"BABEŞ-BOLYAI" UNIVERSITY

FACULTY OF ECONOMICS AND BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION

DEPARTMENT OF MANAGEMENT

PhD THESIS

SUMMARY

STUDY ON ACADEMIC MANAGEMENT IMPROVEMENT

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Introduction

Higher education is a topic that has been given a lot of attention, due to the importance it has in the present context. Many approaches can be taken into consideration for this topic, as it is related, nationally and globally, to the social, economic, cultural and political environment. From this point of view, academic management is a place of challenges and perpetual requirements for improvement.

The purpose of this research is to offer a new perspective on academic management and on its ways to improve. In order to achieve this purpose, we attempted to offer a personal perspective on the way the question of higher education can be approached. Therefore, we focused largely on aspects that had been less taken into account by the specialists in this field, aspects that are valuable to be taken into consideration in our opinion.

Outlining and motivating the research field

Academic management is a vast field that can be analyzed from at least three different viewpoints: the institutional one, the teaching – learning activities one and the research activities one. We have chosen for this research to show more interest to teaching – learning activities and everything that is related to them. Still, referring to this kind of activities cannot be done in a scarce manner, which continuously led us to refer to the other viewpoints during our research.

The importance of academic management is related, in our opinion, to the role university plays in nowadays society. In this way, the interest of this research was guided, firstly, towards university as an institution, towards its place in the contemporary society and towards the role university has in this network. In our opinion, today's university posits itself as the most important knowledge resource and the most important means to disseminate it. Consequently, the mission, functions and the responsibilities towards society make the framework to start with in this research. Besides being the most credible knowledge keeper and having good mechanisms to

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transmit it throughout different channels, university is relevant from a social perspective, too. At the moment, this institution is being a landmark in human intelligence, ability, creativity and spirituality, which shapes the society in a certain direction. On the other hand, university can be seen as an engine that generates the power to go on and equally gives the direction, nationally and globally.

More than being a feature of the ultra-modern or post-modern reality we are living in, university is, in our opinion, a hallmark of this society. Having been sprung out together approximately one thousand years ago, Church and University as institutions shared the same path in history for a while. If we are to consider that a few hundred of years ago, Church was organizing and shaping the entire existence of the society of that time, we can figure out the importance this institution had. The same way today, University as an institution is shaping society. It is in this light that we focus on the tremendous role that university has upon other institutions.

Another aspect that is to be mentioned in outlining the research field refers to academic management understood from a multidisciplinary perspective. Taking as a premise that management is an "applied philosophy" whose results "often take the form of economic expressions" (Abrudan, 2011: 5), we opine that a transdisciplinary or a multidiscipinary approach is necessary to improve the academic management. Besides the controversy of the semantics of the words *multidiscipinarity*, *transdisciplinarity* or *interdisciplinarity*, considering the needs and demands of the present society characterized by the tendency towards globalization and massive technology, it is obvious that the challenges undergone by academic management are even greater. To our view, the transdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approach in managing the academic aspects can bring about optimized solutions.

In a world where information is almost instantly transmitted and easily widespread to any part of the globe, complexity becomes more and more a feature of the post-industrial era. Management in general and academic management in particular must seize on all the theoretical, philosophical and pragmatic dimensions that can be beneficial. Therefore, in the present work we have pointed out the opportunity for the academic management to focus its approaches through multidisciplinary, transdisciplinary and interdisciplinary lenses.

We equally believe that academic management should be perceived closely related to the idea of quality. In order to respond to the requirements and challenges permanently coming from society, it is imperative for university to benchmark quality standards and to comply with them. As it comes out from the literature review, quality in higher education, as a concept and as a practice, displays a wide range of meanings and approaches. Quality is seen as excellence or as a way to get close to the idea of superlative. In the same time, quality is a source of competitiveness between higher education institutions, as a competitive advantage, the "ace" in the "battle" on the educational market. From this point of view, quality is closely related to the current problems of the higher education environment, such as transformations imposed by technology, massification and marketization, the fact that education is perceived as a commodity and student as a customer, etc.

Moreover, we consider it is necessary to focus on the most important activity of the university, which is offering educational services to students and, implicitly, to focus on student – university relation and on the way student is perceived within this relation. Referring to this aspect, student satisfaction with educational services and the quality of the educational process are very important.

It is our intention to underline that one of the aims of this research is to tackle the concept of academic management from both a positivistic and a phenomenological paradigm. While many authors try to articulate this issue from a disciplinary perspective, strictly using the instruments and the theories of one discipline, our research attempts to undertake multiple approaches, pertaining to both epistemological paradigms.

