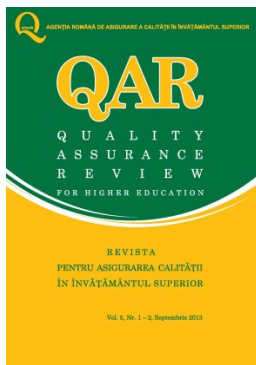




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Demographic Factors in Assessing Quality in Higher Education: Gender Differences Regarding the Satisfaction Level of the Perceived Academic Service Quality

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Rezumat: Acest studiu își propune să prezinte structura demografică a studenților de licență de la linia de studiu în limba germană din cadrul Facultății de Economice și Administrarea Afacerilor, Universitatea Babeș - Bolyai, Cluj-Napoca și în același timp să evidențieze corelația dintre genul studenților și nivelul de satisfacție al acestora. Variabilele demografice sunt esențiale în vederea înțelegerii principalilor factori care pot contribui la îmbunătățirea performanței academice a studenților. Mai mult, studiul oferă prin intermediul unor metode statistice informații relevante cu privire la diferențele dintre studenții de gen masculin și feminin în ceea ce privește nivelul de satisfacție al calității serviciilor percepute. Pe de o parte, structura demografică a studenților are un rol esențial în evidențierea rolului dimensiunilor calității, iar pe de altă parte, lucrarea încearcă să exploreze importanța identificării variabilelor care pot contribui în mod eficient la creșterea performanțelor acestora. Printre variabilele care influențează nivelul de satisfacție al studenților și performanțele acestora sunt: factori referitori la proveniența studenților, factori referitori la nivelul de educație, sau factori externi (Crosnoe, Johnson și Elder, 2004). Calitatea percepută și nivelul de satisfacție sunt corelate, deoarece aduc în prim – plan ideea că evaluarea pozitivă a experienței într-o anumită instituție de învățământ superior este, fără îndoială, asociată cu rezultate mai bune. Procesul de identificare a diferențelor de gen în ceea ce privește calitatea percepută este legată de dezvoltarea unor indicatori de bază și a unor strategii adecvate, care pot contribui la îmbunătățirea continuă a calității la nivel universitar.

Cuvinte cheie: factori demografici, calitatea serviciilor academice, procese educaționale.

Abstract: This study aims to present the demographic structure of the Bachelor students at the German study line within the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, Babeș - Bolyai University, Cluj –Napoca and in the same time highlights the correlation between the gender and the satisfaction level of the respondents. The demographic variables are essential in understanding the main factors that may contribute to the academic performance of the customers. Moreover, the study provides by means of statistical methods relevant information about the differences between male and female students, regarding their satisfaction level of the perceived service quality.

On the one hand, students' demographic structure has an essential role in highlighting the quality dimensions. On the other hand, the paper seeks to explore the importance of identifying the variables that may contribute effectively to students' performance. Among the variables that influence students' quality of academic achievement are also: student factors, family factors, school factors and peer factors (Crosnoe, Johnson and Elder, 2004).

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The perceived quality and the satisfaction level are highly linked, because the positive assessment of the learning experience is undoubtedly associated with better outcomes. The process of identifying the gender differences regarding the perceived quality is related to the idea of developing vital indicators and proper strategies that may contribute to the continuous improvement in the organization, in this case the university.

Keywords: *Demographic factors, service quality, educational processes.*

1. Introduction

Kotler et al (2009) defines customer satisfaction as being the feeling that a person might live as a result of comparing the performance of a product / service in relation to its expectations. In the context of higher education institutions, the student satisfaction is limited to students' expectations that are related to their success in the labor market (Abbasi et al., 2011). The question arising from this statement is if the university provides to the students the necessary facilities to obtain skills, because this aspect is important not only for the success of individual students but also for the success of the overall economy.

The literature illustrates actually from the beginning of the 90's many studies regarding the identification of the factors that determine student satisfaction. For example, Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) cited in Abbasi et al. (2011) explored the relationship between students' learning experiences and their satisfaction. Based on studies conducted by Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) and Umbach and Porter (2002) it can be concluded that the intellectual and personal development of students are key – factors for their satisfaction. Furthermore, these authors found variables such as the contact of the teachers with the students, the focus on research and the proportion of female students as variables with a significant impact on student satisfaction.

