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COMPETITION ON THE UNIVERSITY EDUCATIONAL SERVICES MARKET IN ROMANIA AND THE PROTECTION OF STUDENTS RIGHTS AND INTERESTS

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Abstract

This article aims to quantify the degree in which Romanian students' rights and interests are protected. The authors have conducted a comparative analysis of a descriptive type of five representative university centres in Romania, followed by a quantitative research among students within these centres. Through an exploratory empirical research of a quantitative type, 438 students were interviewed, the results obtained determining the extent in which study programs pursued by respondents live up to student expectations and succeed to satisfy them. Student perception on the services offered in the five university centres considered were also quantified, having identified student intentions regarding their professional path, namely the extent in which there is a continuity between the job and the graduated field of study. Based on the results obtained, the authors recommend to the management of Romanian universities to develop efficient strategies that can afford the protection of students' rights and interests, to permanently identify the needs of the actual and potential customers and to adapt the offer of educational services according to existing requirements on the labor market.

Keywords: protection of students' rights and interests, academic competition, quality of educational services, comparative analysis, quantitative research

JEL classification: A29, I21, I23, M31, P46

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Introduction

The educational university system from almost all continents, but mainly from Europe, has gone, in the last decade, through many big changes, reforms being justified by the need of efficiency increase, effectiveness and competitiveness of higher education institutions, of the desire to align and of the compatibility of study programs at regional level, following the process of „mass-market” of studies, based on the desire of an increasing number of people to have access to various forms of university studies (Saint, Hartnett and Strassner, 2003; Degn and Sorensen, 2015). Considering that in many countries, especially in developing ones, the higher education institutions faced more often the decrease of the number of applicants and, in the same time, with the need of university offer diversification, they have implemented strategies for promoting study programs, creating not only value added but also increasing the competitive advantage in the university competition (Cameron, 1983). Increasing competition between higher education institutions in order to attract students and to maintain and increase its prestige, determined a higher awareness of their rights by the university management, who took proper measures to protect their interests, expressed by using them in the decision process at the faculty and university level (Menon, 2005; Luescher-Mamashela, 2013).

Considering these issues, the main research theme of the article is to measure the degree of protection of Romanian students' rights and interests. The most important objectives of the research aimed to determine the extent to which the study programs followed by students from the analysed university centers, succeed to satisfy their expectations, and the extent to which the services offered by those universities satisfy them. In this respect, the authors have conducted a comparative analysis of a descriptive type among five representative university centers from Romania for the student population, followed by a quantitative research among their students.

The results of the quantitative research show that 42% of the respondents choose the undecided level when asked about the degree of specific interests and rights protection by their university of study, 30,4% agree with this issue and only 2,7% of the respondents fully agree with this situation, a worrying fact for the higher education institution from Romania. Although the quantitative research has certain limits, its results are useful to the higher education institutions in establishing future strategies of strategic positioning on national, European and world level.

After a description of educational services consumer rights from the first section, competition among higher education institutions and quality of educational services are presented in section two, later highlighting the research methodology followed by the analysis of the research results. The article ends with relevant conclusions for the management of Romanian universities.

1. Regulation of educational services consumer rights

As in the other countries of the European Union, in Romania, consumers have a number of specific rights. Among the most important rights we find the one regarding risk of consumers when they buy a product, a brand or a service, especially if they might jeopardize their life, health and security, or affect their legitimate interests (Tudoriu and Popirtac, 2013). Legislation provides also other rights that consumers have (Ordinance

21/1992): the right to be accurately and precisely informed about the main features of products and services, so that the decision adopted matches customer needs; the right to be educated and informed on the responsibilities and/or obligations they have as consumers; the right to be compensated if the product, brand or service do not comply; the right to have access to markets that provide a diversified range of quality products and services. Thus, consumers implicitly have the right to benefit from quality educational services at undergraduate and higher education level.

The relatively large number of universities from Romania (Palade et al., 2013), creates a strong competitive intensity. Therefore, in order to consolidate their position on the educational services market, the higher education institutions implement proper strategies for attracting and maintaining students. The basis for the development of these strategies are students' rights and interests. Students are more and more informed on educational offers, study programs, universities' prestige and visibility, and the opportunities they have at graduation to find a job according to the competencies and skills obtained during the study (Pelău et al., 2011).

