adapted for their perfect match to the special features for which a comprehensive marketing higher education knowledge is an essential premise.

The current paper tackles with the issue of students' satisfaction after developing a marketing higher education literature review. The concept of students' satisfaction and its development context are further detailed within the current paper. Then, two salient factors determine a new perspective on students' satisfaction: firstly, although relatively few empirical contributions appear in the earlier marketing literature that treat time as a major variable of interest, marketers generally recognise the increasing importance of time as it relates to consumer behaviour (O'Neill, 2003). Secondly, as Lowrie and Hemsley-Brown (2011) noted, there is a need for varied approaches and theory development particularly in regard to longitudinal studies, prompted by a need for a bigger picture on how students' inner beliefs evolve in time but also by a lack of previous interest among researchers addressing the field of marketing higher education with an emphasis on evaluating students' satisfaction. The new perspective on students' satisfaction evaluation expanded in the current paper relates precisely to widening the view on students' satisfaction in time, with a research that might be considered as the baby step toward a longitudinal study in this field.

The framework of marketing higher education

Marketing higher education is one of the viable solutions to approach HEIs management in the era of massification defined by greater social mobility for an increasing number of people, new patterns of funding higher education, diversification of the higher education systems in various countries and lowering academic standards (Altbach, Reisberg and Rumbley, 2009). Furthermore, to HEIs, approaches developed along marketing lines provided several options to build a rich profile of students from various geographical locations and also to increase their international presence (Ramachandran, 2010). But, since marketing practice, theory and philosophy were first developed within the for-profit sector, including marketing concepts in higher education management tools should be preceded by an extensive process of adaption to the specific features of the educational field. One such specific feature was emphasised by Petruzzellis and Romanazzi (2010) and Bennet (2006) who concluded that students do not consider traditional university promotional tools such as the web site, prospectus and other written material as significant in their choice and decision making, since they find the information provided through these channels as inadequate, misleading or not trustworthy for their decision making. This perception pressures HEIs toward rethinking both their communication instruments and their messages as they need to lay emphasis on issues students find most important to them. Beyond developing relevant communication strategies, delivering the right message is the foundation of a genuine value-added student-HEI relationship as with the implementation of a marketization policy within HEIs, both students and educational providers have the space to make their own agreements along with higher interaction as accountable entities on the basis of reliable information (Jongbloed, 2003). This reliable information also needs to relate and be connected to the HEIs' overall image as established by the initial desired positioning (Petruzzellis and Romanazzi, 2010).

Recent development within the educational setting changes the focus of marketing activities from a mass perspective on the educational product and demand toward an increasing concern for quality HE. This perspective shift is also observed by Ramachandran (2010) who states that the role of marketing is to develop a mature market that is strong enough to demand quality higher education. From the supply side, the priority for policy makers should be at the transaction level of institutional quality as they must strive for improving the institutional quality attributes (Sudharani and Kalpana, 2012). The damage of a mass perspective are noted by Petruzzellis and Romanazzi (2010) who argue that the lack of care and individualised attention for students represents a critical issue which university governance is confronting in the modern and global competition. When referring to increased demands from the educational system, as for most universities the core service delivery method is still the lecture, the quality of the lectures is still very important (Hill et al, 2003; Banwet and Datta, 2003). As a result the marketing strategies should embrace the systematic accomplishment of studies about the external and internal environment, the analysis of the desires, needs and demands of several publics, the periodic revision of the structure of the educational offering (Raposo, Leitao and Do Paco, 2006). Therefore, in addition to providing information to prospective students, organising career-fairs and exhibition, marketing departments are expected to bring back information on a range of subjects that are intended to help institutional progress (Ramachandran, 2010). Within this framework, the evaluation of students' satisfaction gains relevance and importance in establishing improvements to be made within the educational settings in terms of both strategy and tactical plans.