The student satisfaction is a significant factor in determining the quality and effectiveness of higher education institutions (Sum and Kyeyune McCaskey, 2010). Basically, the higher the degree of students' satisfaction is, the more the student will recommend a university or a specialization to future students (Sum, and Kyeyune McCaskey, 2010). The student satisfaction and their positive experiences are essential elements of their experience in a higher education institution (Sum, and Kyeyune McCaskey, 2010). Most studies in this direction refer to the intrinsic motivation factors that contribute to the students' performance. But it presupposes that students are more motivated than college pupils (Suhre, Jansen and Harskamp, 2006). From this point of view, students' and graduates' satisfaction is considered to be an important dimension for a higher education institution in order to gain a competitive advantage so that students choose a certain institution. Therefore, the identification of students' requirements allows the higher education institutions to attract proficient students and also to improve the quality of the higher education institution (Elliott and Shin, 2002). From this point of view, it is necessary for educational institutions to identify what is really important and valuable for students.

It is to be noted, that over the past 50 years the great majority of evaluations and questionnaires aimed at assessing satisfaction of students have improved the quality of education and student learning in an essential way (Linn, 2000 cited in Knight 2002, p.107).

Further, the student ratings have been used for many years in order to evaluate teachers' performance in the classroom (Stroge 1997, cited in Greimel – Fuhrmann and Geyer, 2003, p.229). Moreover, in the 1980s the feedback from students regarding their experience in higher education was a rarity (Harvey, 2003, p.3). But given the expansion of the university sector, a significant interest has been registered regarding to customer satisfaction and to the process designed to collect perceptions from students.

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):

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

Universities have experienced lately a number of challenges, namely: adapting new methods of internal quality assessment methods, the need for constant improvement of educational services and the attention to customer requirements in order to obtain performance. All these features are often familiar to marketers (Tsinidou, Gerogiannis and Fitsilis, 2010). The educational services are intangible and difficult to measure, and from this point of view there is no general definition of the concept of quality (Tsinidou, Gerogiannis and Fitsilis, 2010). But in order to measure the quality and the output of the higher education institutions, the quality assessment plays a crucial role. The quality assessment in higher education is based on the idea that in general the quality is the result of a sequence of activities and processes and can be obtained when these activities are successfully fulfilled. Moreover, the methods of quality assessment in higher education often appear in the form of managerial models. In fact, the main problem lies in maintaining the quality assessment and the continuous improvement of teaching, learning, research and the quality of graduates (Mehralizadeh, Pakseresht, Baradaran and Shah, 2007).

There are two types of quality assessment in higher education: the external evaluation and internal evaluation. Most higher education institutions have developed a range of external quality assessment methods, but this type of evaluation is actually based on internal evaluation mechanisms. It is assumed that the external evaluation does not illustrate all the aspects related to students' feedback, situation that might bring value to the university (Harvey, 2002). The quality assessment includes many aspects of higher education, namely teaching, research, teacher performance, students' competencies and abilities, the curriculum's structure and the level of graduates' employability (Harvey, 2002).

In general, the external evaluation covers the following objectives (adapted from Harvey, 2002):

- accreditation of programs;
- institutional audit;
- verification of the achievement of quality standards;
- development of a credits system;
- ensuring customer satisfaction regarding the provided services.

Starting from the last objective, the importance of internal evaluation is outlined. The internal assessment refers to three levels - institutional assessment, program evaluation and evaluation of courses - and includes:

- departments within the higher education institution;
- teachers and researchers;
- student organizations;
- external examiners;
- consultants.

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 conclusion, one can develop the overall objective of this research, namely the investigation of the factors that determine the quality of higher education through an internal assessment from

students' perspective. Therefore, the authors propose to analyze the determinants of quality in higher education and to measure the importance of these factors in order to identify those that contribute directly to student satisfaction and to the differences between male and female students.

2. Research Objectives

This paper aims to present the empirical evaluation research of the Bachelor students' perception about quality at the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, German study line („Babeş - Bolyai“ University). One of our research goals is to actually gain demographical information about the respondents. According to Farooq, Chaudhry, Shafiq and Berhanu, 2011, p.2, the academic staffs go a long way back regarding their interest in establishing which factors are most likely to contribute to enhancing students' performance. These factors could be: student factors, family factors, school factors and peer factors (Crosnoe, Johnson and Elder, 2004). At a glance, one could notice that these factors are included within demography, like: place of origin, marital status, employment status, etc. (Ballatine, 1993). Also, according to Goddard 2003, cited in Farooq, Chaudhry, Shafiq and Berhanu, 2011, p.2, these both environmental and personal factors would affect learners in achieving academic success, mainly because the academic staff, family and community members could therefore provide the appropriate help. In the same time, there have been done some relevant studies that explore the gender differences of graduates regarding the employability skills for entry level employment (Wickramasinghe & Perera, 2010). Actually, Central Lancaster UK found differences between male and female students responses regarding the importance of quality of employment skills. The study made by Wickramasinghe & Perera 2010, regarding the gender differences in employability skills also suggests, that the employability skills may be influenced by gender. Moreover the study highlights, that male and female graduate differ in the extent to which they emphasize employability skills during their undergraduate degree programmes and their perceived levels of possession of these skills. In fact, female students have given a higher importance to all employability skills than male graduates.