From this point of view, our research seeks to highlight that a transdisciplinary or multidisciplinary approach in academic management and educational services in universities (mostly teaching and learning activities) should be beneficial. This asks for knowledge of so many aspects that have an influence upon academic management. Above and beyond the traditional explanations, belonging to fields such as economy, history, political sciences, psychology or sociology, we believe that other sciences and fields are to be found in understanding and improving academic management, such as physics, fractals, chaos and complexity or metaphors. It is in this manner that we understand the eclectic nature of

management as a science and, particularly, the one of academic management. Consequently, academic management can be more coherently and holistically analyzed through transdisciplinarity and multidisciplinarity.

Current development of the field

The research we have conducted shows that adjustment, adaptation and, in some cases, even the changing of the classic methods of the academic management are needed. Seen as a set of norms and practices meant to enhance the academic activity, academic management is subject to difficulties. The most problematic aspects of academic management consist in its very core activities, which are the teaching and learning activities, or, in other words, working with people. Definitely, there are some other fields where working with people is the fundamental activity, still, in the academic environment, this kind of activity acquires new meanings.

Thus, we wanted this research to point out those aspects that are specific to academic management, starting with the premise that the fundamentals of higher education institutions is the encounter with the student, which cannot be personalized. In our viewpoint, the emphasis is on the interaction with the student and on the activities that involve him or her, from now on called *educational services*.

Our research of the scholarly literature finds out that *educational services* is not a largely spread concept and that it is insufficiently defined. We have also reached to the conclusion that educational services do not receive enough attention, in the sense that, even if they belong to the field of academic management, they are most of the times analyzed from a marketing perspective. The taxonomy of the educational services should also be improved. Therefore, we urge that academic management should be paid more attention from this angle.

We have also noticed that the expression *educational services* is quite equivocal, as it provides more meanings. Consequently, we claim that this expression and the concept itself need to be clarified. This should be done at the same time with the clarification of the *student as a client* approach, which is actually the very basis of the concept of *educational services* and educational market.

In this respect, the scholarly literature abounds with perspectives and dimensions given to the *student as a client* metaphor, which has reshaped the concepts of educational marketing and educational services in the last decades. In this light, the most frequent question about the student's status becomes: *Is the student a client?* A concise and clear answer to this question is not possible, therefore the question needs to be restated. The question in this case is: *To what extent should the student still be considered a client of the university?*

By simply stating this question, we admit that the student is a partner of the university, but a very special one as compared to other types of clients. This research emphasizes the features of the student as a client/pseudo client of the higher education institution, as these features represent an important part for the academic management, both at strategic and operational level.

Considering all these, we can affirm that the research is a viewpoint about the approaching, understanding and implementing academic management. This viewpoint is made up of more epistemological perspectives and multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches. We also admit that this is not an exhaustive interpretation either at a conceptual level, or at a pragmatic level, which requires improvements.

Literature review

This research contains six chapters, four of which refer to the scholarly literature, the fifth one is dedicated to the empirical research, more exactly to the way some of the Romanian students perceive and assess the quality of the educational services offered in universities, while the last chapter refers to conclusions and personal contributions.

The first chapter, entitled *The role of the university in society and its influence on academic management*, presents the evolution of the university as an institution and the models that have shaped the actual format of the university, and offers an image of the academic environment today. Starting out from the idea that university is one of the most important and longevous in the European area, this chapter describes the path from the beginnings of the university to its current form.

Furthermore, university is investigated under its relation with society, by highlighting the common features that make them adaptive open systems. We were equally interested in describing the mission, functions and roles of the university within society. The challenges and continuous transformations of the academic environment and the complexity of its attributes have been emphasized. As for the relation with society, we consider it suitable to identify the common values of universities and corporations, which is beneficial for the taking on of corporative organizational models.

In the same chapter, we investigated university as an organization. As it has both features of a social and economic organization, university is difficult to be analyzed. Even though, we pointed out the similar functional and organizational aspects between a university and an organization. This led us to approach university from the academic capitalism perspective.

The second chapter, entitled *Academic management today and its perspectives*, gives a disciplinary description to the concept of academic management. It points out the most important academic management models and their functions in the higher education institution. At the same time, this chapter emphasizes some trends in approaching academic management, both from a positivistic and interpretivist paradigm, through interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary lenses. Complexity, chaos, fractality and metaphors are some of the approaches taken into consideration. Within this chapter we analyzed time and space management in universities, in order to trace out some good practices in the scholarly literature.