Students' satisfaction concept

Beyond any marketing effort aimed at developing a strong HEIs' image on the educational market, evaluating students' satisfaction is particularly essential to HEIs as they are becoming more concerned with their studies and being successful in their chosen institution, rather than with any perceived image that the institution might have (Petruzzellis and Romanazzi, 2010). The emphasis laid on evaluating students' satisfaction is motivated by what Jongbloed (2003) defined as the higher education failure in meeting the expectations of citizens: students and their parents, private businesses. Besides, as Petruzzellis and Romanazzi (2010) stated, educational institutions have to actively monitor the quality of the services they offer and to commit to continuous improvements in order to survive the increasingly fierce competition for highly desirable students and the revenue they generate. Beyond attracting students, evaluating students' satisfaction is proving of great use since highly satisfied customers do not easily change their opinions, even after few unsatisfactory incidents (Paswan and Ganesh, 2009). Also, the role of student within the educational setting has changed since the student is perceived and engaged in the educational framework as the central self-steering power of the educational path, and is gaining more and more accountability for their decisions (Jongbloed, 2003), and thus introducing new dimensions to the relationship that exists between the HEIs and students (Ramachandran, 2010).

When defining students' satisfaction, Beerli Palacio, Diaz Meneses and Perez Perez (2002) offer a valuable insight as they define satisfaction as the affective response in a time, the moment of the latest registration of the students, resulting from the evaluation of the teaching services and study support offered to the student by the university. That satisfaction is determined by three key factors: prior expectations, ideals associated with a university, variables included in the cognitive component of satisfaction (Carvalho and De Oliviera Mota, 2010). These components are further expanded by Petruzzellis and Romanazzi (2010) who state that the value of a university is a function of the faculty's knowledge and abilities, the faculty's positive interaction among themselves, the faculty's interaction with students, the administration's efficiency, the administration's support of its faculty and students, and public perception of how good a product the university delivers. The lack of interest in students' feedback on their perception and satisfaction with their university experience may lead to the so called student sacrifice (Maceli, Fogliasso and Baack, 2011) that occurs whenever the service provider (HEI) does not, or not completely meet students' expectations, event that is highly likely to occur when students are not invited to

collaborate with the university in the definition process of the service features.
Even though there are specialists that claim that although universities could improve student retention by attempting to increase their level of satisfaction, their efforts will be more effective if focused on demonstrating the strategic importance of the social value (Petruzzellis and Romanazzi, 2010), evaluating students' satisfaction can create the premise of genuine students' involvement and empowerment related to their decision making regarding their educational path. But, on their educational journey, very rarely do the perception and satisfaction level stay constant, and this demonstrates the need for a satisfaction perspective in time which has seldom been approached in previous research related to students' satisfaction (Hussain and Bhamani, 2012). As O'Neill (2003) argued, students' perceptions may not be stable over time and educators should be interested in tracking students' perceptions throughout the learning experience. Within this framework, educational managers should grant special importance to two requisite issues: the increasing need of gathering information on students' expectations before and during the educational experience (Katiliute, 2011) as well as the increasing need for managing these changing expectations throughout the educational experience so that the educational product could be better positioned to meet these changing expectations (O'Neill, 2003). Therefore, the time variable and how it affects the students' satisfaction evolution is the main focus of the research project, along with determining the comprehensive steps needed for adapting the educational services to students' needs.

Research methodology

Based on previous research projects evaluating students' perceptions and satisfaction, a quantitative research was developed and conducted within the student community in the Bucharest University of Economic Studies. The results were collected through an online survey tackling with a wide range of aspects that build the student-university relationship: from interaction with the teaching staff to the elements of students' social life (campuses, social events in the university and other facilities). This research was conducted in two different years: January-February 2013 and January-February 2014 using roughly the same collecting questionnaire. The 2013 study was conducted on a 743 students sample, while the 2014 study on a 710 students sample, both of them gathering results from students from both bachelor and master programmes, from different study years. Data collected in both researches was statistically interpreted and analysed.

