

PORTUGUESE PUBLIC UNIVERSITY STUDENT EXPECTATIONS: A STAKEHOLDER THEORY BASED APPROACH

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INTRODUCTION

In accordance with the importance that the student stakeholder represents to universities, the objective of this research project was to identify and classify the leading expectations of students at Portuguese state universities. In order to achieve this, the study adopted both the premises of Stakeholder Theory and the approaches of earlier studies on the management of university stakeholders.

The identification of student demands within the scope of Stakeholder Theory has not been a common theme in the literature. There are only a handful of studies raising these issues. In these few studies, student demands are normally approached from the perspective of university managers and not the students themselves (Chapman et al., 2010). Thus, we opted to look at the expectations of students within the scope of Stakeholder Theory.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Stakeholder Theory

As Clement (2005) stated, modern organisations are placed under ever more pressure to respond to distinct groups of stakeholders. Clarkson (1995) had already pointed out how the survival and success of an organisation depended on the capacity of its managers to generate wealth, value and satisfaction for its stakeholders. Similarly, Cummings and Doh (2000) attribute the competitiveness of a company to its capacity to relate with its stakeholders. Its multiple roles, representing an important factor in the analysis of the company's chain of value, contribute with the information, resources and competences necessary for organisations to cope with uncertain and turbulent environments. Preston and Donaldson (1999) argue that stakeholder management may boost the wealth of the organisation and that economic benefits derive

from positive relationships between an organisation and its stakeholders. The authors necessarily include the determination and evaluation of service value perceptions held by stakeholders, including facets such as the sharing of knowledge, complementary resources, capacities and patterns of cooperation.

University Stakeholder Management

Conway, Mackay and Yorke (1994) highlight how higher education contains multiple stakeholders, simultaneously complementary and contradictory. The different desires and needs of these distinct stakeholders may sometimes enter into conflict and throw up difficulties to strategies designed to meet their needs effectively (taking into consideration the expected results) and efficiently (utilising the minimum level of resources). According to Bertrand and Busugutsala (1998), universities should, beyond actually identifying their respective stakeholders, recognise the different expectations and needs (demands) present in each case. Their approach divided the demands up into three different categories: (i) non-student demands, such as scientific fields, professional entities, employer associations and society as a whole, (ii) the demands of students as individuals, and (iii) the demands of the target group of students who have particular characteristics and for whom universities should provide specific and carefully defined services.

Furthermore, higher education institutions should develop their capacity to manage the pressures applied by the different stakeholder groups as well as the tensions in the co-existence of competition in cooperative regimes. The importance of identifying and guiding stakeholders in accordance with the strategic objectives of the institution needs to be one of the key steps in setting out and implementing a stakeholder management strategy. In order to nurture the development and effectiveness of such strategies, universities should create specific

structures for managing their stakeholder relationships (Jongbloed, Enders and Salerno, 2008).

Each university, in order to be competitive, has to carefully evaluate the challenges and threats posed by the environment, understand stakeholder needs, attract and consolidate resources, face up to external changes and resolve internal problems. The capacity of a university to react to the prevailing environmental threats, to meet the needs of its publics and to resolve internal problems determines the institutional stakeholder orientation (Clarke III, Flaherty and Mottner, 2001, Tam, 2007).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Taking into account that the research objective incorporates the quantification of the perceptions of expectations held by the student stakeholder with the goal of confirming and classifying such demands, this research made recourse to a descriptive-quantitative methodology (Hair Jr. et al., 2003). A descriptive approach was necessary so as to describe the reality analysed from the student point of view. However, the study was also quantitative given the objective of quantifying student perceptions and undertaking statistical confirmation of the results obtained. This objective explains the deployment of the methodology adopted given that it seemed most appropriate to attaining the aforementioned goals.

The target population of this research was made up of all students (irrespective of their level of study) in attendance at eleven of the fifteen Portuguese state universities. The project had received 1,669 correctly completed questionnaires (a total of 163 questionnaires were excluded on found to be incomplete), which enables the statistic validation of the data collected, with the final error determined as 2.43%, a level of significance lower than the maximum rate of 5% as set out by Malhotra (1999). The final response rate stood at 1.29%.