The third chapter, *Approaches to quality management in universities through the complexity of the quality concept*, presents the many acceptations of quality in the educational environment. We pointed out the difficulty of defining quality in a rigorous and unique manner, as the concept of quality is present in every aspect of human life nowadays. Quality has been dichotomously analyzed, from two epistemological angles. The meanings of quality in the rationalist-modernist model are a *de facto* representation of the way quality is perceived today, while the meanings in the post-modern model are a representation of possible improvements to the current paradigm of quality.

We have offered some definitions and dimensions of quality in higher education institutions using an intradisciplinary perspective. Quality planning, control, assurance and improvement in universities have been tackled in this chapter. A case study regarding quality assurance in some Romanian universities is a part of this chapter. The organizational structure of the quality management system and some policies and quality assurance procedures have also been presented.

The fourth chapter, entitled *Views on student offered educational services improvement*, gives a personal perspective about the meaning of educational services and the way they can be improved. Therefore, we have defined, analyzed and categorized the educational services concept. We have also had a look on the transformation the student *status* has undergone in time and the way he is perceived as a client in the new paradigm. Some external factors that influence the perception of service quality in universities have been taken into account.

The fifth chapter, entitled *Empiric research on educational service quality in universities*, represents the empiric study we have accomplished in this research. It describes the research methodology, states the research problem, objectives and methods, the methodological and practical limitations, the analysis and interpretation of the results.

The sixth chapter, entitled *Conclusions and personal contributions*, is a synthesis of the most important aspects that had been considered in this research. This part emphasizes the author's theoretical and practical contribution.

Empirical research

This research is an applicative research, in the sense that, by using the results obtained through theoretical and empirical ways, it offers a set of measures to improve academic management. The design of this research outlines two stages that have the same main objective and different specific objectives, therefore, the research methodology is different for each stage.

Taking for granted that quantitative methods are not enough to give a complete image about the quality in universities, we have chosen to implement other methods. In order to achieve our

objectives, we have made use of concerted qualitative and quantitative methods to assess the quality of the educational services offered in universities.

The first stage of our empirical research consists in a one university quantitative/qualitative analysis based on a semi-structured questionnaire followed by a interview. The second stage of the empirical research consists in a quantitative study based on a structured questionnaire applied in more universities. In this empirical research we have also used triangulation as a way to validate the obtained results.

The main objective of this empirical research is to elaborate an analysis model about academic management that is to be used with the purpose of improving educational services in more universities from Cluj-Napoca. As for the specific objectives, they are the following:

> • *to develop strategies and policies regarding educational services;*

> • *to identify good practices about university educational services from students perspective;*

> • *to identify ways to improve the quality of educational services from students perspective;*

> • *to identify some external factors that influence students assessment of educational services in universities;*

> • *to establish the level of importance for some aspects from students perspective.*

Final conclusions and personal contributions

The first aspect that has come out after having analyzed the scholarly literature refers to the place and role of the university in society. The higher education institutions still have a privileged status in society, by having a permanent dialogue with society and constantly responding to its needs.

> • *Higher education institution has a unique status in society, by creating values and trends of opinion. Its role in shaping society and individuals is very important, by disseminating its own values, such as freethinking and creativity, ethics and morality,*

the most recent discoveries and knowledge, and its mission should include these aspects.

In this respect, academic management is responsible for the preservation of this privileged space, through continuous adaptation to the stakeholders' requirements. Therefore, university is not just an institution that borrows a managerial model from the economic environment, but it is an institution capable of adapting and recreating this model, in close relation with the functions it has in society.

> • *In order to assure the good functioning of the institution, academic management is obliged to adapt the scientific management principles and methods at macro, meso and micro level. This is to be done taking into account a large range of aspects pertaining to the educational environment an educational market, in the context of globalization and advanced technology.*

We count it is important to show that in a more and more dynamic and complex context, university needs policies, methods and practices that approach in a holistic manner the question of redefining academic management. Consequently, it was our interest to point out some possible approaches that overpass the strict intradisciplinary frame of academic management and we stressed the importance of multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary approach for such a matter. Related to this issue, in order to ensure a better link with society and to better respond to its requirements, literature analysis reveals the idea that and transdisciplinarity should be a priority of academic management and that it should also be included on a curricular level.

