

**BABEȘ - BOLYAI UNIVERSITY**  
**FACULTY OF ECONOMICS AND BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION**

**SUMMARY**  
**PhD THESIS**

**STUDY REGARDING QUALITY MANAGEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION**  
**INSTITUTIONS**

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## **SUMMARY PhD THESIS**

**Key - words : total quality management, quality assessment, key performance indicators, EFQM model, total quality management tools, multivariate analysis.**

### **1. Research motivation and importance**

The motivation for this subject is given by the remarkable changes, that the educational system in Romania experienced, namely from the focus given to policies regarding the organization and administration of the university sector to policies implying the importance of customers, namely students and graduates for the development of this sector and of the whole society. The idea of customer focus as a component of the New Public Management develops also the idea of a student-centered university.

The impact of the economic downturn in Europe produced several lessons for the higher education institutions. The most important learning is that the students are the driving force in demanding changes regarding their educational needs. Actually, the transformation of the student into a customer implies the idea that students are important in order to succeed in a competitive higher education marketplace. Facing on the one hand an increasing demand for higher education services and on the other hand an increasing number of study programs, the higher education institutions developed a complex mechanism in order to compete and to be attractive for students. Under the New Public Management principles, students are referred to as customers or clients and quality assurance and accountability measures have been put in place to ensure that universities meet the clients' needs and expectations (EUA Report, 2007).

In our understanding the customer of the higher education institution is the student and in this article we will focus on the orientation of universities towards the student. According to the Quality Procedures in European Higher Education the students are the most involved stakeholders, followed by employers and public authorities (ENQA Report, 2012) and in the same time the most important beneficiaries of institutional and program-

oriented quality assurance process. The idea of the collaboration between universities and students, perceived as customer/ as stakeholders has been recorded in a survey made by the ENQA in 19 European countries and provides two innovative cases: the promotion of students' involvement as a global strategy for external QA and quality enhancement in higher education and the creation of an Advisory Committee in an agency composed by students.

Likewise major business enterprises, universities may want to consider strengthening their customer-oriented approach in interaction with students. Nowadays, institutions rely on increasingly large numbers of students to balance their expenditure and due to the increased financial demands, there are also dramatic rise in the cost of attending university. From this point of view, the Berlin Communiqué (2003) says that higher education institutions should promote appropriate study and living conditions for students to successfully complete their studies within an appropriate time period, without obstacles related to their socioeconomic background (Higher Education Institutions and students, Para. 5).

After 1990's, the higher education institutions have become a complex system based on the importance of human resource, on the development and improvement of quality in academic sector, and not necessarily based only on the focus on governmental actions (legislation). Among the identified prerequisites from this point of view are: the transformation pressures placed upon the European education, the development of Romanian higher education after the 1989 Revolution, the development of student organizations in the last two decades and their role to achieve other competences than the students enrolled in traditional higher education institutions.

Actually, the higher education system in Romania experienced significant changes after 1990's. There is a major change regarding the number of universities from 56 universities (with 186 faculties) in 1990 to 107 universities (with 629 faculties) in 2010. After 1990's the Romanian students had the opportunity to study also in private universities, as alternative to public higher education institutions and it is remarkable that in 2009 45 %

of the Romania students, studied in private universities. In the same time, the number of students was relatively constant in the period 1971 -1989 (approximately 200.000 students), but between 1990 -2010 the number of students increased 5 times (approximately 1 million). Significant increases have been registered for the economic and law studies and the technical education had a decreased number of students. With the increasing number of students increased also the number of higher education teachers, but with a much lower rate. Also, the infrastructure of higher education institutions has grown, but slower than the number of students (Drăgonescu, 2013).

In general, the customers of higher education institutions, namely the students and graduates are considered the key – actors in order to measure the university performance and to promote the quality of academic services that contribute to social and economic growth of a country. Moreover, the attention given to customers in the higher education sector also requires a demand for quality educational services regarding: teaching, administrative processes, infrastructure and research.

Starting from the above mentioned situation regarding the low level of employability of young graduates, the low graduation rate in higher education institutions and the existing competition in the university sector given by the increasing number of universities and students in both the public and private sector, we aim to develop a total quality management model based on students' and graduates' satisfaction and on the importance of developing specific and transversal skills in order to increase their employability.