Given the lack of known research identifying student expectations, the questionnaire set out required prior research, of an exploratory nature, for obtaining the evidence necessary to test on the final sample. Hence, we carried out a series of ten interviews with university students. Following content analysis of interview responses, we obtained an initial list of 36 expectations that were subsequently grouped into 25 given the similarities existing between some responses. The data obtained in the exploratory research provided the grounds for the research questionnaire. The characteristic features of this

questionnaire are self-applied, structured and non-disguised (Hair Jr. et al., 2003). The first part of the questionnaire detailed a brief description of the research objectives and its target audience. There then came questions referring to student expectations before proceeding with some questions designed to characterise respondents.

Following the completion of data collection, we proceeded with a range of quantitative analysis tests. The first corresponded to the characterisation of respondents, analysing diverse aspects, with the objective of detecting eventual trends that would compromise the analysis.

First, the data was subject to analysis through descriptive statistics, such as averages, standard deviations, variances, among others. Then, the data was subject to multivariate analysis through multiple linear regression (Hair Jr. et al., 2006). The dependent variables were the general expectations of students about their degree and their university. Meanwhile, the independent variables were the 25 expectations that were subject to evaluation in terms of individual expectations.

In order to classify expectations, the main objective of this study, we adopted the method set out by Garver (2003) and its approach to evaluate the importance of attributes (in this case, student expectations), utilising the results of the perceptions declared by respondents and the statistically calculated importance via multiple linear regression:

- Expectations obtaining higher than average rankings and also attaining statistical significance in regression are considered “key”,
- Expectations obtaining lower than average declared rankings and that do not attain statistical significance in regression are considered “secondary”,
- Expectations obtaining higher than average rankings but which do not attain statistical significance in regression are considered “basic”,
- Expectations obtaining lower than average rankings but which did attain statistical significance in regression are considered “amplifiers”.

Based upon this methodology and the analysis described in this section, it was possible to attain the research objectives: the confirmation and classification by importance of the expectations identified in the exploratory research.

DATA ANALYSIS

For each one of the 25 expectations tested, the student was requested to provide their level of agreement with options ranging from “totally disagree” through to “totally agree”. Analysis of results finds firstly that all expectations returned averages in excess of three meaning and that all expectations tested for were included among student expectations, desires and needs prior to entering university. The importance of measuring expectations after having begun their studies is that prior to embarking upon them, there is neither the perception nor the understanding as to the reality of university. Only after utilisation of the organisational services is the student able to compare that expected with that received and hence ensuring the opportunity to determine the expectations the student brought into the university and when the reality becomes clear (Mainardes, Alves and Domingues, 2009).

In general terms, the student nurtures greater expectations on entering the university in relation to the degree (an average of 3.90, which practically corresponds to the highest level of expectation), even while expectations in relation to the university are also relatively high (3.75). Hence, prior to beginning university, the student, in various different ways, has high expectations, especially that: on graduation he/she will carry value in the employment market (average of 4.53), that the university has good infrastructures (average of 4.45), that the course content will be up to date (average of 4.45), that the university runs good services (average of 4.44), that both the degree and the university hold strong links with the job market (average of 4.41), and that on graduation the student is able to attain a good job (average of 4.40). In summary, these are the greatest expectations of students on entering university and clearly without overlooking the 19 other expectations, which were all confirmed by students with 17 of the 25 expectations getting average figures in excess of 4, which represents high expectations in relation to all seventeen. Furthermore, we may state that in general terms, the main expectations declared by students, on entering university, focus on the subsequent professional opportunities (value in the job market, a good job, connections with the job market), in degree content (updated course content) and the university in itself (infrastructures and services). These are the points around which students focus their greatest attention and hence deserve attention by the university management, a factor also found by Mainardes, Alves and Domingues (2009) in a similar research project undertaken in Brazil.

Furthermore, the lesser student expectations according to their own opinions relate to participation in voluntary social work (average of 3.07), learning to manage their time (average of 3.36) and accessing university financial support (average of 3.47). That is, despite displaying positive expectations as regards this aspect, the other expectations prove more important and more susceptible to dissatisfaction. Therefore, these aspects with lesser averages may be factors that came as a surprise to respondents as they had no particular pre-established position on them.

Nevertheless, the averages are fairly high in overall terms and this may pose certain difficulties to university managers in their efforts to focus upon the expectations of this stakeholder as recommended by Stakeholder Theory (Clarkson, 1995). Hence, it is necessary to discriminate between the expectations declared by students in accordance with the importance attributed (Mainardes, Alves and Raposo, 2010). To this end, one useful option is the model by Garver (2003), as explained above. Model implementation requires the application of multivariate analysis, multiple linear regression.

