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Investigating the Correlation between Personal Values and Overall Satisfaction for Consumers of Higher Education Services and Assessing the Managerial Implications

Ionel BOSTAN¹, Teodora ROMAN², Adriana MANOLICA³, Georgiana BIGHIU⁴

Abstract

This paper aims at bringing empirical evidence to support the importance of personal values for consumers of higher education and determine possible connections between personal values and perceptions, attitudes and behaviors of students, all valuable information in maintaining the “Excellency” premise of Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași (UAIC). The data was collected through a structured interview held with 150 university students from five faculties: Faculty of Law, Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, Faculty of History, Faculty of Psychology and the Faculty of Philosophy and Socio-Political Science. *The results* showed positive correlations between personal values and overall satisfaction, intention to recommend and perception of UAIC services (both as adding value and as being highly qualitative) proving that personal values do matter.

Keywords: higher education, values, satisfaction, perceptions, attitudes, managerial implication.

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Education – key player in today’s society?

Universities have a universal educational mission - that of producing *savoir-faire*, that of capitalizing human capital and technical expertise in the service of the whole nation. The fulfillment of this mission depends highly on the students - professors’ relationship, on the administration and the relationship with the authorities, as well as on the size and structure of its financial sources. The student is no longer a simple consumer of educational services but he/she is a partner of the teacher and a member part of the local community. That is why, in the modern University, the students should no longer be a majoritarian passive participant. The students should be encouraged to take initiatives affecting both the political and community life and to actively participate into the decisional process and the management of the university. Raising the bar and the market dynamics in the educational system have determined the universities to face a shift in paradigm and think and act more like a business in terms of marketing their services: the students are customers, parents and governments are stakeholders and teachers and courses are part of the “package”.

If previously some universities considered that their history and prestige were enough to attract students, nowadays, with the growing number of private educational institutions, of people interested in obtaining a degree⁵ and when potential students have such a diversified offer, it is pivotal to reconsider one’s position and act accordingly. Consequently, educational institutions are being encouraged to provide “high quality education, exist as a well-reputed university, achieve enrolment success, improve competitive positioning, provide contemporary and well-designed academic programs, and maintain financial strength” (Cetin, 2003: 57). In higher education, the market matters now (Zemsky *et al.*, 2001). Education and its promotion play a central role in the prestige and reputation a country has, and that is why educational marketing should be of concern for all parties involved. Still, the word „marketing” is often associated by higher education professionals to untrustworthy practices and stirs feelings of concern within the world of education. Nevertheless, the educational offering must definitely be looked at from a marketing perspective as part of the logical process the institutions must go through to understand who their „customers” are, how the needs of these customers are changing and how they need to adapt, develop and meet them.

Educational services are composed of complex programs and products which make it a difficult job to market oneself, especially since educational institutions compete in a tough industry. If previously universities may have lacked or have not felt the need for profit as a measure of success, market and governmental

⁵ The number of people actively enrolled in university studies has increased from 1 million in 2000 to 1,53 million in 2009 – information accessed on April 2013 in <http://businessday.ro/07/2011/cati-romani-au-studii-superioare-si-cum-stam-in-comparatie-cu-alte-tari/>.

pressures are changing the status quo. Of the main reasons suggesting that the use and appreciation of the marketing process can significantly help the future of educational services, four key areas can be mentioned: the complexity of the offering, the complicated role in the society of educational institutions, the increasing importance of financial performance and the new approach of the market that envisions students as informed consumers (Gibbs, 2000). Kotler (1995), on the other hand, suggests that the trends in the demographic, economic, lifestyle, technological and political (and regulatory) areas offer great insight into the context in which universities must operate nowadays.

Education, in many aspects, is now positioned and aligned to the general archetype of consumption. Therefore, it can now be looked at similar to a commodity and has become subject to the same criteria of consumer evaluation and satisfaction, similar to other purchases. Higher education is considered a public good and it also presumes a public responsibility. Many countries encourage, through their macroeconomic policies, the involvement in higher education as a solution to the development of individual, social and economic prosperity. However, the public access to education - and higher education in particular, requires a sustainable public support with the funds, nowadays, getting thinner and thinner. Consequently, higher education institutions must focus on the most urgent needs, on what the work market validates as a necessity and an opportunity and at the same time to ensure broadened access, diversified preparation and an increase in both performance and competitiveness. In the context of public sub financing, and, of other forces coming to work, the universities feel compelled to analyze if all the functions mentioned above are compatible in the strategy of the same institution or not. As mentioned in the Magna Charta of European universities, the educational institution plays a great role in the democratic development of a country and thus it must have the capability to perform and take initiatives to support this mission.