Through this paper, we aim as major goal to develop a comprehensive study, which captures both the scientific approach regarding the importance of quality in higher education and the establishment of a reference framework for the development of a quality culture in higher education institutions. There are highlighted from this point of view a number of total quality management models in universities and established the key performance indicators regarding the quality of academic services, regarding teaching and research activities. Equally, it is surprised and determined the importance of

students' and graduates' satisfaction by analyzing the theoretical aspects and the specific models and methods that meet the proposed objectives.

## **2. Research objectives and hypotheses**

Moreover, the motivation for choosing the research theme is doubly justified: on the one hand, by the importance of quality and academic excellence, and on the other hand by the presence of strategic objectives designed to support and promote the continuous improvement of academic processes, namely: service offered to students by the academic organization (eg. library, administrative services) teaching and learning process (related to both education and research).

Starting from the general objectives, the specific objectives of this paper are:

(O1): Identifying the main quality dimensions that are representative for high levels of students' satisfaction;

(O2): Investigating the relationship between students' perceptions about the quality of the academic services in a higher education institution and the year of study;

(O3): Investigating the relationship between students' perceptions about the quality of the academic services in a higher education institution and the level of study;

(O4): Identifying significant factors determining the graduates' satisfaction regarding the quality of graduated study program and regarding the developed specific and transversal competences;

(O5): Identifying the differences between the level of satisfaction regarding the perceived quality of the graduated study program and its' importance;

(O6): Identifying the differences between the level of satisfaction regarding the perceived quality of the developed specific and transversal competences and their importance.

Based on these objectives, the research hypotheses are:

H1: The students' level of satisfaction represented by the perceived quality of academic service varies by year of study (undergraduate);

H2: The students' level of satisfaction represented by the perceived quality of academic service varies by level of study (undergraduate and master's level);

H3: The graduates' level of satisfaction represented by the perceived quality regarding the graduated study program varies by employment status, gender and year of graduation;

H4: The graduates' level of satisfaction represented by the perceived quality regarding the developed specific and transversal competences developed varies by employment status, gender and year of graduation;

H5: There are differences between the graduates' level of satisfaction regarding the perceived quality of the graduated study program and the importance of quality;

H6: There are differences between the graduates' level of satisfaction regarding the developed specific and transversal competences and their importance.

### 3. Thesis chapters presentation

The importance of education for the development of excellence and knowledge contributes directly to social and economic development of a country. Ensuring the development in this direction involves understanding the mechanisms underlying the processes of strengthening academic quality assurance and improvement, and also the existence of a good strategy to achieve performance in this area.

The aim of the research is to identify the main characteristic issues of quality in higher education institutions by highlighting specific key performance indicators. From this point of view, the paper proposes in the first two chapters a literature review in order to determine the current state of national and international research in the field of quality management in higher education. The **first chapter** brings to the fore a series of definitions to the term 'quality' given by the quality founders: Philip B Crosby, Joseph Juran M, W Edwards Deming, Armand V Feigenbaum and Ishikawa Kaoru.

According to Sallis (2002), the importance of quality is felt when one could experience feelings related to absence of quality. But according to the author one thing is certain: the quality makes the difference between superficiality and excellence. There are thus a number of definitions of the concept of quality, designed to operationalize this notion. Crosby (1979) defines quality as being the compliance with requirements ", while Juran and Grya (1980) admits that quality means,, fitness for use ". Deming (1986) defines quality as having, a predictable degree of uniformity and reliability, low costs and it is adapted to market requirements.

It is remarkable, that unlike the physical goods, the services could be considered ephemeral, only when they are consumed over the course of specific processes. Therefore, in the university sector, the customer becomes an integral part in the provision of services. Parasuraman et al. (1985, cited in Mishra, 2006, p.26) identifies the following dimensions of academic service quality: reliability, responsiveness, competence, access, courtesy, communication, credibility, security, understanding customer and tangibility.

Based on these characteristics Owlia and Aspinwall (1996) developed a model that illustrates the quality of services in the higher education institutions.