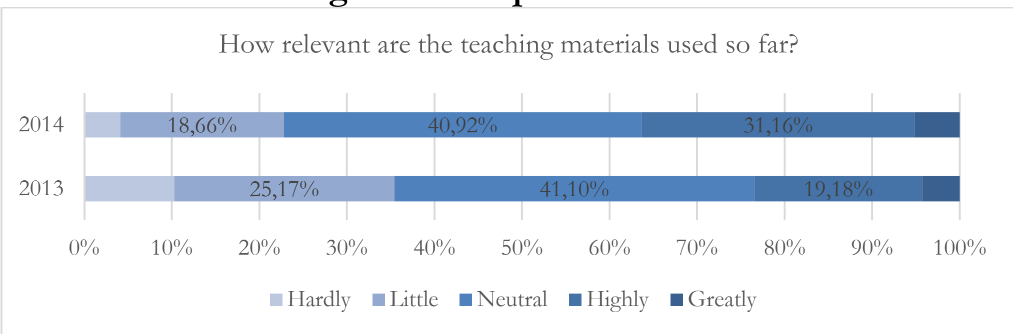
Results on students' satisfaction evolution in time

As the central aim of HEIs relate to developing knowledge and educate students for society, the first and most important part of the student-university relationship is the student-teacher interaction as primary source of knowledge development. Thus, using a 5-point Likert scale, the current research evaluated the extent to which respondents considered the teaching staff they have interacted with so far as good professionals. Computing these results a 3.82 mean was determined within the 2013 sample (1.001 standard deviation), while the 2014 sample reached a 3.85 mean (.921 standard deviation). These results argue that the teaching staff within the Bucharest University of Economic Studies are mostly considered as good professionals in their relationship with the students they interact with. The evolution of this indicator in time is rather insignificant with small impact on students' overall satisfaction.

Another factor that contributes to building powerful student-university relationship in terms of academic interaction refers to the use of relevant and up-to-date learning materials in delivering courses. Using also a 5-point Likert scale the teaching materials perceived relevance was evaluated. Figure 1 displays the comparative results gathered within the 2013 sample and the 2014 sample. As it can be observed the 2014 sample expressed a more positive perception regarding the materials used as 36.3% of the respondents thought the materials to be highly or greatly relevant, while only 23.46% of the 2013 respondents conveyed such perceptions. Two underling determinants can be considered as the drivers to this change: firstly, starting 2014, the teaching staff evaluation by the students is done across the entire professor body in the university and a great emphasis of this evaluation is put on their ability to ensure access to learning materials; secondly, an online platform was launched for easing the transfer from teachers to students in terms of materials and courses.

Figure 1

Learning materials perceived relevance

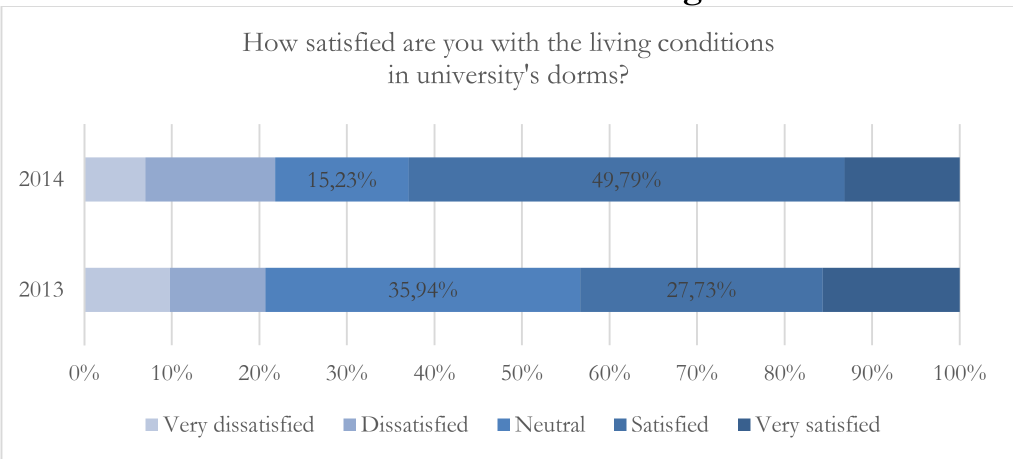


Source: Data analysis using SPSS

Since university life expands beyond teaching-learning activities, evaluating students' perceptions on the social facilities within the university can shed a light on their university interaction in terms of social life. In this respect, the satisfaction related to the living conditions inside university's dorm was evaluated and graphically represented as it can be observed in Figure 2. Comparing the results from the 2014 sample with those from the 2013 sample, a major difference can be found in the sense of major improvement: if in 2013 43.36% of the respondents were satisfied or very satisfied with the living conditions, in 2014 this share of respondents rises up to 62.96%. Evaluating the changes that occurred in this area, it can be concluded that one possible cause could be the decreasing student pressure on accessing these accommodation facilities leading those who do request such facilities to live in better conditions (the likelihood of entering a higher comfort dorm is significantly bigger).

