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Article

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QUALITY OF THE TEACHING PROCESS AND ITS FACTORS OF INFLUENCE FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF FUTURE BUSINESS SPECIALISTS

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Abstract

In the context of the large number of Romanian economic graduates competing for a relatively small number of specialized positions, an increasingly dynamic environment that requires specialists and leaders with practical skills, internationalization and increasing competition among higher education institutions to attract both students and financing, it is necessary to evaluate the quality and performance of business educational programs. Periodic evaluation is the premise of improving and modernizing educational services, and students, as the primary beneficiaries of education, are the first to be included in this process. Therefore, the goal of this research is to identify the perceptions of students specializing in the financial management of European funds regarding the quality of teaching staff and the teaching process. This study takes a quantitative approach using a survey method and a questionnaire as a data collection instrument. The questionnaire includes a set of 11 specific items that are considered to be most relevant to the quality of higher education services and two related to overall perceptions of quality. Data were collected from a sample of more than 1,500 students enrolled in a new master's program on the axis specified above. Analyses showed that three factors have a significant influence not only on the assessment of teacher performance during courses and seminars but also on the quality of the teacher involved in the process: the use of modern teaching techniques, the degree to which master's students are trained and actively participate in teaching activities, and the presentation of quality and coherent information. A teacher's performance is influenced to a lesser extent, but still a significant one, by other two items included in this study: delivering materials on time and efficiently using the time allocated to the discipline. However, professor performance is also negatively correlated with the relevance of the information offered to students and the difficulty of the assessment. This study offers a valuable perspective on the quality of the educational process as perceived by Romanian university students. It identifies the most relevant factors in ensuring the quality of a master's program focused on providing practical skills and training international specialists in the area of international funds management.

Keywords: quality of services, students, business educational programs, factors, perceptions, Romania.

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Introduction

Romania is accessing European funds, although the degree of absorption is extremely low. These funds represent an excellent opportunity to develop better-performing academic programs that are both adapted to market needs and (especially) correlated with the practical skills requested by the labor market. In the context of the internationalization of services - including educational services - for new professions and the increasing perishability of information, study programs in line with current trends in the business environment are necessary. In Romania, this type of program would decrease the common managerial perception that 'universities produce graduates on a treadmill; they know theory but don't have practical skills', an urgent requirement of the modernization process of the educational system. Moreover, the recent, significant growth in the number of business-training programs, especially master's studies, perhaps is not correlated with the need for higher-quality educational services.

Based on the ideas set forth above, this study aims to evaluate the aspects that students consider to be the most important in guaranteeing the quality of a new educational program, based on providing the practical skills that are extremely useful in the area of European funds management and benefitting from contributions by specialists. This research is required by the strategy that has been developed to assure the constant improvement of educational programs (Cardona and Bravo, 2012). It is impossible to achieve improvement in educational programs without conducting periodic evaluations that identify the optimum combination of factors that guarantee a high level of educational quality. Moreover, the demand that educational programs developed with European funds be sustainable implies attracting students once financing has been finalized, which is an impossible objective unless feedback from students, in their capacity as the primary beneficiaries of education, is obtained (Darlaston-Jones et al., 2003; Lee and Tai, 2008, Brochado, 2009).

The first studies on the perceived quality of educational services were conducted in countries developed from an economic and educational point of view such as the United States, Great Britain, and Australia (Hill, 1995; Cuthbert, 1996; Cook, 1997; Pariseau and McDaniel, 1997; Brenders, Hope and Ninnan, 1999; Oldfield and Baron, 2000; Ham and Hayduk, 2003; Joseph, Yakhou and Stone, 2005; Russell, 2005; Christensen, Knezek and Tyler-Wood, 2014). However, in recent years, the specialty literature has featured numerous articles that analyze the dimensions of the perceived quality of universities' educational services and the factors that contribute the most to global perceptions of quality in developing, primarily Asian, countries. With few exceptions (Sârbu et al., 2009; Pelău, 2010; Băcilă et al., 2011; Plăiaș et al., 2011; Popa, Dragoș and Mare, 2011; Toma, 2013), the literature lacks complex studies of the quality of educational services in Central and Eastern European countries – specifically, Romania.

Taking into consideration the criteria of evaluating the quality of business education or professional competencies obtained through economic studies, the number of studies on these themes is low, although most such studies are recent (Johnes (2006), Vasiliu (2009), Wellman (2010), Mare, Dragoș and Span (2011), Plăiaș et. al (2011), Teng, Horng and Baum (2013), Hall et al. (2014), McLeavy and Wesson (2014), Săvoiu et al. (2014)). Some

of those studies primarily focus on employers' perceptions – and to a lesser extent, on the perspectives of future business specialists – whereas other studies approach economic education in the context of the knowledge-based economy (Brătianu, 2007; Dinu, 2011; Lefter et. al, 2011; Pocatilu and Ciurea, 2011; Toma, 2011).