As a conclusion to the first chapter, one should mention that each institution of higher education is a dynamic system and must be understood as a total quality management system, which contains: input factors, processes and output factors. The higher education institution is an open system with a number of input factors, which by means of some specific processes turn into output factors. Like any open system, the higher education institution depends on the continuous interaction with the environment. The notion of “system” is abstract and could be defined as an organized unit consisting of a number of interrelated factors and synergetically correlated elements. The sub-system or system components are integrated in system and the system is not the sum of all sub-systems, but a holistic representation of their characteristics. The input factors are the human resources: students, teachers, administrative staff, infrastructure and financial resources. Then, the processes and the educational activities related to specific management dimensions and to curriculum management forms the transformation of the input factors into output factors. The output factors – the product- of higher education institutions - are represented by the graduates; by their success on the labor market, by the scientific research and its’ impact on the economic development (Mishra, 2006).

**Chapter 2** highlights a series of total quality management tools in higher education institutions in order to define key performance indicators in universities. The quality assurance in higher education institutions in Europe is based on the objectives of the Bologna Process and of the Lisbon Strategy. Since 2000, the Bologna Process and the Lisbon Strategy were the driving forces for the educational reforms across Europe. Both refers to the development of an European Higher Education Area and examine the structure of academic programs, the international qualifications, the doctoral programs, the employability degree of the graduates, the international mobility, the relationship with stakeholders and the quality assurance (Froment, 2007 quoted Bollaert et al., 2007:11).

There are a number of methods and models that assess students’ and graduates’ perceptions about the quality of academic services. One of the most common

perspectives in higher education relates to client orientation (Douglas et al, 2006, Petruzzelis et al., 2006, Duque and Weeks, 2010). This approach focuses on treating the student as the primary customer of the higher education institution using perceived quality and satisfaction as a measure of academic performance. This approach can be controversial if the students are seen as passive recipients of academic service, but the focus on primary customers involves actively the students and the graduates in the educational processes, in the academic and quality assurance processes (Duque and Weeks, 2010).

**Chapter 3** highlights the quality assessment tools in higher education institutions. Harvey (2003, p.3) stated that most universities collect perceptions from students about their experience in higher education institutions. „Feedback” means in this situation the opinion of students regarding the received service. This may include, as the author illustrates, perceptions about learning and teaching, the learning support facilities, the learning environment and external aspects of being a student (such as, for example, transport infrastructure).

In fact, the feedback of students has two main functions (Harvey, 2003):

- Gaining internal information used for guiding improvements;
- Gaining external information for future students and also for other interested parties, integrating requirements regarding responsibility and compliance.

Moreover, specific internal evaluation processes are vital in order to ensure the quality of education and research provided by the higher education institution. Martin Trow (1999 cited in Harvey 2002) stated that the internal evaluation carried out at the institutional level by external evaluators do not provide long term results. In fact, Bente Kristensen noted that there may be a fruitful synergy between the internal and external evaluation, but the external evaluation cannot replace the value of internal evaluation (Harvey, 2002). In the same time, in this chapter were highlighted the research objectives, hypotheses and methodology, by calculating the mean, the standard deviation and the multivariate analysis MANOVA. The research refers to the comparative analysis of the Bachelor and

Master students' satisfaction level about the perceived quality of the program study within the German study line at the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration (Babeş - Bolyai University).

In order to establish a quality management model, **chapter 4** proposes the development of a reference framework, which takes into account the idea that a model based on business process management principles describes the methods that could help an organization to measure performance (Harrington et al ., 1997). It is remarkable, that the second study describes the essential quality dimensions referring to the assessment of graduates' level of satisfaction.

A review of the specialist literature reveals that measuring students' and graduates' satisfaction would help higher education institution to pinpoint their strengths and to identify areas for improvement (O'Neil and Palmer, 2004, Garcia – Aracil, 2008). Using the principles of Total Quality Management – customer satisfaction, continuous improvement and teamwork – (Mangan, 1992, Seymour, 1992 quoted in Hartman and Schmidt, 1995) many universities focus on developing positive educational outcomes on understanding the determinants of graduates' satisfaction. Moreover, one of the most important uses of Total Quality Management theories in education is applying the principle of customer satisfaction to students and graduates as the consumers of the educational services. Actually, viewing the students and the graduates as the consumers of the educational service rather than the products requires a sound understanding of these particular consumers.

Regarding higher education institutions, the performance is a complex subject that involves not only the financial perspective, but also the one referring to the quality of teaching and interaction with stakeholders. By means of MANOVA multivariate analysis, t test for paired samples and multidimensional scaling ALSCAL, the paper reveals the differences between perceived quality of the graduated study program and specific and transversal competences and their importance .