The demands of the students towards higher education institutions are increasing and they choose universities based on the quality of educational services. On the other hand, higher education institutions have to take into account not only the higher demands of young people, diversity of services offered by other national and foreign universities, but also the real needs of employers, skills required for employment (Plăiaș et al., 2011; Mare et al., 2013). Universities are constrained to have as strategic objective the continuous increase of the educational offer quality, of study programs, curricula, permanent renewal of the disciplines content, succeeding to obey students' rights and interests.

In fact, the protection of students' rights is becoming more relevant on the educational services market, they need to be protected to follow quality studies and to graduate in the best conditions the programs followed. Students also have certain responsibilities, which, together with obligations of universities are covered by study contracts signed at the faculty level, between them and the students at bachelor, master, Phd., postdoctoral level, namely the students at different post graduate programs (Transylvania University of Brasov, 2017 site; National education law nr.1/2011). The control forums at the level of each higher education institution (faculties councils, university senate, ethics committee, scientific committee and at least for the curricula, etc), student organizations and especially, National Authority for Consumer Protection (NACP) have the obligation to monitor and control the obeying of rights and responsibilities of both parties: students and higher education institutions (Dinu, 2011). Any complaint regarding a possible violation of students' rights or an abuse against students is first analyzed at the faculty, namely university level, subsequently notifying the control and regulatory authorities. Possible deficiencies that may be raised can refer to not respecting tuition fees, payment terms, promised quality of study programs etc. Theoretically, students can claim damages, but these situations are extremely rare.

A clear enforcement of student rights and interests leads to a high degree of contentment and satisfaction, which determines the maintaining of the university's competitive position on the market. That is why, for universities, the assessment of student satisfaction should represent a permanent objective on medium-long term. Information obtained through satisfaction monitoring and measurement can help to identify the opportunities of improving services, products and features of universities. Such improvements can increase customer's trust and can lead to benefits (Drăgulănescu, 2014) and synergies for all the parties involved.

2. Competition between universities and quality of educational services

Through reputation and prestige, but especially through curricula and study programs content, higher education institutions succeed to offer the students a social status and increased opportunities of personal development, in comparison with those who do not have access to studies. Therefore, the performance of these universities becomes a „positional good” (Hirsch, 1976). The proper positioning of universities is hampered by their competition. This takes place at different levels; on one hand there is the economic and social competition, on the other hand competition can be analyzed in terms of hierarchies and power and, namely, national and global competition (Marginson, 2006; Wiesenfeldt, 2016). Competition among universities is based on economic models, disputing limited resources that can be material goods, financial resources, or symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 2011). As a result, the higher education institutions permanently assess actions of other universities and the legal and social environment in which they work permanently adjusting and taking necessary decisions needed to differentiate educational offers and institutional positioning. A quasi-state of academic rivalry always existed between universities, sustained by the need to show the acquired authority, elements that shape the social aspect of competition. Elite universities and those consolidated based on tradition, distinguish through the value of teachers and education process, substantial financial support, outstanding research activities, inevitably creating hierarchies and power poles in the academic environment. At national level, universities and study fields are assessed by applicants, their families and employers of future graduates.

Driven by increased freedom of movement, global competition between universities was favoured, being mainly supported by the attractiveness of the prestige universities and the offer of research activities.

At a global level, taking into account international rankings (Shanghai, QS etc.) within global competition, from a numerical point of view, American universities are the best positioned ones (Marginson, 2006; Olcay and Bulu, 2016). They succeed to position year after year in top rankings. Due to a long tradition, and the ability to attract high-class researchers, they seem not to be so highly affected by the global academic competition. International studies show the relevance of alumni networks for big universities for creating its own competitive advantage and for prestige and visibility increase. From the competition point of view, universities with strong alumni networks succeed to attract more valuable applicants who, at graduation, find faster and easier proper positions on the labor market based on the reputation of the institution graduated (Yonezawa, 2007; Mişcoiu et al., 2012).

The higher education institutions compete with other universities for attracting foreign funds, students, and for obtaining among public, especially applicants, the status of the best faculty (Marginson, 2004). In order to implement this approach, universities are based on international study programs and double diplomas, capable to bring more students, especially foreign students, on teaching and research staff, who succeed to attract funds and to access research grants, but also on industry financing and sponsorships. Campuses, buildings, faculties, departments, research laboratories etc., are named after philanthropists or companies that contributed to the financial support of their activities (Schwier, 2012; Mişcoiu et al, 2012; Dabija et al., 2017).