These latter arguments support studying students' perceptions on the quality of business education in a developing country – specifically, the knowledge and the practical skills obtained – in the context of the influences of different cultural and economic environments on students' perceptions (Ford, Mathew and Beatriz, 1999; Lagrosen, Seyed-Hashemi and Leitner, 2004; Mai, 2005).

1. Review of scientific literature

Quality is the most common concept used to indicate a high level of consumer satisfaction with respect to the factors that characterize a service or a product (Hanif, Hafeez and Riaz, 2010; Lupo, 2013); there exists a positive correlation between the two concepts (Anderson, Fornell and Lehmann, 1994; Radomir, 2010; Souca, 2011; Băcilă, 2012). Worldwide, both researchers and authorities pay increasing attention to educational institutions because of their vital role in a nation's development and its competitiveness (Oldfield and Baron, 2000; Magd, Kadasah and Curry, 2003; Becket and Brookes, 2008; Ionciță et al., 2009).

The concept of educational quality refers to an educational institution's policies, processes and the actions through which quality is maintained and improved (Owlia and Aspinwall, 1996). In universities, this aspect can be equated to students' perceptions that their courses and experiences in those courses are of high quality and that the courses provide a high value in exchange for taxes paid and costs incurred (Porrà, Lévy-Mangrin and Novo-Corti, 2013). Although higher education institutions have begun to implement (to a greater extent) competitive educational practices based on quality evaluation (de Jager and Gbadamosi, 2013), in general the quality of higher education has been less successful in achieving global excellence (Senthilkumar and Arulraj, 2011).

Evaluation of the perceived quality of universities' educational services is based, in most cases, on students' perception that they are the primary clients or beneficiaries of the educational process (Narang, 2012; Sumaedi, Bakti and Metasari, 2012; Manaf, Khaliq and Ahmed, 2013; Yang, Becerik-Gerber and Mino, 2013; Teng, Horng and Baum, 2013). This definition of service quality corresponds to the marketing perspective (Grönroos, 1984), which claims that quality must be assessed according to consumer evaluations. Quality evaluations of teachers and the teaching process, in addition to their use as the basis for improving and modernizing teaching activities, are often used to promote higher education institutions and to rank universities (Gallifa and Batallé, 2010).

Thus, in the context presented, students' quality perceptions are an essential study variable and can be correlated with almost every definition of quality. One of the most common approaches to studying students' quality perceptions comes from the area of services marketing, in which quality is seen as the extent to which the level of services offered or provided meets consumer expectations (Grönroos, 1984; Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry, 1985), with the gap between the two levels being considered by consumers as lack of quality (Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry, 1985; Zeithaml and Bitner, 1996). The SERVQUAL model proposed by Parasuraman, Berry and Zeithaml (1991) analyzes the

factors that determine the formation of expectations, using 5 base dimensions of service quality: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy. Numerous assessments of the quality of higher educational services are based on this model (Hill, 1995; Wright, 1996; Tan and Kek, 2004; Mostafa, 2007).

However, considering the fact that expectations are influenced by perceptions - if those perceptions have not been previously assessed (Gallifa and Batallé, 2010) - another instrument called SERVPERF, based exclusively on perceptions, has been created (Cronin and Taylor, 1992). The instrument is most suitable for final-year students because they have a clearer perception and more critical opinions than do first-year students. Other studies have recognized the importance of quality perception from the student perspective to the process of modernizing and improving the quality of the educational process (Terenzini, 1993).

Zineldin (2006) claims that assessing students' perceptions of the quality of university services can reflect students' global satisfaction with the university. Based on an empirical study, Zineldin and Vasicheva (2012) propose the "5Q" model for assessing the factors that contribute to students' satisfaction with the higher-education system, focusing on the perceived quality of educational services. The 5 dimensions used in the model are as follows: educational quality, process quality, infrastructure quality, interaction and communication quality and environmental quality.

The central role in providing educational services is played by university employees (de Jager and Gbadamosi, 2013). In most studies on this topic, teachers' performance and their role in ensuring the quality of the educational process have been considered as dimensions of perceived quality. However, few studies focus exclusively on this issue (Husbands, 1998; Pozo-Munoz, Reboloso-Pacheco and Baltasar, 2000; Greimel-Fuhrmann and Geyer, 2003; Brown, 2004; Voss, Gruber and Szmigin, 2007; Peng et al., 2014). The results of these studies show that expertise, competence, the willingness to help students and interest in student development are attributes important to the evaluation of teacher quality.