It is natural for universities to reformulate their mission, to redefine their role oriented to the Knowledge Economy and adapt their strategies in order to become dynamic organizations able to assume their role as human resource providers with a constant offer of education to the society, while at the same time being capable of facing their competition- now not only at national level but also at the European level.

Student expectations or what you see is what you get!

In the context of globalization, of increased competition and when with one click you can peek over the neighbor's garden, it is important for businesses to own up to what they promise to deliver. The same concept applies to how the universities should "run" their business. The first step in meeting customer expectations is knowing them and one of the key challenges universities face is identifying those expectations and determining how to attract and retain their customer is: the students. Understanding students' expectations can help universities in developing suitable messages for attracting prospective students. Indeed, developing a distinct image – a brand- with consistent messages may be useful in sending signals to potential students about the credibility and the quality of the higher education institution (Thomson, 1995). Students' preconceived ideas about what to expect from a program might bias the way they evaluate the quality of their experience showing how important is for universities to understand expectations and correctly inform their clients. Similar to customer satisfaction, the satisfaction of the students is the result of complex set of factors. That is why it is important to determine what those factors are and how individually or taken together influence student satisfaction (Apleton-Knapp, S. & Krentler, K., 2006).

Consequently, service quality as evaluated by students can be used as a tool of how well universities perform in their promotion and delivery of their services to be then used in developing attractive programs. The most wide used tool for assessing satisfaction is SERVQUAL, yet, other instruments were also developed to measure perceptions or expectations of the quality of university services (Clemes *et al.*, 2001, Gatfield, 1998; Prugsamatz *et al.*, 2007). One way of understanding the relationship between students' expectations and student satisfaction is the expectancy/disconfirmation paradigm. It is composed of four constructs: satisfaction, expectations, disconfirmation and performance. When there is a discrepancy between previous expectations and the actual performance the phenomenon of disconfirmation occurs that can have three possible outcomes: zero disconfirmation (expectance = actual performance), positive disconfirmation (actual performance > expectations) and negative disconfirmation (actual performance < expectations). In relationship with satisfaction, it is obvious that negative disconfirmation does not bring about satisfaction, but the opposite, while positive disconfirmation actually leads to satisfaction.

This paradigm has been put to test by many researchers and has served as basis for a large number of studies on satisfaction in the field of marketing proving its usefulness when trying to determine the link between expectations and satisfaction. The most important student expectations are the academic level of demand, the university's connections with the employment market, student personal self-fulfillment and the prevailing university environment (Mainardes, Raposo, & Alves, 2012).

European Higher Education beyond service attributes: do personal values matter?

As asked in the title of this research paper, the research problem tries to determine whether personal values do matter in the evaluation of university services by students currently studying at Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași (UAIC). Through this research we tried to answer to several questions: (1) Does UAIC employ marketing tools, in the context of increased competition among universities, to differentiate itself? (2) Do personal values of UAIC students affect their perception of overall value of higher education services at UAIC? (3) Do personal values of UAIC students affect their satisfaction with the higher education services offered by UAIC? (4) Do personal values affect UAIC students' behavioral outcomes such as loyalty and intention to recommend? (5) Do personal values affect retention of the students currently attending UAIC? (6) By obtaining answers to these questions I hope to shed light to the matter identified in the research problem and test the hypotheses identified in the previous section of this paper.

Methods

Research hypotheses

- H_1 : Educational institutions- universities- have begun to behave more like a business by acknowledging their importance and using more intensively marketing strategies and tools in building a relationship with their customers (Zemsky *et al.*, 2001; Gyure & Arnold, 2001; Cetin, 2003; Lam *et al.*, 2004);
- H_2 : There is a positive correlation between students' satisfaction with university attributes and meeting their expectation, that in turn affects their behavior towards the institution (increased retention, increased reputation, increased loyalty and positive word-of-mouth). (Elliot & Shin, 2002; Alves & Raposo, 2007; Helgensen & Nettet, 2007);
- H_3 : Examining personal values offers a greater insight into how students behave in relation to university services. (Kropp *et al.*, 2005; Voss *et al.*, 2007; Khademalomoum, 2011; Durvasula *et al.*, 2011).