One may say that this particular dimension of higher education quality, namely the employability skills may be predictable for the gender differences regarding other quality dimensions. Past studies made at the German study line at the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration (Pitic, Drăgan and Brătean, 2012) presented the quality dimensions structured in three categories: teaching and learning process, infrastructure and opportunities provided. Being an internationalized study program, the demographical factors may have an increased impact in the perceived quality. The perceived quality and satisfaction level are important concepts (Duque and Weeks, 2010); the fact that students have a positive assessment of their learning experience is associated with better learning outcomes. In the service marketing literature, the consumer satisfaction is defined as consumer's overall impression of the relative inferiority/ superiority of the organization and its service (Bitner and Hubbert, 1994).

For higher education this means, that the consumer must be satisfied with the teaching and program quality. Actually, the term „consumer“ may not fit to the higher education sector. Sallis (2005) considers that the concept of „stakeholder“ or „client“ fits better in order emphasize the role of the students in higher education processes. The perceived quality has been found to affect stakeholders' satisfaction in service marketing and higher education (Duque and Weeks, 2010). Through this study the authors aim to highlight the degree of gender differences and gender influences on students' level of satisfaction regarding the perceived quality.

3. Research Methodology

In order to operationalize the concept of quality, there must be developed an internal evaluation tool suitable for assessing the requirements of the higher education sector in Europe. From this point of view, the higher education institutions should measure quality in order to enhance transparency and accountability of the higher education institution and to develop the international visibility of universities.

Radhakrishna, Leite and Baggett (2003) cited in Radhakrishna (2007) stated that of 748 academic research studies, 64% of them have used the questionnaire method, while noting that the studies reviewed reported no problems of validity and reliability. Therefore, the development of a reliable and validated questionnaire is a need in order to reduce the errors of quality measurement.

First step of this research consisted in gaining knowledge about students' perception of educational quality. Therefore, the research design is based on several variables that may influence the students' view: learning and teaching processes, infrastructure and service delivered. The questionnaire developed contains 36 items that focuses on the above discussed variables, where the last six factors in the questionnaire include demographic information of the respondents. The data collection took place in January – February 2012, resulting a sample of 162 valid questionnaires, which means that a response rate of 72 % was registered. This research illustrates the results obtained by analyzing Bachelor students' perception at the German study line.

The analysis of students' satisfaction is designed to identify significant aspects of quality in higher education, specifically to identify the status quo of quality in order to integrate the concept of continuous quality improvement at the university level. The students were questioned regarding following quality dimensions: learning and teaching, infrastructure, educational services and opportunities for graduates.

Taking into account the objective of this study, namely to indicate if there are significant differences between the perception of male and female students regarding the level of satisfaction for the perceived educational quality, following research hypothesis was formulated:

H1: There are relevant differences between male and female in terms of satisfaction levels regarding the quality of the perceived educational services.

According to some past studies (Pitic, Drăgan and Brătean, 2012), the authors revealed, that there are some relevant factors, which are correlated with a higher level of satisfaction. These factors are (Table 1) those connected with the following variables: the advantage and opportunities as a graduate of the German line of study (question no.16), the availability of the teaching staff (question no.5), and the technical equipment (question no.18), and the presence of both visiting and internal professors (question no.4) and the evaluation system (question no. 14).

In order to verify the hypothesis H1: There are relevant differences between male and female students in terms of satisfaction levels regarding the quality of the perceived educational services. Thus, we analyzed the average and standard deviation for each dimension and then we identified which dimensions contribute most to students' satisfaction, taking into account the values around 3.7 (M e" 3.7). The score of each dimension is obtained by calculating the mean scores of each item. Therefore, we considered relevant those dimensions that have received the average value of about 3, 7, since, on a scale from 1 to 5 we can speak of a high degree of satisfaction of the students when the results are closed to the numerical value of 5.