Figure 2

Satisfaction relative to dorms living conditions

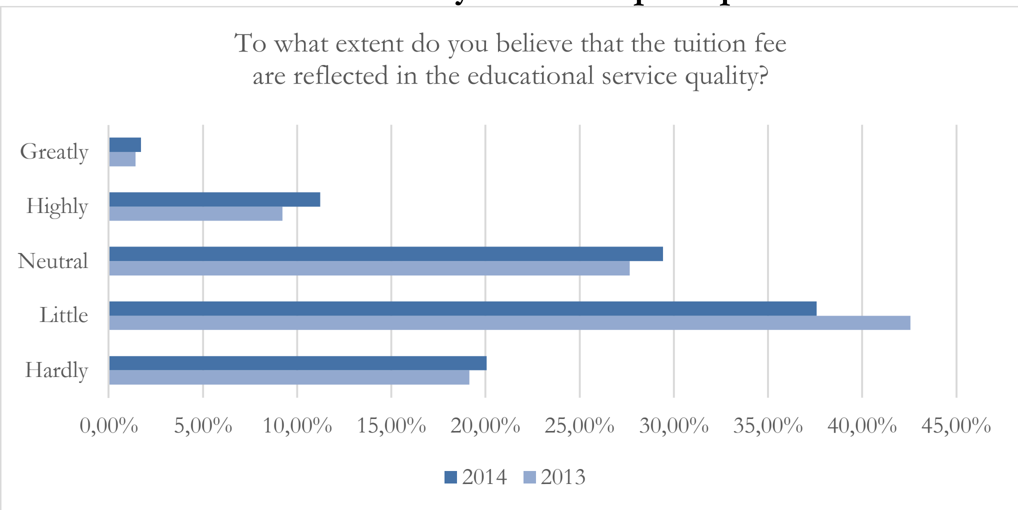


Source: Data analysis using SPSS

The university-student interaction consists also of making available a wide range of opportunities to create and contribute to the professional and personal development of students. Given the university focus on Economics, bringing companies into university so as to gain direct contact between them and students is a major part of the harmonious development of students. In order to evaluate this experience component, a 5-point Likert scale was used to test the respondents' perception on their enhanced access to professional and personal development events in their university. Within the 2013 sample, a 3.92 mean was computed while within the 2014 sample a 3.87 mean was determined. For the slight decrease in students' perception, even though not significant, accountable might be the difference between a major anniversary academic year and other types of academic years: 2013 was the year of celebration of one century since the establishment of the university and, therefore, the range, number and diversity of events organised on this occasion was consistently higher than in 2014. The 2013 events were also aimed at enhancing interactions with the private sector through workshops, conferences, seminars and job fairs dedicated to university students.