Research method

The research was conducted in two stages: in the first stage, a secondary research was carried out followed by the second stage consisting in a primary research: (1) the secondary research was conducted to provide information helpful in formulating the research hypotheses. To achieve this, research papers of national

and international specialists were analyzed and their results and conclusions can be found in the literature review section of this paper; (2) the primary research was conducted because, currently, there is no paper done in Romania examining the relationship between personal values and student evaluation of university services. The purpose of this second stage was to gather sufficient qualitative and quantitative data to accomplish the research objectives proposed. However, this research is rather exploratory than explanatory since its main purpose is to identify whether personal values matter when assessing the services that UAIC provides to its main customers - students.

The tool used in performing the primary research is a structured interview. The most important element in the interview is the SERPVAL Scale, a tool developed by Lages and Fernandes (2005) based on Zeithaml's (1998) framework by applying the conceptualization of the means-end chains based on the works of Rokeach (1979) and Kahle (1983). In an empirical study done on a sample of 386 service users the two authors developed and tested the scale of Service Personal Values (SERPVAL) for measuring the personal values that are associated with purchasing a service. SERPVAL is a multi-dimensional scale presenting four broad individual dimensions of service value to: (1) Peaceful life (SVPL) - starting from an amalgam of values identified by Rokeach's scale (RVS) designed to measure general individual values. This personal value is satisfied when the individual feels that the service promotes a pleasurable life while providing and improving safety, tranquility and/ or harmony; (2) Living communication (SVLC). This personal value makes a service worthwhile for the consumer when he recognizes that the service promotes a more enjoyable life; (3) Social recognition (SVSR) - based on LOV scale created by Kahle and the RVS scale of Rokeach. This personal value, when fulfilled by a service, helps the individual in gaining respect from others, status and allows one to achieve and demonstrate to others a more stimulating and fulfilling life.

Social integration (SVSI) - based on the same scales as the SVSR dimension. Social integration is accomplished when social recognition exists. If the individual benefits by social integration through purchasing a service, he/she is more inclined to establish better relationships at various levels: family, social, professional. The target population is represented by all students attending the University Alexandru Ioan Cuza, Iași and enrolled in their final year of undergraduate studies at five faculties with a socio-human orientation: Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, Faculty of Philosophy, Faculty of Law, Faculty of Psychology and the Faculty of History.

Hypothesis Testing

In this section, several hypotheses are tested using inferential statistics.

H1.1 There is a relationship between increased promotional activities and intention to continue studies with a Master program.

Inferential statistics used: Independent samples t-test.

From the cross tabulation between the two variables it resulted that a greater percentage of those who feel UAIC has not increased its promotional activities will choose a Master program from UAIC compared to those who felt otherwise (31,4 % compared to 21,2 %).

To check whether these differences would be observable at the population level, a Pearson Chi-square test was performed following the hypotheses:

$H_0: \chi^2 = 0$, meaning that there is no relationship between how the respondents feel about UAIC promotional activities and choice of Master Program location.

$H_1: \chi^2 \neq 0$, meaning that there is a relationship between how the respondents feel about UAIC promotional activities and choice of Master Program location at the population level.

As seen in the Table 1, we observe a Pearson Chi-square value calculated at 5,581 at 2 degrees of freedom, which gives a sig = 0.061, meaning that there is a 6,1% chance to be wrong in rejecting the null hypothesis. With a degree of confidence of 95%, we do not reject the null hypothesis and accept that there is no a relationship how the respondents feel about UAIC promotional activities and choice of Master Program location. This means that we cannot infer that, at the population level, depending on perception of UAIC promotional activities, the students would have different options regarding a Master program.

Table 1. *Chi-Square Tests*

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	5,581 [*]	2	,061
Likelihood Ratio	5,905	2	,052
Linear-by-Linear Association	5,057	1	,025
N of Valid Cases	137		

^{*}2 cells (33,3%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 1,42.

Managerial implications: since the results are not applicable at population level, no suggestion can be made.

H2.1 There is a positive correlation between students' satisfaction and intention to recommend UAIC services to others.

Inferential statistics used: Pearson bivariate correlation (Table 2).