Table 1. Mean Values for the Bachelor students

	Teaching and Learning Processes	Mean
1.	The curriculum of the specializations at the German study line presented on the web site of the faculty is useful and easy accessible	3.3210
2.	The knowledge gained within classes represent a good mix of theory and practice	3.0988
3.	The information about the elective courses are helpful, complete and available on time	3.2840
4.	The inclusion of both domestic and foreign teachers provide a successful mix of knowledge and skills	3.7099
5.	The teachers are available during tutorials whatever questions you may have	3.9753
6.	I also take the opportunity in visiting the teachers during the office hours within a semester	3.1790
7.	The tutors of all the specializations ensure adequate support during the academic year	3.3457

8.	During classes, soft-skills are also required (teamwork, communication skills, practical skills, etc.)	3.2531
9.	The presence at the course is a prerequisite for the acquisition of the specialized knowledge	3.2963
10.	A reasonable timetable contains 2-3 units daily	3.3951
11.	The knowledge acquired within all subjects in one semester are accessible, complete and appropriate	3.2222
12.	The language level at the courses meets my expectations	3.4568
13.	The difficulty of the taught material and the learning effort for the exam preparation are in balance	3.2963
14.	The rating system should be composed of several units (exam, homework, projects, attendance, etc.)	3.6235
15.	The final results of the tests are subject to the principle of fairness	3.5309
16.	The chances and opportunities to find a job as a graduate of the German study line provide a comparative advantage over other graduates	3.9630
Infrastructure		
17.	The premises have appropriate equipment (number of seats, heating, acoustics)	3.6049
18.	The technical equipment to carry out educational activities is in line with the expectations	3.7716
19.	I visit the “Robert-Bosch” library of the German study line at the during the semester and am aware of the current books fund	2.5185
20.	I am aware of the economic books fund at the Austrian library, the library of the German Cultural Centre and the German Institute	2.5926
Opportunities and Services Provided		
21.	I am satisfied with the administration service (secretary)	3.1296
22.	The referee at the German study line informs me fully and on time about all organizational news and events on course	3.4630
23.	There is a reasonable amount of information about scholarships and internship opportunities	3.4877
24.	The opportunities for the recognition of professional services with the scope of awards (Rehau, EBS, etc.) are meaningful	3.3889
25.	The representative of the students of the German Study Line within the Council of the Faculty is known to me	2.9630
26.	I am fully aware of his duties. I also feel that my sphere of interest are well represented	2.9259
27.	The existing student organizations act to strengthen the intercultural competencies. I am therefore ready to participate actively in such an organization.	3.1974

Source: Authors’ research

4. Results and Discussion

In order assess the demographic structure of the respondents, the authors used as statistical method the frequency analysis within the SPSS Programm for Windows (Table 2).

Table 2. Demographic structure of questioned Bachelor students

Demographic data	Registered percentage
Gender	
Male	41%
Female	59%
Study form	
Tuition fee	36%
Tax free studies	64%
Place of origin	
Village	9.87%
Town	90.13%
Status of employment	
Unemployed	79%
Employed	21%
Year of study	
First year	35%
Second year	27%
Third year	38%
Age	
18	0.61%
19	28.4%
20	23.45%
21	35.8%
22	7.4%
23	1.23%
24	0.61%
25	1.23%
26	0.61%
27	0.61%
Specialisation	
Economy and International Business Affairs	48, 8 %
Business Economics	51, 2%

Source: Authors' research

According to Table 2, 48, 8 % of the respondents are enrolled within the specialization „Economy and International Business Affairs” and 51, 2% within the specialization „Business Economics”. Further, the results also highlight that, 35 % of the respondents are in the first year of study, 27% in the second year of study and 38 % in the third year of study. In the same time, 64 % of the respondents are studying without paying fees and 36 % of the respondents are paying fees. Regarding the place of origin, 90,13% of the respondents are coming from urban environmental and 9,87 % from the rural environmental.

So, most of the students are studying without paying a tuition fee, situation that may be predictable for an academic performance, because the classification of the study form is made in accordance with the academic results. Namely, the students with good academic results are studying without paying tuition fees.

It is important to mention that 79 % of the students are not employed and 21 % of the respondents work in certain companies (Table 2). According to a past study made by the authors, students visiting the Master level courses have proven to have a different demographic structure: there are 72 % employed students and 28 % unemployed students; situation that reveals that the interest of students in working is significant once they are finished their Bachelor studies. Most of the respondents are between 19 -21 years old (82, 3%), 59% of the students are women and 41 % are male.

The relationship between gender and the academic performance of students has been discussed by a long time and the above mentioned results show that there are more female than male students studying at the German study line at Bachelor level. According to Chambers and Schreiber (2004), a gap has been found between the levels of achievements of female and male respondents and the results illustrated that first ones had better performances in certain instances.