Best positions in international rankings and obtaining a higher performance through quality increase of educational services offered are real challenges for the present higher education institutions (Shekarchizadeh, Rasli and Huam, 2011). The quality of educational services is an important criteria for the selection of study programs by future students at the bachelor, master, PhD and post-doctoral level of the higher education institutions. In this selection, students take often into account the scientific reputation of the university, its position in international rankings, public visibility of universities, technological endowment, quality and skills of the management team at the level of departments, faculties and institution as a whole, international accreditations and certifications held, quality and visibility of study programs, and the skills of university professors and researchers (Naidu and Derani, 2016; Dabija et al., 2017). It is often the case when the future students of a higher education institution do not know in detail the performances and the quality of teaching and research, namely they do not manage to perceive the relevance of studying certain disciplines from a curricula, so that the selection of the university is made based on the status and position of the university in rankings and on the available recommendations in virtual environment and less based on the quality of teaching activities (Marginson, 2004; 2006).

Teixeira et al. (2012) underlined that, although the competition between universities can become a force that affects the progress and institutional development, its effects can be influenced by third factors, as students needs and the effectiveness of regulatory measures. While universities have enjoyed, in time and in most countries, a higher autonomy, expressed in building study programs or defining curricula, the executive power tries to conduct the university system based on key goals linked to quality and competitiveness (Dakowska, 2015). Boccanfuso, Larouche and Trandafir (2015) stated that the improvement of the quality of university educational services can have significant positive effects, not only on results obtained on the labor market by future graduates, but also on the decrease of the dropout rate and course attendance.

As a result of the globalization process, Romanian universities went through important steps towards the harmonization of university studies with the European ones (Drăgoescu, 2015). Universities understood that they are involved in a fierce competition at domestic and foreign level, a lot of young people preferring to study abroad after the baccalaureate exam (Lăstun and Banciu, 2014). In order to succeed to differentiate themselves and strengthen the study offers, universities are forced to adopt an entrepreneurial approach (Gorgan, 2015). The educational service market from Romania has certain features, arising mainly from the very frequent changes of the legislation, and of the National Education Law from 2011, that exerts increased pressure on the universities financing, and the way of coordinating the scientific and teaching activities (Duguleană and Duguleană, 2011).

At a world level, a trend of increasing student mobility can be noticed, contributing in a decisive way to better interconnection of universities, and study programs harmonization at regional, over state level (Hemsley-Brown and Goonawardana, 2007). With Romania's accession at the European Union (1st of January 2007), the Romanian higher education system became part of the European system, which is extremely competitive (Strat and Danciu, 2013). The full compatibility of the Romanian education with the European one is hampered by inadequate funding, and small numbers of functional partnerships between different companies and higher education institutions. In fact, many study programs do not succeed to give the students, the necessary and useful skills for employment on proper positions in companies (Plăiaș et al., 2011; Stan and Manea, 2014).

3. Research methodology

In order to implement the main objectives of the research regarding quantifying the degree in which universities included in the researched population protect the rights and interests of students, the degree in which study programs followed by students from this university centers succeed to satisfy their expectations, and the degree in which services offered by universities satisfy them, a comparative analysis of study programs offered by five representative Romanian universities at national level, followed by a quantitative research among their students were used.

The comparative analysis was based on determining the links between several relevant factors for the Romanian education system: the evolution of the number of higher education institutions (universities and faculties), the structure of faculties from public and private field, the evolution of students enrolled in these universities, the structure of students after specializations followed, the evolution of teachers from university education and the dynamic of the number of students, namely, the graduates.

Data collected from annual reports of rectorate, senate etc. referred to the information available for the academic year 2014-2015. These issues were researched in 5 universities, selected according to concentration of universities, faculties, namely study programs:

- capital of the country Bucharest, which is the university center with the highest concentration of public and private universities;
- Cluj-Napoca university center, holding most of the faculties in the provinces, being an important cluster for analysis;
- University centers Braşov and Târgu Mureş, with an average number of universities and faculties;
- University center Galaţi with a small number of universities, respectively faculties.

Within each university center, the selection of the most representative university as number of faculties and study programs at all levels was followed (bachelor, master, PhD.) but also according to availability of public information on the web page. Data was collected from the following universities: University of Bucharest; Babeş-Bolyai University from Cluj-Napoca; Dunărea de Jos University of Galaţi; Petru Maior University of Târgu Mureş; Transilvania University of Braşov.

The quantitative research methodology was based on a survey method using the questionnaire administered through computer as a tool of data collection (CAWI – *Computer Assisted Web Interviewing*) (Barbu and Isaic-Maniu, 2011). Taking into account the exploratory and empirical character of the research, and the fact that reports where authors had access do not clearly mention the size of the researched population, the unprobabilistic sampling „snowball” type method was applied. Consequently, only the students that fulfil the required criteria to be included in the research (membership at one of the five universities) were considered (Luo, 2009).