> • *Taken as an applied philosophical thinking, academic management can be improved by incorporating transdisciplinary approaches in its policies, practices and methods. Also, the answer on current issues could be more relevant by adopting transdisciplinarity in different forms, including in the curriculum.*

Further, the paper reveals that the way in which the university relates to the notion of quality is essential for rewriting academic management. In an attempt to highlight the multiplicity of meanings and approaches to quality in academic environment, by several paradigms, we have shown the need for a reconsideration of some fundamental concepts for academic management,

such as the educational market, the educational services or the student's customer role within university. Assuming that educational services should not be approached in terms of their marketing, but through the processes that they imply, and that student is not a customer of the university but its partner in the teaching – learning processes, this paper highlights the benefits of such an approach.

> • *The student's customer status and the frequent address of educational services through marketing make the university task difficult. The return to an approach that should be closer to the truth, where the student is directly involved and responsible in teaching - learning activities is more useful for both sides. Thus, academic management should strive for student awareness in this respect.*

All these considerations have led us to focus our attention, in the *empirical part* of the study, on how students relate to educational services and how they appreciate the quality of educational services. Following this approach, from students' perspective, an overview resulted that revealed the defective and the satisfying aspects of educational services, and certain measures to improve the framework of education.

In addition, empirical research revealed that student satisfaction assessment models to educational services require numerous improvements. It was also noted that there are many external factors (educational age, type of study, cultural factors) that influence the assessment of educational services, which leads to the distortion of the truth about the actual level of service quality. The conclusions derived from empirical research can be summarized as follows:

> • *External factors such as educational age, type of study, or cultural factors influence the assessment of the quality of educational services. This has a twofold relevance for academic management, a theoretical one, which involves the identification of a model for quality assessment that should include corrective factors, so as to eliminate distortions, and a practical one, which involves improving the quality of educational services.*

• Issues related to educational services pertaining to the teaching - learning dimension are more important from students' perspective than the issues referring to material comforts.

• Issues related to educational services pertaining to the time and flexibility dimension are more important from students' perspective than the issues referring to material comforts.

Reflecting on the last two conclusions, in an attempt to give them a meaning beyond the values that each of the dimensions considered has obtained, we can say that the truth behind them is much deeper. Essentially, what students say by the first statement is that *teacher involvement*, with all implications on this, their teaching skills, teaching interactivity, their contribution to the assessment of students, is more important than the use of materials in teaching – learning activities. When asked if there still is room for the teacher in front of what follows by the adoption and use of a more and more advanced technology in higher education, the students' answer is certainly yes. This proved to be even more evident from the qualitative study, where we found that students want more communication with teachers in terms of "human" relations. Therefore, this finding makes us think of a number of other questions concerning teacher quality, namely, what is the intellectual profile, especially the moral and human profile, the quality of the person that we put in front of students. The default choice made by students between man and technology shows that at this point of evolution, man cannot be replaced by any machine, especially in education, which is an idea we have advocated for in previous chapters.

The other conclusion shows us a further issue, at least as interesting. The prevalence of the importance of the dimension that takes to *time and flexibility* in relation to the dimension that takes to material facilities, indicates again, beyond the ranking of figures, the ranking of human priorities. Students consider the time element and everything related to its best use as more important than the material facilities themselves. On the one hand, we see that the focus is not therefore on the material facilities themselves, but on using them to manage time as efficiently as possible. Material facilities are perceived as a tool, not as an end in themselves, an idea that is similar to the one mentioned above. On the other hand, we note that in an age in which speed

is an unnamed but default issue, in most services and where information spreads instantly, the role of the university proves to be extremely difficult. Therefore, these issues lead us to conclude that academic management should reconsider the priorities of the university and student priorities at present, to include them in university policies and strategies.

Last but not least, our empirical research identifies certain measures the implementation of which would improve educational services according to students. Among them, some seem to be axiological for what university education means. We recall in this respect that students consider appropriate *a more effective selection for admission to university*, reflected in the entrance exam, *the existence in each faculty of a specialized person or center to guide student career paths, also depending on the profile and the specific of the faculty,* or finding solutions to ensure *feedback from students after the implementation of measures*.

Having a theoretical and practical feature, this paper brings a series of results that could be used on several levels:

- on the *theoretical / conceptual level*, by providing participants in the process of improvement of academic management, a theoretical perspective on the concepts and notions covered and on some information related to these concepts and notions;

- on the *practical level*, by providing tools to the participants in the process of academic management improvement and the possibility to apply the results of this study.