H_0 : $r = 0$, meaning that there is no correlation between variables.

H_1 : $r \neq 0$, meaning that there is correlation between variables.

Table 2. *Pearson bivariate correlation between Overall satisfaction with UAIC services and Intention to recommend UAIC services*

Correlations		Overall satisfaction with UAIC services	Recommend UAIC to other people
Overall satisfaction with UAIC services	Pearson Correlation	1	.764**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	150	150
Recommend UAIC to other people	Pearson Correlation	.764**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	150	150

** *Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).*

After running the test, an $r = 0,764$ was obtained, and a $\text{sig.} = 0.000$, meaning that there is a negligible risk to be wrong in rejecting the null hypothesis. Therefore, the null hypothesis can be rejected to accept that there is a correlation between the variables. This means that we can infer that, at the population level, overall satisfaction and intention to recommend of the students are positively correlated. The Pearson correlation coefficient of $0,764$ is an indicator of a strong positive correlation between the two variables chosen.

Managerial implications: to increase positive word of mouth, UAIC should ensure its current students are satisfied with its services.

H3.1 Personal values of students are correlated to their behavioral outcomes

H3.1.1 There is a correlation between SERPVAL and overall satisfaction with UAIC services

H3.1.2 There is a correlation between SERPVAL and intention to recommend UAIC services

H3.1.3 There is a correlation between SERPVAL and perception of UAIC services as highly qualitative

H3.1.4 There is a correlation between SERPVAL and perception of UAIC services as adding value

After running the test, an $r = 0,549$ was obtained, and a $sig. = 0.000$, meaning that there is a negligible risk to be wrong in rejecting the null hypothesis. Therefore, the null hypothesis can be rejected to accept that there is a correlation between the variables. This means that we can infer that, at the population level, how students perceive UAIC services through their personal values and perception of UAIC services as adding value are correlated. The Pearson correlation coefficient of $0,549$ is an indicator of a medium positive correlation between the two variables chosen (Table 3).

Table 3. *Pearson bivariate correlation between SERPVAL and perception of UAIC services as adding value*

		SERPVAL	UAIC services add value
SERPVAL	Pearson Correlation	1	,549**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		,000
	N	150	150
UAIC services add value	Pearson Correlation	,549**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	
	N	150	150

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

H3.1.5 *There is a correlation between SERPVAL and loyalty towards UAIC*

Managerial implications: personal values are an important factor to be taken into consideration when analyzing perception of students and their behavioral outcomes, such as satisfaction and intention to recommend etc. For UAIC this means that personal values should be taken into consideration when offering and delivering their services. Moreover, in constructing messages for their customers, appealing to inner personal desires and values would maybe make their messages get through better to UAIC's students. (Table 4).

Table 4. Summary of hypothesis testing

<i>Hypothesis</i>	<i>Confirmed/ Disconfirmed</i>
<i>H₁: Educational institutions- universities- have begun to behave more like a business by acknowledging their importance and using more intensively marketing strategies and tools in building a relationship with their customers. (Zemsky et al. 2001; Gyure & Arnold 2001; Cetin 2003; Lam et al. 2004)</i>	<i>Partially confirmed</i>
<i>H₂: There is a positive correlation between students' satisfaction with university attributes and meeting their expectation, that in turn affects their behavior towards the institution (increased retention, increased reputation, increased loyalty and positive word-of-mouth). (Elliot & Shin 2002; Alves & Raposo 2007; Helgensen & Nettet 2007)</i>	<i>Confirmed</i>
<i>H₃: Examining personal values offers a greater insight into how students behave in relation to university services. (Kropp et al 2005; Voss et al 2007; Khademalomoum 2011; Durvasula et al .2012)</i>	<i>Confirmed</i>

Conclusions and managerial implications

From the responses of those interviewed it seems that UAIC does employ marketing tools for its promotion: its official UAIC website (used by 71% before enrolling), Brochures (35%), university fairs (11%) and its Facebook account seems to have gained also some visibility being mentioned by 16% of the respondents. However, one importance source of information for prospective students seems to be their friends (56%). This implies that one other very important “tool” for promotion that UAIC could use wholeheartedly is its current students whom are possibly friends to those prospective students. By catering to the needs of their current students and making current students aware of every opportunity when studying at UAIC, the University could increase the chances of them recommending UAIC services to their friends. This assumption is supported also by the strong positive correlation found between satisfaction and intention to recommend (R= 0, 764).