Before implementation, the questionnaire was pretested on a ten-person sample. Therefore, it was possible to identify and eliminate inaccuracies, incorrect formulations or content mistakes and also refining for a better correlation with the objectives set (Lefter, 2004). After reviewing and reformulating questions, the empirical research was implemented

between April and May 2016. The questionnaire containing demographic data of respondents, but also questions on the research topic was posted on the Google Docs platform (Form function), the respondents introducing the answers directly into the browser. This method is relatively easy for the user, not being necessary additional configurations, the answers being given directly in the browser offered by the operating system (Pop et al., 2011; Dinu et al., 2016). Finally, 438 answers were validated, obtained from the students enrolled in the researched universities in all three university studies levels: bachelor, master and PhD.

Taking into account the exploratory character of the research, and the fact that the domestic literature and the foreign one did not allow the identification of similar studies, it was targeted to obtain a high number of questionnaires completed by the students. The sample included: 56% students from the Transilvania University of Braşov, 14% are students of the University of Bucharest, 11% students of Petru Maior University of Târgu Mureş, 10% belong to Babeş-Bolyai University from Cluj-Napoca and 9% from the Dunărea de Jos University of Galaţi. The group consisted of 58% female students and 42% males, of which 77% are enrolled at Bachelor, 13% at Master courses and 10% at PhD.

In interpreting results of the quantitative research it was pursued to show the existence of significant differences between the respondents' gender and their opinion regarding the protection of rights and own interests within universities where they attend courses. In this respect, the following hypothesis was tested:

H_1 : There are differences between students irrespective of their gender regarding the protection of their rights and interests.

Its checking was carried out with the help of the nonparametric test Kolmogorov-Smirnov.

4. Results and discussions

4.1. Comparative analysis of universities in the Romanian higher education system

In 2016 in Romania almost 100 higher education institutions were functioning, of which: 56 certified state universities, 37 certified private universities and 10 private higher education institutions authorised to function temporarily (MNESR2016a; 2016b). The increase in the number of private and state owned universities has negatively influenced the quality of higher education (Palade et al., 2013), because resources are used chaotically, sometimes study programs which are graduated by a low number of students receiving finance. By analyzing the infrastructure of the higher education system, the state-owned sector has an advantage of the number of faculties and study programs. In the academic year 2014-2015, of the total Romanian faculties, those from state owned universities represented 55%, the rest being found in private universities (MNESR, 2016a).

From 48 universities in 1990, their number has increased to 101 in 2014 (Palade, 2016). Although, at the beginning of the year 2000, in Romania, there were almost 120 universities, because of reorganizations and mergers, of less attractive study programs offers, of a limited ability to present a consolidated curricula, of a teaching staff poorly trained, and change of legislation, their number has started to decrease. On the other hand, the number of faculties has a spectacular increase between 1990 (186 faculties) and the academic year 2005-2006 (770 faculties). The number of private faculties has reached a

maximum of 264 in the academic year 2001-2002, and in the public sector the maximum number was 558 faculties in the academic year 2006-2007. From 192.810 students in the academic year 1990-1991 the number reached 907.810 students in the academic year 2007-2008 at all educational levels, currently being on a downward slope (NIS, 2016b). This trend is caused mainly by the demographic changes after the revolution (Stanef and Manole, 2013), fact that constrains the faculties to offer a value added in the services and study programs.

In the academic years 2011-2012, namely 2013-2014, we can notice a reorientation of students enrolled in the higher education system from Romania towards technical, pedagogical and economic sciences specializations (NIS, 2015). In fact, of the total number of students enrolled in higher education (Bachelor, Master, PhD, postgraduate and Postdoctoral programs) in the academic year 2014-2015, 25.3% were enrolled at business, administration and law programs, 21.4% at engineering, processing and constructions programs and 12.6% at health and social assistance programs (NIS, 2016a). The number of students enrolled at bachelor level has recorded the highest value in the academic year 2007-2008, further, the number of students decreasing annually with almost 100.000 students. The number of graduates has reached the maximum level of 232,885 persons in 2007-2008 (NIS, 2011). Although in 1990 the number of professors increased due to an increase in the number of higher education institutions, from a maximum of 30.137 persons in the academic year 2003-2004 to 27.772 persons in the academic year 2014-2015 (NIS, 2010; 2016a).