2. Research methodology

As previously mentioned in the introduction, this study's objectives are to assess the perceived quality of the educational process and the teaching staff involved in implementing a master's program as the most important elements that contribute to improving and modernizing the educational process. Achieving this goal was accomplished by evaluating three generations of students enrolled in the master's program in the Audit and Financial Management of EU Funds. This program is offered by the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration at Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania. During its first years, the program was financed by European funds dedicated to training human resources (POSDRU programs). Nistor et al. (2011) describe the program's characteristics.

For all of the subjects studied, all students were asked to complete one questionnaire divided into two sections – the first section analyzes personal aspects and the second section asks students to evaluate the quality of the educational process throughout the semester. The second section is the subject of this study. Thus, the endogenous variables evaluate the quality of teaching a particular discipline (Qual_Act) and the quality of the teacher (Qual_Teach). For both variables, respondents gave grades from 1 to 10. There are

11 factors analyzed, 10 of which assess the perceived quality of the teaching process on a 10-point scale from 0 to 10. One factor is represented by a nominal dichotomous variable, which refers to the process of timely delivering material to students. The questions were formulated in such a way as to emphasize issues related to the courses' practical aspects and the level of interaction between teachers and students. Two endogenous variables are considered because one of the program's goals was to modernize the educational process and to increase its level of applicability. Therefore, each teacher was encouraged to invite specialists to their classes. Thus, the first dependent variable – Qual_Act – assesses the activity of the teaching staff and its guests, whereas the second refers strictly to the teaching staff.

The specific factors considered fall within the dimensions proposed by Parasuraman, Berry and Zeithaml (1991) (except for tangibility) and the '5Q' model (except for infrastructure and environmental quality); however, they emphasize those elements that directly interfere with the educational process and that are linked to the relevance of the educational process to the labor market and specialized training. These are as follows:

- The adequacy of the course's subject-matter content to students' personal need for professional training (*Adeq_Pers*) (Parasuraman, Berry and Zeithaml, 1991; Gallifa and Batallé, 2010; Cardona and Bravo, 2012; Porral, Lévy-Mangrin and Novo-Corti, 2013).
- The adequacy of the course's subject-matter content to the labor market's needs (*Adeq_PM*) (Parasuraman, Berry and Zeithaml, 1991; Gallifa and Batallé, 2010; Hussain and Birol, 2011; Porral, Lévy-Mangrin and Novo-Corti, 2013).
- Linking theory to practical activities (*Corel_PractTeor*) (Gallifa and Batallé, 2010; Hussain and Birol, 2011; Cardona and Bravo, 2012; Porral, Lévy-Mangrin and Novo-Corti, 2013).
- The provision of coherent information Coherence (*Coherence*) (Al-Alak and Alnaser, 2012; Cardona and Bravo, 2012).
- The relevance of the information provided to the master's program and the labor market (*Relevance*) (Gallifa and Batallé, 2010; Hussain and Birol, 2011; Cardona and Bravo, 2012; Zineldin and Vasicheva, 2012; Porral, Lévy-Mangrin and Novo-Corti, 2013).
- The use of modern teaching methods (*Method*) (Parasuraman, Berry and Zeithaml, 1991; Gallifa and Batallé, 2010; Cardona and Bravo, 2012; Zineldin and Vasicheva, 2012).
- The level of student involvement in course and seminar activities (*Train*) (Parasuraman, Berry and Zeithaml, 1991; Zineldin and Vasicheva, 2012; Cardona and Bravo, 2012; Porral, Lévy-Mangrin and Novo-Corti, 2013).
- The quality of materials received (*Qualit*) (Gallifa and Batallé, 2010; Al-Alak and Alnaser, 2012; Zineldin and Vasicheva, 2012).
- The synchronization of course materials with learning needs and tasks (*Materials_time*) (Gallifa and Batallé, 2010; Al-Alak and Alnaser, 2012).
- The efficient use of the time allocated to the course's subject matter (*Efficiency_time*) (Gallifa and Batallé, 2010; Al-Alak and Alnaser, 2012; Porral, Lévy-Mangrin and Novo-Corti, 2013); and

- The requested effort imposed by the assessment method (*Eval*) (Gallifa and Batallé 2010; Al-Alak and Alnaser, 2012; Porral, Lévy-Mangrin and Novo-Corti, 2013).