By means of this study we tried to identify if there are relevant differences between male and female students regarding the satisfaction level of the perceived quality. By using as statistical method the “t test for independent samples”, following results may be noticed (Table 3):

Table 3: Results Independent Samples Test

		Independent Samples Test									
		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper	
Question no.4	Equal variances assumed	.210	.647	.299	160	.766	.04735	.15853	-.26574	.36044	
	Equal variances not assumed			.294	132.045	.769	.04735	.16102	-.27116	.36585	
Question no.5	Equal variances assumed	.006	.936	1.494	160	.137	.26515	.17750	-.08539	.61589	
	Equal variances not assumed			1.513	145.730	.133	.26515	.17530	-.08131	.61161	
Question no.14	Equal variances assumed	.877	.350	3.299	160	.001	.71970	.21814	.28889	1.15050	
	Equal variances not assumed			3.268	135.075	.001	.71970	.22024	.28413	1.15527	
Question no.16	Equal variances assumed	7.895	.006	3.217	160	.002	.52557	.16335	.20297	.84817	
	Equal variances not assumed			3.033	110.039	.003	.52557	.17330	.18212	.86902	
Question no.18	Equal variances assumed	.010	.919	1.108	55	.273	.36234	.32709	-.29316	1.01784	
	Equal variances not assumed			1.115	45.711	.271	.36234	.32499	-.29195	1.01663	

The method of t test for independent samples is used for comparing averages of two populations in order to determine if the means of the two groups are significantly different because the null hypothesis affirms that the two groups have equal options. For this purpose, the Levene test for equality of variances (Levene’s Test for Equality of Variances) is used. If the observed significance level for this test is small (eg. less than 0.05), one should use different variants (Equal variance not assumed) for testing the averages. If this level is high, then one should use the common variants (Equal variances assumed). So, for question no.4, question no.5, question no.14 and question no.18 the condition for equal variances is assumed and for question no.16 the condition of equal variances is not assumed.

The next step is to observe if the coefficient Sig. is smaller than 0, 05 in order to identify if there are significant differences between the means of the two groups: male and female. In this case,

question no.14, regarding the structure of the rating system reveals differences between the two groups. The assumption of homogeneity is assumed and having the value of t test of 3,299 and a significance level of .001, our data reveals that there are differences between male and female.

For question no.16 the homogeneity condition is not fulfilled and the one should observe the second row. In this situation, the significance level is .003 ($t = 3.033$), which means that there are differences between the means of this groups, in the context of the changes and opportunities, to find a job as a graduate of the German study line over other graduates.

Actually, the results illustrated in Table 4 suggest, that the female students are more satisfied with the perceived quality in comparison with the values obtained by the male group, in the context of the following variables: the advantage and opportunities as a graduate of the German line of study (question no.16), the availability of the teaching staff (question no.5), the technical equipment (question no.18), the presence of both visiting and internal professors (question no.4) and the evaluation system (question no. 14). Thus, it is remarkable that only in one situation the averages differ, namely in the context of question no.14 and question no.16.

Table 4: Group Statistics

Group Statistics					
	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Question no.4	1	96	3.7292	.95674	.09765
	2	66	3.6818	1.04010	.12803
Question no.5	1	96	4.0833	1.13941	.11629
	2	66	3.8182	1.06568	.13118
Question no.14	1	96	3.9167	1.33509	.13626
	2	66	3.1970	1.40570	.17303
Question no.16	1	96	4.1771	.87051	.08885
	2	66	3.6515	1.20884	.14880
Question no.18	1	35	3.7714	1.21476	.20533
	2	22	3.4091	1.18157	.25191

4. Conclusions

The analysis performed within this paper aimed to present the demographic structure of the Bachelor students at the German study line and the correlation between gender of the respondents and their satisfaction level. The results illustrate that the female students are more satisfied with the academic quality in comparison with the male group, regarding following dimensions: the advantage and opportunities as a graduate of the German line of study, the availability of the teaching staff, the technical equipment, the presence of both visiting and internal professors and the evaluation system. The instrument used in order to gain information from the students had as an objective to identify the main characteristics of quality regarding the educational processes, the quality of educators being also given by the students' performance and their level of satisfaction.

Therefore, a key aspect of the teaching-learning process is to educate the students so that they may be able to show quality performance. To achieve this objective it is necessary to better understand all factors that may contribute to the academic success of students (Farooq, Chaudhry, Shafiq and Berhanu, 2011). Further research is needed to explore the issue of demographic factors including the differences in satisfaction level regarding the geographical regions, family factors and social economic status.

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