At the level of Romania, it can be seen a relative concentration of the public and private higher education institutions in a few university centers, especially those with tradition. (table no. 1)

Table no. 1: Public and private universities and faculties according to size of the university centers from Romania in 2015

University center	Center type	Public education		Private education		Total	
		Universities	Faculties	Universities	Faculties	Universities	Faculties
București	Very large	17	93	15	64	32	157
Cluj-Napoca	Large	6	42	4	9	10	51
Iași		5	37	5	8	10	45
Timișoara		4	29	3	10	7	39
Constanța		3	20	2	7	5	27
Brașov	Average	2	19	1	6	3	25
Craiova		2	16	0	1	2	17
Tg. Mureș		3	10	1	5	4	15
Galați	Small	1	13	1	3	2	16
Pitești		1	12	1	4	2	16

Sources: Gogu and Mureșan, 2014; MNESR, 2016a; NIES, 2016b.

As shown in table no. 1, the analyzed university centers were divided on categories depending on the number of universities and faculties, namely: very large – Bucharest, large - Cluj-Napoca, Iași, Timisoara; average - Constanța, Brașov, Craiova, Tg. Mureș; small - Galați and Pitești. At the level of the university center Bucharest, in 2015, 17 public universities with 93 faculties and 15 private universities with 64 faculties were active. The percentage of public universities is higher than the private universities, but the difference between the two is not significant.

In the category of large university centers, the difference between the number of higher education institutions from Cluj-Napoca, Iasi and Timisoara is reduced. In Cluj-Napoca six public universities (with 42 faculties) and four private (with only nine faculties) function, while in Timisoara there are four public institutions (with 29 faculties) and three private (with 10 faculties). It can be noticed that at Iasi, the percentage of public and private universities is the same, with five public and five private universities. A big difference can be noticed at the number of faculties, with 37 public and only 8 private. In the average university centers, in Constanta there are three public universities and two private, in Brasov two public and one private, at Craiova two public universities and none private, and in Targu Mures three public universities and one private, the number of faculties being lower (15). In the category of small university centers are included Galati and Pitesti, each with two public universities. We can notice that dividing university centers depending on their size is correct.

Out of the four categories considered a representative university was selected, being included in the analysis: University of Bucharest – UB (from the category very large university center), Babes-Bolyai University of Cluj Napoca - BBU (from the category large university center), Transilvania University – TU and Petru Maior University of Targu Mures - PMU (both from the category of medium university centers) and Dunarea de Jos University of Galati – DJU (from the category small university center). Representative information regarding the five relevant universities are presented in table no. 2.

Table no. 2: Summative situation of the comparative analysis in universities considered (academic year 2014-2015)

Number	UB	UBB	UPM	UDJ	UT
<i>faculties</i>	17	21	3	14	18
<i>professors</i>	2.568	2.694	141	1.143	1.305
<i>Bachelor and Master study programs</i>	295	537	39	156	177
<i>Bachelor students</i>	21.465	28.180	2.514	9.016	14.957
<i>Master students</i>	8.191	8.216	639	2.281	3.571
<i>PhD students</i>	1.649	1.225	38	202	441
Total students	31.305	37.621	3.191	11.499	18.969

Of the universities analyzed, the longest tradition is kept by University of Bucharest (founded in 1864), followed by BBU (1919). In comparison, Transylvania University of Brasov is founded in a new structure in 1971, continuing the tradition of the Forestry Institute (founded in 1948). In the autumn of 1948 the Faculty of Land Improvements was founded in Galati - the first in the country with this profile which becomes Dunarea de Jos university. Petru Maior University of Targu Mures is founded in 1991, being the successor of the Pedagogical Institute founded in 1960.

As it is shown in table no. 2, of the five universities, the highest number of faculties can be found at BBU (21). At TU there are 18 faculties, while at BU 17 and at DJU 14. In the opposite direction, at PMU only 3 faculties are recorded. In the 21 faculties of BBU 2694 professors are employed, while at BU, in the 17 faculties there are 2568 professors. At TU there are less than 1300 professors, in comparison with 1143 from DJU. The lowest number of professors, can be found, as expected in PMU (141). At BBU there are 537 Bachelor and

Master programs, while at BU only 295. At TU there are 177 programs, 156 at DJU and only 39 at PMU. In the five universities analyzed, the highest number of students is recorded at UBB with 37.621 students. A comparative number is recorded at BU with 31.305 students. At TU attend courses 18.969 persons, and at DJU- 11.499, and at PMU are enrolled the lowest number of students- 3191.