Figure 3

Value-for-money students' perceptions

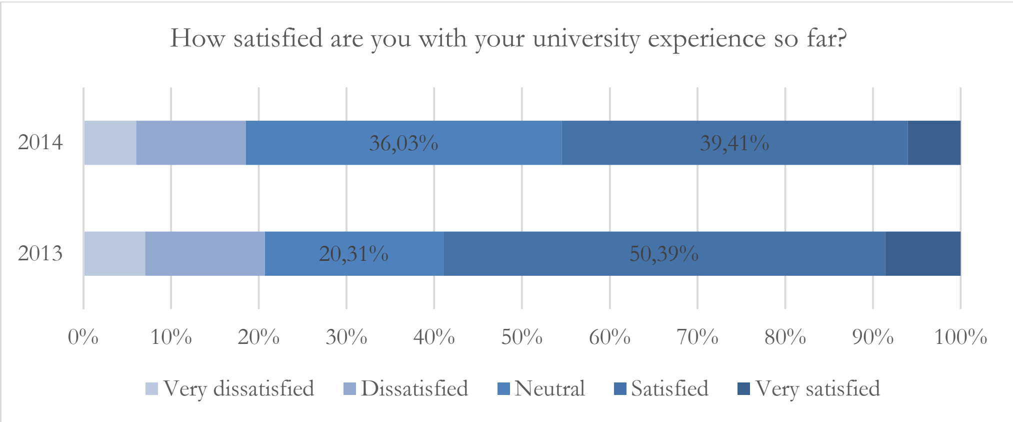


Source: Data analysis using SPSS

Since evaluating results is tightly connected to evaluating efforts regardless of the context, also within the university evaluating students perception on value-for-money proves important to policy makers. Therefore, respondents from both samples were asked to evaluate to what extent they perceive that the level of tuition fee is motivated by the level of educational service quality. Evaluating the visual representation in Figure 3, a slight improved perception can be observed in 2014 sample compared to that in 2013: if in 2013 there were 61.70% of the respondents that believed that the tuition fee is hardly or little justified by the educational service quality, in 2014 this share of respondents was only 57.65%. This small improvement might be determined by the 20% decrease in tuition fee for master students, but is far from reaching an adequate equilibrium for students' perceptions related to university fees.

Figure 4

Students' overall satisfaction



Source: Data analysis using SPSS

For completing the evaluation of students' perception on their interaction with their university, an overall satisfaction question was included. The results gather this way show that while 58.89% of the 2013 respondents stated that they were satisfied of very satisfied with their experience within the university, this share of respondents drops to 45.44% among the 2014 respondents. This significant decrease – from an indisputable majority to less than half of the respondents – does not seem to have an underlying major cause with such a big impact on the university-student interaction. Still, it is likely that a set of a few unsolved issues that worsened between the moment of first research to the second one created such a major change. Both researches gathered information on what should the university improve and chances are that precisely this improvement opportunities to lay on the basis of the major overall shift between 2013 and 2014. Some of this components relate to: unwelcoming and cold lecture rooms, administrative staff lack of communication skill, failure in connecting the curricula to the current labour market or shortage of passionate and inspiring professors.

Practical implications

The data gathered and analysed through this research project shows that students of the Bucharest University of Economic Studies are far from being completely satisfied with their relationship with their university and this calls for developing strategies and actions to improve different aspects within the university. Firstly, the investment in the human capital should be constant as means to permanently improve teachers-student interactions, along with generating a constant renewing strategy for the teaching-learning materials so as to improve their novelty and relevance according to the current market needs. Secondly, social facilities investment is crucial for ensuring the proper comfort level for students as a premise of a 360^{o} development of students. This investment might be directed toward enhancing buildings, but also toward expanding access of students to social facilities. Thirdly, students point to the issue of access to professional and personal development events in their university, an issue that, even though is secondary to the policy makers as students' unions develop a wide range of such events, should not be dismissed but tackled with openness and support granted to third parties that develop such projects. Lastly, students' perception that they pay more than they receive in their relationship with the university is a serious matter that can be dealt with through increased transparency in setting the tuition fees level. All these recommendations should be the focus of strategic and tactical plans developed by policy makers for a successful HEI management.

Conclusion

The current paper offered an insight into how students' perceptions and satisfaction evolve in time by comparing the results of two research projects conducted in two subsequent years: 2013 and 2014. The results gathered this way proved a decrease in students overall satisfaction with small variations related to other components that build the university-student relationship (teaching staff, learning materials, social facilities, personal and development opportunities or perceptions on tuition fees). Limits of this research are determined by the limited perspective with a focus on only one university, but also by the differences in terms of respondents included in the sample: for a more suitable longitudinal study, a perfect match between the respondents in the two samples would offer a better perspective on satisfaction evolution in time. Additionally, another limit for this research refers to the human nature: just by asking questions about satisfaction and perception, these components enter an inner analysis process that actually distorts the reality and, therefore, the collected results. Future research projects could tackle with this issues by broadening the perspective outside one university, but also gathering data from improved students samples approached in major moments throughout their interaction with the university.

Acknowledgement

This work was co-financed from the European Social Fund through Sectoral Operational Programme Human Resources Development 2007-2013, project number POSDRU/159/1.5/S/134197 'Performance and excellence in doctoral and postdoctoral research in Romanian economics science domain'.

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