Another important issue revealed by the study is the level of awareness of students related to promotional activities performed by UAIC during their undergraduate studies. Here the opinions were quite radical with 70% feeling that UAIC has not put any more effort into promoting itself. This may be due to the poor reach towards current students of events or other activities developed by

UAIC. Since “Welcome to UAIC” and its Facebook page were the most frequent quoted PR “activities” of UAIC, more effort should be put into promoting the other endeavors of UAIC and of course maintaining interest in the two mentioned. One way of doing that is by making more use of its Facebook page – since students nowadays are tech savvy’s all the way- and make their stakeholders aware of everything of worth. The purpose is to increase its on-line visibility and take advantage of all the new ways an organization can promote itself, especially through Social Media.

Nevertheless, despite some hiccups that any organization faces considering the new challenges posed by diverse factors: globalization, increased competition, more information- hungry stakeholders etc., UAIC seems to align to the general trend of applying marketing techniques in its activities thus confirming the first hypothesis formulated in the Research premises chapter that postulated that: *“Educational institutions- universities - have begun to behave more like a business by acknowledging their importance and using more intensively marketing strategies and tools in building a relationship with their customers”*.

A second relevant topic inquired in this research was the level of satisfaction of students and how it relates to different students behaviors. Overall, UAIC graduating students seem to still be slightly undecided to where to position themselves- with a mean of 3.39, the students tend towards being slightly satisfied with UAIC services showing the complexity of this construct. The result may be explained by the stress of the final year or the impending event of defending bachelor thesis that could be a great factor influencing student overall perception. Nevertheless, the general feeling is positive, also supported by the large percentage positively denoted words obtained through the “top of mind test”, of which the most frequent were qualitative and seriousness (11.3%, 10.7% respectively). Since across faculties different results were obtained for the level of overall satisfaction, UAIC should work on maintaining the happiness of Law and FEAA students, make an effort to satisfy History students and try to change the attitude towards a more positive one for Psychology and Philosophy students.

More data in support of the general opinion about UAIC are the results for intention to recommend, perception of UAIC services as highly qualitative and adding values. To all these, the respondents had positive appraisal (with scores ranging from 2 to 3: Strongly to Slightly Agree) supporting once more that the general perception is affirmative. For these variables, the logical step is to work on maintaining and even improve perception of FEAA, Law and Philosophy students while trying to determine possible reasons for less positive appraisals from Psychology and History.

When analyzing the relationship between satisfaction and the previously mentioned behavioral manifestations of perceptions and attitudes it has been revealed that satisfaction and intention to recommend, and loyalty are positively correlated

and satisfaction and location of desired Master Courses are related. These results demonstrated once more the importance of having customers atoned and confirmed the second hypothesis formulated in the Research premises chapter that postulated that: *“There is a positive correlation between students’ satisfaction with university attributes and meeting their expectation, that in turn affects their behavior towards the institution (increased retention, increased reputation, increased loyalty and positive word-of-mouth).”*

Last but not least, the main focus in this paper were not university service attributes, but rather how seeing them by students through the lenses of personal values affects the way university customers evaluate higher education, the way they perceive it and the actions they take as a result.

Hence, do personal values matter? Yes, they do: results showed positive correlations, from medium to strong ones, between personal values and overall satisfaction, intention to recommend and perception of UAIC services (both as adding value and as being highly qualitative), while, surprisingly, loyalty – a moral value- was found to be more weakly correlated to personal values. On the other hand, personal values are also related to where students choose to continue their studies.

One way of capitalizing on these discoveries by the management of UAIC would be to integrate appeals to personal values in the messages they create, to include the concept in their studies for evaluating students’ satisfaction and further investigate how they are relevant for students. Although more thorough research would be needed to further support the importance of personal values for students in their assessment of higher education offers, the current findings support, at least in part, the third hypothesis formulated in the Research premises: *“Examining personal values offers a greater insight into how students behave in relation to university services.”*

In conclusion, overall, the purpose of the research was sully fulfilled bringing empirical data to support both the importance of marketing for the sale of higher education and the importance of personal values for the consumers of higher education. A possible area for further research could be on what basis graduating students evaluate their choices of Master programs and to what extent do personal values matter in this decision.

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