4.2. The results of the quantitative research

In order to quantify the degree in which the universities included in the researched population protect student rights and interests an interval scale in five steps, with equal distances between levels was used. A balanced distribution around the intermediate level of the scale (neither agree, nor disagree) can be noticed, with 42,2% of the respondents indicating this level, and 30,4% agreeing with the fact that the university followed protects their rights and interests. Only 2,7% of the respondents totally agree with the fact that the university followed protects specific rights and interests, while 8,2% totally disagree. (Table no. 3)

Table no. 3: Assessing the extent to which university considered protects students' rights and interests

Agreement level	Gender		Total
	Masculine	Feminine	
Totally disagree	8,2%	8,2%	8,2%
Disagree	14,1%	14,1%	16,4%
Neither agree nor disagree	44,3%	44,3%	42,2%
Agree	29,8%	29,8%	30,4%
Totally agree	3,5%	3,5%	2,7%
Total	100%	100%	100%

From the distribution of answers, we can notice that at the level “*totally disagree*” equal percentages between female and male population were recorded. However, from the distribution of relative frequencies on both groups it can be observed that at the female students the neutral level of answer (neither agree, nor disagree) recorded a higher percentage than for male students. Respondents agreement recorded a higher percentage among men, than among women. All these can show the existence of a significant difference among the two groups.

In order to verify this statement, the test Kolmogorov–Smirnov was used, for the following:

$$n_1 = \text{number of the women sample}; n_1 = 255; \quad (1)$$

$$n_2 = \text{number of the men sample}; n_2 = 183; \quad (2)$$

$$n = n_1 + n_2 = 438 \text{ subjects} \quad (3)$$

Taking into account the cumulated relative frequencies of both subsamples, the statistical hypotheses are stated as following:

H_0 : The maximum difference between cumulative relative frequencies for women (F_1) and for men (F_2) is zero.

H_1 : The maximum difference between cumulative relative frequencies for women (F_1) and for men (F_2) is nonzero. (Table no. 4)

Table no. 4: Calculation of differences between cumulative relative frequencies

Assessment	Relative frequencies		Cumulative relative frequencies		Difference ($F_1 - F_2$)
	Men	Women	Men	Women	
Totally disagree	8,20%	8,20%	8,20%	8,20%	0,00%
Disagree	19,70%	14,10%	27,90%	22,30%	5,60%
Neither agree, nor disagree	39,30%	44,30%	67,20%	66,60%	0,60%
Agree	31,10%	29,80%	98,30%	96,40%	1,90%
Totally agree	1,60%	3,50%	100%	100%	0%
Total	100%	100%			

It can be noticed that the maximum difference between cumulative frequencies is:

$$D = \max_k |F_1(k) - F_2(k)| = |27,9\% - 22,3\%| = 5,6\% \quad (4)$$

It was further calculated the theoretical value of D:

$$D_\alpha = 136 \sqrt{\frac{n_1 + n_2}{n_1 * n_2}} \Rightarrow D_\alpha = 136 \sqrt{\frac{255 + 183}{255 * 183}} = 13.17\% \quad (5)$$

According to the decision rule the following results can be reached:

$D_{calc} = 5,6 < D_\alpha = 13.17 \Rightarrow$ is accepted $H_0 \Rightarrow$ among the two groups there are no differences about the protection of students rights and interests in the five universities.

Therefore, the satisfaction level of respondents on the study program followed was further measured. The average of recorded answers, for each higher education institution included in the study, regarding the degree in which respondents consider that the study program followed satisfies their expectations exceeds 3 points, having values between 3,21-3,49 points (figure no. 1).

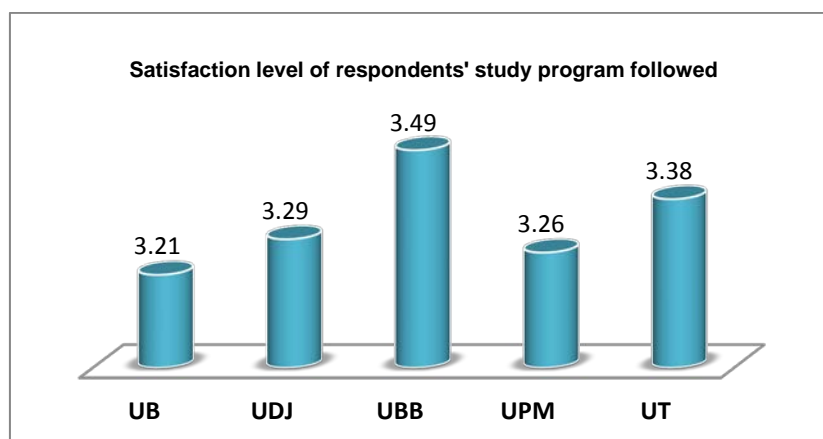


Figure no. 1: Satisfaction level of respondents' study program followed

The students from BBU show the highest satisfaction level on the study program followed, in comparison with the answers offered by the students from the other analyzed centers. The rest of the averages recorded at the level of higher education institutions were: 3,38 points TU, 3,26 points PMU, namely 3,21 points at BU. As a conclusion, the students