This analysis was carried out for two different situations. Firstly, general student expectations were considered in relation to the degree as a dependent variable. Afterwards, the same process was undertaken in relation to general student expectations in relation to the university. Hence, expectations were classified as follows:

- Core expectations (high average declared values and multiple linear regression statistical significance): Level of study demand, Level of university connections with the job market, Personal fulfilment, Pleasant and safe university environment.
- Basic expectations (high averages in the attributed importance and not statistically significant in terms of multiple linear regression): Get a good job after finishing studies, Up to date study content, Good university infrastructures, Good university services, Good coordination between lecturing staff, Motivating classes, University agile and adapting to student needs, Modern university technological structures, Freedom of student thinking and expression, New life experiences, Relationships with other universities, Student value in the job market, Events related to the degree.
- Amplifier expectations (low declared expectation averages and multiple linear regression statistical significance): financial support,

- Secondary expectations (low declared expectation averages and not statistically significant in terms of multiple linear regression): Making new friends and a lively academic social life, More practical than theoretical classes, Lecturers available to students, Carrying out scientific research, Clear and well defined bureaucratic processes, Voluntary student participation in social causes, Learning how to manage one's own time.

We may consider that the classification obtained represents the types of student expectations, needs and desires. This classification serves to guide university management in developing their relationships with one of their key stakeholders, the student.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Taking into account that the objectives of this research were to identify and classify by importance student expectations, on completion, we perceive that even while students represent a traditional university stakeholder some findings show that universities are at fault in the level of attention paid to this stakeholder. Drawing upon a diversified sample, with data on the various participant universities and with respondents covering the three cycles of higher education and the respective fields of study, with a range of ages and experiences, we may conclude that the results obtained represent a significant proportion of the reality of higher education taking place in these university organisations. As the data collection process was broad reaching, this correspondingly opens up a wide array of opportunities for future comparative research, deepening the discoveries made here, and providing the first recommendation of our study. In accordance with our findings, it is clear that there is a need to improve the relationship of partnership between students and universities, something that shall be to the benefit of both parties (Arnett, German and Hunt, 2003).

In order to raise the quality of this relationship, stakeholder requirements (expectations, needs, desires), in this case of the students, have to be understood. To this end, the expectations generated by prior qualitative research were tested and confirmed. The 36 initial expectations were reduced to 25 before then being incorporated into the questionnaire. Following analysis of the results, we identified the leading effective student expectations as linked up with the results produced by studying (subsequent professional opportunities), university

infrastructures and services and suitably up to date study content. Of less importance to students are issues such as voluntary social work, time management skills and financial support for studying. These represent the initial findings and similar to those returned by Mainardes, Alves and Domingues (2009).

Furthermore, due to the sheer number of expectations, one fundamental factor is to highlight their respective level of importance. After due analysis of the general student expectations towards their degree and their university (with the results unified due to the level of correlation) via multiple linear regression and the application of the Garver (2003) methodology, we found the most important (key) expectations to be the level of course demand, university connections with the job market, student personal fulfilment and the university environment (pleasant, safe). From the outset, these expectations prove fundamental for the student to establish a strong relationship with the university. Complementarily, university financial support for students emerged as an amplifier. Other expectations proved to be basic across both levels. These results show the alternatives that university management might opt between should they wish to raise the standard of their relationships with this stakeholder (Clarkson, 1995, Polonsky, 1995), one of the guidelines implicit to Stakeholder Theory.

This means universities should focus upon meeting these student expectations and direct their actions towards the key and basic expectations (McCullough and Gremler, 1999). The results obtained for the course of study and for the university provide indicators for the development of the relationship between the university and its students, a leading stakeholder as observed above. The construction of a strong and committed relationship between the university and its students positively contributes towards the development of not only the organisation but also the students themselves (Arnett, German and Hunt, 2003). This process inherently involves actions targeting the core, basic and amplifier expectations and resulting in the most effective benefits without the wasting of resources. In summary, the broad range of research presented here seeks to provide another step forward in the construction of a new university management model based upon Stakeholder Theory. Focusing university actions and policies on meeting stakeholder expectations may result, in practice, in greater university efficiency and effectiveness.

References available on request