The items' wording was based on the SERVPERF model. Namely, the items evaluated students' perceptions of the factors listed only. To test the influence of the analyzed factors on the perceived quality of the educational process, the classical method OLS was used. Thus, two linear multiple regression models were estimated, one for each dependent variable:

$$Qual_Act_i = f(X_i) + \varepsilon_i \quad (\text{eq. 1})$$

$$Qual_Teach_i = f(X_i) + \varepsilon_i \quad (\text{eq. 2})$$

Estimation was done in both the classic and the standardized versions. The advantage of standardized regression is that it allows the ordering of factorial variables according to the influence each has on the dependent variable.

The stepwise method was used; that method is characterized by a stage analysis that assesses the statistical significance of each exogenous variable. Thus, the variables of the factors are introduced gradually into the model, which provides for each analysis phase both the significant variables and the variables that have been eliminated from the model. The best-performing model is the one that results in the final phase of building the regression (Mare et al., 2013). The advantage of this method is that it does not require the user to reapply the model each time it is desirable to eliminate insignificant variables (as is required by, e.g., the Enter method).

The models were then validated through conventional procedures. In addition, for control, the application method Backward was used, obviously with the same results. One thousand five hundred and seventeen questionnaires were collected. For the qualitative evaluation, 164 questionnaires were eliminated because of a lack of answers pertaining to some of the variables. Processing was conducted using SPSS 20.

3. Results and discussions

The analysis performed showed that for both of the endogenous variables, mean values ranged between 9 and 10. Thus, the quality of the teaching process was rated very highly: the means were 9.05 for quality and 9.2 for teaching staff performance. Applying modern methods to the training of future experts in European funds – an imperative request from project managers, as interpreted through these global assessment indicators – has been highly appreciated by master's students. Thus, the manner of unfolding the activities within this study program can be used as an example for improving and modernizing the educational process.

As shown in Table no. 1, the average values are lower for the factors considered. All of the average values are in the range of 7 to 9, most of them passing the threshold of 8. Obviously, the lowest mean related to the degree of difficulty imposed by the assessment method (7.38), and the highest mean related to the quality of materials (8.77). With respect to the timely delivery of teaching materials, 80% of students stated that those materials were received at the appropriate time.

Table no. 1: The average values of the exogenous variables used

Variable	Average
<i>Adeq_Pers</i>	7.82
<i>Adeq_PM</i>	7.78
<i>Corel_PractTeor</i>	7.93
<i>Coherence</i>	8.58
<i>Relevance</i>	8.28
<i>Method</i>	8.46
<i>Train</i>	8.11
<i>Quality</i>	8.77
<i>Efficiency time</i>	8.18
<i>Eval</i>	7.38

Source: own computation

The purpose of this study was to determine which of the characteristics of the teaching process at the university level determines students' views of its quality. Thus, two multiple linear regressions were performed in which the grade given by students was shaped by the factors analyzed (Tables no. 2 and no. 3). In both situations, ANOVA analysis gave Sig. = 0.000, making possible a guarantee probability of 99% that the resulting models are statistically significant. Assessing the quality of the educational process is 48.2% dependent on the factors analyzed (R^2 adjusted = 0.482), and the performance of the teaching staff represents a proportion of 58.5% (R^2 adjusted = 0.585).

Except for coefficients for relevance of information and time synchronization of materials with students' learning needs, which are significant at 5%, all of the other coefficients, regardless of the endogenous variable, are significant at 1%.

Table no. 2: Multiple linear regression for quality of teaching

Qual_Act Exogenous variables	Coefficients		t	Sig.
	Classic <i>b</i>	Standardized β		
<i>Constancy</i>	3.986	-	24.363	0.000
<i>Method</i>	0.236	0.307	8.529	0.000
<i>Train</i>	0.115	0.180	5.397	0.000
<i>Coherence</i>	0.108	0.132	4.176	0.000
<i>Qual</i>	0.083	0.100	3.244	0.001
<i>Adeq_Pers</i>	0.057	0.082	2.977	0.003

Source: own computation

The most important factor is the use of modern teaching techniques. It seems that not only the teacher but also the guests, the applied interactive methods, and the *Train* variable – which assessed the level of students' involvement in teaching activities – are significant in both cases. The coherence of the presentation also determines the grade given to the quality of teaching in both cases. A fourth exogenous variable significant to both the teacher and the overall teaching activity refers generally to the quality of the materials given to master's students. All of the four factors positively influence the evaluation of the educational process.

The quality of the educational process is significantly determined by the taught content's degree of adequacy in meeting students' personal needs related to professional training, but the influence of that factor is still reduced. In this case, the relationship is direct.

With respect to the quality or performance of the teachers, the teacher must consider not only the 4 most important elements that contribute to the quality of the educational process but also other aspects. The smallest (but still significant) influence results from providing teaching materials on time so that students can timely process knowledge and solve tasks. An efficient use of time allocated to the course's subject matter also leads to a good evaluation of the teacher.