enrolled in the universities mentioned in the research, from Cluj-Napoca, Galați and Brașov have a higher satisfaction level regarding the study program followed, in comparison with the students enrolled in universities from Târgu Mureș, namely Bucharest.

As results from table no. 5 show, the highest values regarding the extent to which the study program followed satisfies students' expectations, is at the answer options 3 and 4, for Bachelor level and Master, and PhD, keeping the trend recorded at the level of researched universities. Making a comparison between respondents' study levels it is revealed that at PhD there is no answer for the level *to a low extent*, while at Bachelor there are 6% and at Master 7%. For level 2, the highest percentages are recorded at Master, showing an increased dissatisfaction of the master students. The highest percentages are recorded by the PhD students for level 4 of the scale, exceeding half of them (53%). From the analysis of these data we conclude that the PhD study program records the highest values on the scale 4 and 5 proving a satisfaction of PhD students' expectations. Percentages decrease for Bachelor and Master level.

Table no. 5: The extent to which the study program followed satisfies students expectations

Study level		Bachelor	Master	PhD.	Total
<i>The extent to which the study program followed satisfies students expectations</i>	1 – to a low extent	6%	7%	0%	6%
	2	9%	21%	2%	10%
	3	39%	30%	28%	37%
	4	36%	36%	53%	38%
	5 – to a high extent	9%	5%	16%	9%
Total		100%	100%	100%	100%

Regarding the satisfaction degree on the services offered (teaching activity, auxiliary services, etc.) by the higher education institution, for all the five university centers researched it exceeds 3 points (figure no. 2), the average of answers having values between 3,33-3,60 points.

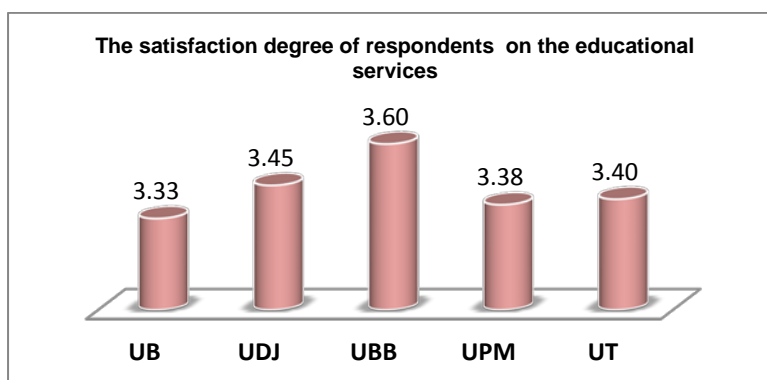


Figure no. 2. The satisfaction degree of respondents on the educational services

The highest average is recorded by the students from BBU (3,60 points), proving once more their satisfaction, in comparison with the answers offered by the students of other university centers. The rest of averages recorded at the level of higher education institutions were: 3,45 points at DJU, 3,40 points at TU, 3,38 points at PMU and the lowest average recorded (with a value of 3,33 points) at BU. As a conclusion, the students enrolled at university centers for the research, from Cluj-Napoca, Galati and Brasov have a higher satisfaction level regarding educational services, compared to students enrolled at other university centers from Targu Mures, namely Bucharest.

According to the results obtained from table no. 6, the highest values are recorded for the satisfied answer option for Bachelor, Master and PhD level. Making a comparison between respondents' study level we can notice that at PhD there is no answer for the level totally dissatisfied, while at Bachelor there are 3% and at Master 4%. The highest percentages are recorded by the PhD students for level 4 of the scale, exceeding half of them (56%). The conclusion from this analysis is that respondents, declare to be satisfied on the educational services, regardless of the study level followed within the five university centers included in the research.