Further, by using business process modeling with ADONIS and ADOscore, the paper illustrates that universities could develop a general framework for the continuous quality management model based on graduates' feedback seen as an output of the educational services, because increased competition in higher education sector determine universities to use the graduates' satisfaction as a quality sign.

**Chapter 5** highlights the conclusions of the thesis by taking into account the beneficial implications of the feedback coming from students and graduates, which become a method used for measuring the performance of academic service.

The performed research analysis, on the one hand, the implementation of the EFQM model and explored the continuous improvement in the educational services. By implementing the model based on RADAR logic, a performance degree of 71,3% for the Bachelor students and 77,7% for the Master students was registered for the criterion "customer results". This result illustrates actually the satisfaction level of the students, regarding the quality at the German study line. There are undoubtedly factors, that lead to an increasing satisfaction level, namely the chances and opportunities to find a job as a graduate of the German specializations and the inclusion of both domestic and foreign teachers in order to provide a successful mix of knowledge and skills. The dimensions scored with 50 % performance degree are related to the information about the German libraries and about the duties, that the students' representative have in the Faculty Council. According to the performance degree, one could say that the organizational culture supports the quality within the educational processes.

On the other hand, the paper presents the importance of assessing graduates' satisfaction, regarding the study program and the specific and transversal competences. By using multivariate analysis, multidimensional scaling and t test for paired samples, one could identify differences between the perceived quality dimensions as delivered performance and the importance of these dimensions for the labor market. Comparing the means belonging to the developed quality dimension points out the idea, that there exist for each dimension differences between the two above mentioned variables, but the gaps are not

always relevant. So, the most relevant differences are met for the following dimensions: specialist support in order to find a job, curricula based on courses/ seminars about career guidance, practical content of the courses/ seminars and specialty practice. This means that for this specific dimension there should be developed improvement measures by taking into account each particular variable and by discussing them at institutional level.

Another aspect to be taken into consideration is the difference between specific and transversal abilities. Specific abilities or competencies are associated inside curricula with certain courses offered, whereas transversal ones are developed throughout the whole program of study without being associated with a certain course. From this point of view, the paired samples t test revealed significant differences regarding the following quality dimensions: effective communication and conducting comparative studies in the business area in German and English, ability to work in teams performing complex and multicultural skills, effective management of work, ability to mobilize others, critical thinking and analytical thinking.

Taking into consideration these differences, we have developed a model for higher education institutions, that focuses on continuous improvement, as a basic condition for Total Quality Management in teaching processes by using the business process management instruments: ADONIS and ADOscore.

In conclusion, the adoption of a quality model is a concern of most organizations, especially higher education institutions, which are complex organizations. Even if universities are autonomous, they have to perform functions and to develop procedures in order to fulfill the expectations of the customers. In order to improve students' and graduates' satisfaction and to remain competitive universities should manage their business process similar to enterprises. One strategy to be taken into consideration is the focus on quality services. In this case, the proposed model takes into consideration the specific and transversal competences that graduates may develop during the study and offers a systematic, procedural and methodical model for quality improvement in higher education institutions.

#### **4. Personal contributions**

The personal contributions of the paper refer, on the hand, to the literature analysis regarding quality management in higher education institutions and to the implementation of a quality management model based on assessing the students' and graduates' level of satisfaction, perceived as key performance indicators. Equally, were illustrated and analyzed the quality management instruments in the European Higher Education Area and also highlighted the studies regarding the importance of quality dimensions in higher education institutions. Then, we identified the instruments for measuring students' and graduates' level of satisfaction regarding the perceived quality of the study program through the theoretical model performance - results - satisfaction (Hartman & Schmidt, 1995).

On the other hand, the paper performs a comparative analysis of Bachelor and Master students' perception regarding the specific dimensions of quality in higher education institutions through multivariate analysis MANOVA. For this first study, the paper defines a conceptual framework to analyze the performance of the university sector by using the EFQM model and the RADAR logic for the dimension „customer results“.

Then, the second study analyzes the graduates' satisfaction level regarding the quality of the study program and regarding the developed specific and transversal competences. Using as analysis methods: multivariate analysis MANOVA, multidimensional scaling and paired samples t test, the paper illustrates the graduates' satisfaction level and highlights the differences between the perceived quality of the graduated study program and of specific and transversal competences and their importance. Finally, we have developed a model of quality management by using ADOscore and ADONIS modeling tools that allows the performance measurement at the institutional level.

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