Regarding our *personal contributions in theory*, we mention that they refer both to a wider improvement of academic management, as well as to a more limited area, concerning the improvement of educational services provided to students. These contributions include:

- analyzing the concept of academic management by several epistemological paradigms and trans-disciplinary approach;

- selecting a set of practical measures for improving educational activities, summarized from the scholarly literature;

• reconsidering the concept of educational services in a spaced relation to the concept of marketing, defining and clarifying the phrase *educational services*, analyzing the *student-customer* metaphor;

• improving the taxonomy of educational services by proposing classification criteria and by making their classifications;

Applied personal contributions are reflected through a series of analyses of educational services offered to students by means of a university and of a group of universities in Cluj-Napoca, consisting of:

• making a model to highlight the deficient aspects regarding educational services provided to students in a university / several universities and to identify measures to improve these aspects;

• identifying measures to improve educational services in a faculty and in several universities, in relation to students;

• making a model to perform a scan of educational services in a university / several universities and to measure the opportunity of implementing certain measures;

• highlighting the influence of some external factors in the students' assessment of the quality of educational services;

• proposals for action in terms of improving the teaching – learning activities;

• proposals in terms of improving other aspects related to educational services in general.

Considering the fact that this paper has addressed academic management and the improvement of educational services, both by a positivist and interpretivist perspective, using quantitative and qualitative methods of data measurement and result interpretation, we consider it necessary to highlight the extent to which the work meets certain criteria to be validated as a scientific paper, i.e. reliability, validity and transferability.

With reference to the reliability (internal validity), the paper has clear objectives, reached by addressing the appropriate methodology, by reporting on a consistent and comprehensive *corpus* of trade literature, by appropriate methods of collection and analysis of data, by drawing conclusions based on resulted data.

Regarding the validity of the work, we believe that this study accurately reflects the concepts and objectives that we have set and the research design is able to answer the questions that the paper raises.

In our opinion, the paper transferability (external validity) is validated by the fact that although this study was conducted on a small number of universities, some of the results of this research can be generalized and applied to other contexts or situations (universities in this case), to the extent that this part of the aspects investigated concerned the general framework of learning in the Romania universities.

We conclude, thinking about the prospects of this research, that academic management has, in essence, two major imperatives. One refers to the obligation to keep alive the relationship with the student, the other one, to keep alive the relationship with society. Both imperatives, however, should not lose sight of the most important mission of the university, which is to transmit knowledge, to create awareness and values, to maintain the human spirit to the highest of its degrees.

Methodological and practical limitations

Although our research is primarily based on quantitative measurements, we believe that it involves a certain degree of subjectivity inherent in any sociological surveys based on questionnaires.

With regard to *methodological limitations*, they can be placed mainly on the tool and on its inability to evaluate all educational services provided to students in universities. At the same time, the tool used in this research does not take into account the different access level of services to students.

Also, since university educational services are not similarly offered in every university, the working tool did not aim to consider their possible standardization.

With regard to *practical limitations*, we can say that they primarily aimed the investigated population. These limitations primarily relate to the practical impossibility of questioning all co-participant students in the teaching – learning processes.

In order to obtain an array as close to the reality of educational services provided by universities, a larger volume of the sample would be required, which would increase result accuracy.

Therefore, both the working tool and the methodology are improvable, by including new variables in question and by its adaptation to the specificity of universities or faculties concerned.

Research recommendations and perspectives

In practical terms, we believe that the present research can be improved for the purposes of standardization of an instrument to measure the opinion of students with regard to educational services they receive in universities. In this sense, the intervention of sociology for improving methods of measuring student perceptions and expectations is welcome.

In conceptual terms, we also believe that the paper can be improved. In the context of ongoing changes in the educational environment, we believe that academic management will always be under pressure to come from the inside and outside of the university. In our opinion, both in the near and in the distant future, the university will be a fighter on the same battlefield. The need for financing and being competitive on the educational market, unfortunately, will be at least equal to the current one, if not more intense. On the other hand, in the same context, the university will have to keep its status of an elitist area, of a respected institution in society that should have a strong word to say in the choices that a state or a nation has to make.

We, therefore, consider as imperative to maintain this elite level conjugated with a most real insertion of the university in as many aspects of society, together with the establishment of internal quality standards that university should achieve and maintain. From the same perspective, we believe that in the future there will be a greater need for the involvement of academic management to make students aware of their status as co-participants in the educational process.

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