Table no. 3: Multiple linear regression for teaching staff performance

Qual Act Variables exogenous	Coefficients		t	Sig.
	Classic <i>b</i>	Standardized β		
Constant	4.416	-	31.700	0.000
Method	0.245	0.366	10.915	0.000
Train	0.099	0.178	5.885	0.000
Quality	0.115	0.163	5.851	0.000
Coherence	0.086	0.120	3.889	0.000
Efficiency_time	0.070	0.106	3.819	0.000
Relevance	-0.036	-0.060	-2.210	0.027
Assessment	-0.030	-0.058	-2.969	0.003
Materials_time	0.112	0.038	2.085	0.037

Source: own computation

Two coefficients were negative for evaluating the quality of a teacher. Thus, a teacher is more appreciated by the students when the method announced is perceived as easier or more accessible. This phenomenon was expected because it is known that in general, students appreciate less-demanding evaluations. Another explanation could be that although the assessment method was easy, the teacher might have compensated with modern teaching techniques, additional explanations, practical examples, debates, study cases, etc. – aspects that led to increasing the level of knowing and understanding the discipline. The second negative coefficient is, however, unusual. It was expected that a teacher would be highly appreciated for providing information relevant to the master's students' specialty (in particular) and to the labor market. Results show an inverse relationship between these two variables. Thus, an increase in information relevance leads to a decrease in the appreciation of a teacher's performance. This statistical connection cannot be sustained by a logical explanation, and further research on this issue is needed. However, it can be assumed that this relevance of information is associated with the richness and constant novelty of the information transmitted by the teacher, a fact that leads to the need for an even greater effort to assimilate that information. A more difficult assimilation also implies a perception of the need for greater effort to pass the exams, which to students is less desirable.

Conclusions

In the context of the full process of modernizing economics education at the university level, along with fierce competition among higher education institutions and among graduates on the labor market, this study aims to evaluate the factors specific to the

educational process that significantly influence students' evaluation of that process. Although studies of students' perception of the quality of higher-education services are numerous, the manner in which quality is perceived is significantly influenced by the cultural and economic context to which the university and its beneficiaries belong.

This research was conducted in the context of a master's program because master's students have better synthesis and analysis skills than do bachelor's students. Master's students can better appreciate quality educational activities because they have a knowledge base in the field.

Analyses were run on a final sample of 1,000 respondents. It was decided to apply the questionnaire to students enrolled in the master's program in Audit and Financial Management of EU Funds, based both on the idea of the university as a multicultural environment and on the fact that Romania needs such specialists to improve its situation at the European level. Moreover, this educational program was conceived as a program focused on providing practical skills, as adapted to the labor market. Five of the factors analyzed are significant in assessing educational quality related to course and seminar hours. These factors are as follows: the use of modern teaching methods, the degree of training and active participation of master's students in educational activities, the coherence of information presentation, and the quality and the degree content adaptation to students' personal need for professional training. It is interesting that none of the other factors are significant, even though the expectation was that there would be a correlation between information and the labor market, the manner in which theory was combined with practice, the level at which theory was combined with practice, etc. One explanation could be that even if there are no significant correlations between factors in terms of variables, it would be possible for students to subconsciously include these aspects in their assessment of the teaching method used.

In addition to using modern teaching techniques, training and actively involving master's students in teaching activities, and providing coherent and quality information, the teacher must ensure that students receive material resources in a timely and effective manner and must efficiently use the time allocated. All of these practices are required for one to be perceived as a quality teacher. As expected, from students' perspective, a good teacher is one whose assessments are seemingly easy or accessible. The coefficient of this variable is significant and negative. This variable is not significant in evaluating the performance of the overall teaching activity because it also contains guests' activity – but guests have no decisional power in the assessment process.

All of these conclusions can be useful in managing institutions of higher education, considering the fact that periodic assessment and implementation of the results of periodic assessments are required for institutions to sustain their quality. Thus, taking into consideration the limited budgets available, persons responsible for improving the quality of the business education process will focus primarily on employing teachers who use modern teaching methods, who train and actively involve students in teaching activities and who provide coherent and quality information. These factors are the most important in ensuring not only the quality of the educational process but also the performance of the teacher as evaluated by the students.

Despite a valid data collection instrument and an exhaustive sample for the analyzed program, the survey's limitation to graduates of the master's program in Audit and

Financial Management of EU Funds limits this study's ability to fully understand the complexity and structure of the factors that contribute to the quality of business education in an international and multicultural context.

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