Table no. 6: The satisfaction level of respondents on the educational services on study cycles

Study level		Bachelor	Master	PhD	Total
<i>The satisfaction level of respondents on the educational services</i>	Totally unsatisfied	3%	4%	0%	3%
	Unsatisfied	14%	11%	7%	13%
	Neither satisfied, nor dissatisfied	34%	36%	26%	33%
	Satisfied	44%	38%	56%	44%
	Very satisfied	6%	13%	12%	7%
Total		100%	100%	100%	100%

Regarding the teaching activity currently performed by the higher education institution, respondents had the possibility to choose several answer options, 557 answers being recorded, the most relevant being shown in figure no. 3.

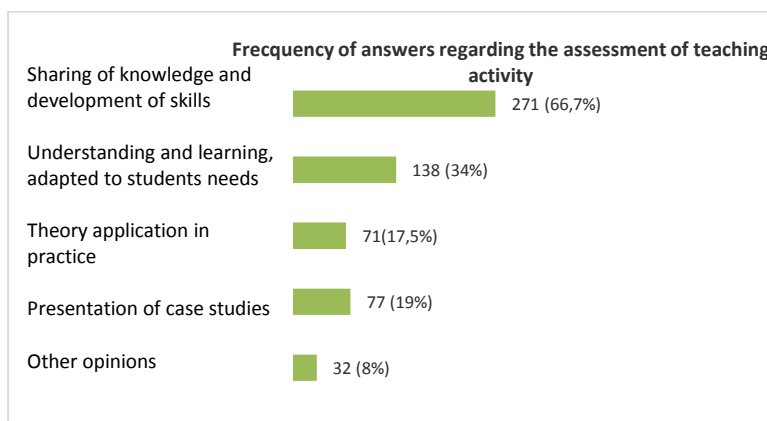


Figure no. 3. The assessment of teaching activity

Most of the answers (namely 271, representing 66.7%) showed that the teaching activity is focused on the sharing of knowledge and development of skills. The option according to which teaching activity is oriented on understanding and learning, adapted to students' needs recorded 138 answers, representing 34%. Case studies/examples presentations recorded 77 answers (19%) and the answer option „it is focused on theory application in practice” recorded 71 (17.5%). At the answer option *other opinions* which recorded 8% the following answers were mentioned: *a high focus on theory and a low focus on practice* (answer given by 14 subjects), *focus on memorization* (9 respondents), *professors attitude*, *teaching activity not correlated with market requirements*, *no focus on understanding the course*, *focus on empirical research* and *focus on individual study*.

Conclusions

From the data analyzed at the level of the five higher education institutions it can be noticed that the larger the university center, the higher its capacity to set up new faculties, to invest and develop. Furthermore, all data analyzed is closely linked with the number of existing faculties in the university center.

The main research topic was the measurement of the degree in which Romanian students' rights and interests are protected. The results of the quantitative research show the relatively low percentage (30,4%) of respondents who consider that the university where they study protects their specific rights and interests, while most of the answers highlighted the existence of an indecisive attitude regarding this issue (42%). In authors' opinion, the result can be considered worrying for the higher education institutions' management from our country.

Also, the results obtained afford to achieve a hierarchy among university centers analyzed. In terms of respondents' satisfaction on the study program followed, it can be noticed that the higher education institutions from Cluj-Napoca, Brasov and Galati have recorded the highest averages. Furthermore, by measuring the satisfaction level on the educational services offered to students, it can be seen that the hierarchy between university centers analyzed is kept. On the other hand, the comparisons made between study levels, namely Bachelor, Master and PhD, suggest that the doctoral study level ensures the highest satisfaction level among interviewed students.

The quantitative research conducted has a few limitations. These include: inability to extrapolate results at the level of the whole researched population, the lack of an interview operator when completing the questionnaire can lead to misinterpreting of some questions by respondents, low attention to answers. Another limit of the quantitative research is, in the authors' opinion, the fact that only five university centers from the country were included in the study.

The authors recommend to the Romanian universities' management to develop effective strategies that can allow the protection of students' rights and interests, to permanently identify the needs of effective and also potential customers, and to adapt the educational services offer according to the requirements of the labor market from our country. For each issue researched, the authors have made suggestions which can help to improve the analyzed situation. A first proposal is the opportunity to carry out a quantitative research on a representative sample at national level, pilot program to promote the actions of protecting student rights and interests, and of professors. Monitoring the effects of the pilot program

should represent the following strategic action of universities. Starting from the results of all the activities described within the article and of future actions, we suggest to develop a long term strategy regarding the major interest topic- protection of students' rights and interests within the Romanian higher education system.

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