

THE ADJUSTMENT OF PERSPECTIVE AMONG STUDENTS REGARDING PROTECTION OF EDUCATIONAL SERVICES' CONSUMER

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Abstract

Academic education services entered Romanians habits more than a century and a half ago, at the beginning as a need for professional development mostly. Paradigm shift from the traditional perspective on education to the knowledge society perspective requires the increasing competitiveness of higher education systems. From this perspective, universities should collaborate frequently with other research institutions, private companies and public institutions, and participate in international research networks, to produce the optics change regarding the protection of educational services consumers: the next generation of students. To determine the above-mentioned change the authors developed and executed the pilot survey, which granted the possibility of testing the set of questionnaires and the relevance of questions. The survey was a random one; most of the responses are complying with the actual configuration in economic higher education institutions. The research objective "Investigation of student opinion of the Bucharest Academy of Economic Studies on changes recorded in the Romanian higher education" consists in the development of an accurate picture of the changes that occurred and are occurring in our education system. The originality of the paper resides in the feasibility of implementing the research results reflecting changes that require an appropriate management allowing institution and its members to accomplish the implementation of changes required by Bologna process in the interests of its main beneficiaries: the students.

Keywords: consumer of education services, students, change management, university, the protection of the consumer, higher economic education

JEL Classification: A22, I21, I23

Introduction

The research undertook portrays an original to the Romanian academic environment, since such an analysis has not yet been conducted. This research highlights the need to conceive changes in the interest of economic environment - in general, focused on consumers of educational services, the students. In addition, we consider that publication of reports on

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Romanian universities activities regarding the alignment to changes imposed by Bologna Process, will increase nationally and internationally their visibility. Also, they will enable interested parties (especially students, as consumers of educational services) to generate their own comparisons with other universities, and not guide themselves exclusively by certain hierarchies made by different institutes.

In literature, Brătianu Constantin (2006, 2008), Nistoreanu Puiu and Nistoreanu Bogdan Gabriel (2008), Cameron Esther and Green Mike (2004), Cook Sarah and Macaulay Steve (2004), Ghergut Alois (2007), Hayes John (2007) s.a addressed the topics. Furthermore, various reports concerned with the change of education management approached these assumptions: *A test of leadership. Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education*, U.S. Department of Education, 2006; *America's Perfect Storm. Three forces changing our nation's future*, ETS Report, 2007; the main documents of the European Commission: *Delivering on the modernization agenda for universities: Education Research and Innovation* (2006), *Mobilizing the brainpower of Europe: enabling higher education to make its full contribution to the Lisbon Strategy* (2005) or the recent *Report of the Presidential Commission for analysis and policy making in education and research*.

Protection of educational services' consumer has been addressed in reports conducted and provided by various organizations such as OECD -*Enhancing consumer protection in cross border higher education: key issues related to quality assurance, accreditation, and recognition of qualification*, from the forum Trade in educational services. Managing the internalization of post-secondary education, (2003), SWAHS (Sydney West Area Health Service) - *Consumer Rights and Responsibilities Policy* (2008), GSA (General Services Administration) - *Consumer Action Handbook. Be a smarter consumer*, Federal Citizen Information System (2009).

The character of novelty within the theory and practice of change management in higher education institutions in Romania and the possibility of using research results for improving educational management activities are based mostly on the loyalty of the educational services' consumers (student community) and the members of the academic community' s ability to take on change.

Taking into account these circumstances and the changes taking place in Romanian universities a pilot research was conducted, based on questionnaires, among economics students as consumers of educational services.

Data collected from the questionnaires was processed through office editing activities (checking, correcting the data and exclusion of questionnaires that had many different unanswered questions) and encryption (in case of using the scale methods of semantic differential type and the situation of using mixed questions, which requested respondents to provide another response than those stipulated in the questions of the questionnaire).

Ulterior to processing, the data was subjected to analysis process, which involved the use of statistic-mathematical techniques for the fulfillment of the following objectives: determining the central tendency for variables investigated, characterizing the variation and distribution of variables by presenting frequency distribution (absolute, relative and cumulative) both as tabular and graphical form as well as measuring the degree of association among different variables and redeeming intensity of links found.

1. Establishing research coordinates

To achieve the objective proposed in this paper, theoretical and practicable aspects were combined during the research. The methods used in the undertaken research were varied and in line with the objectives. These methods are: documentary study which involves two aspects, respectively bibliographic documentation from internal and external sources; theoretical analysis, observation, qualitative and quantitative analysis of the characteristics of the Bologna process; practicable documentation and collection of informative material developed through research in the field; statistical analysis of data; synthesis of information.

Theoretical Documentation aimed to identify and review the state of knowledge in change management, university management, and changes in the Romanian higher education system under Bologna process.

To realize the survey by questionnaire a questionnaire with ramifications was used on students. The questionnaire comprises mainly closed questions; the administration of the survey questionnaire was the survey. The resulting sample includes a target group.

Through the chosen research, we intend to obtain information on changes of the Romanian higher education system under Bologna. Equally, we intend to clarify through the results obtained that are the assessments of the relevant persons for these changes. Modeling the level of quality is a mathematical method used in developing a model of optimized features, as close to the ideal one.

Researched statistical collectivity comprised persons over 18 years, students from the Academy of Economic Studies in Bucharest. Therefore, the individual consumer of educational services represented the observation and survey unit.

The method for gathering information consisted in direct research of survey type, using structured interview technique. The information collection instrument was the questionnaire. It was applied in the period of March 2 to April 16 2009, in the Academy of Economic Studies in Bucharest to students - consumers of educational services - at the end of seminars, the answers for the questions being recorded by respondents on questionnaires submitted.

The sampling method was random, this being a pilot investigation. In the research, 525 students participated. The sampling scheme is simple random.

Information collection process was realized at a rate of about 78% female and 22% male, a situation currently in line with the gender representation of the student community in the Bucharest Academy of Economic Studies, adequately reflecting the gender distribution in statistical terms of the consumers of educational services. Using the absolute frequencies of the 525 respondents, 114 were men and 411 women.

Sample distribution by age groups was not proportional, because the student community structure based on the criterion mentioned is not similar to that existing in the Statistical Yearbook. Therefore, the age range with the highest frequency was considered to be the 21 years (48%, 252 respondents), followed by student segment of 20 years (38%, 198 respondents) and the 22-24 years (10%, 54 respondents). The lowest frequencies were recorded in the 25-28 years age groups (2%, 12 respondents) and those over 28 years (2%, 9 respondents).

2. Interpretation of the results of the research undertaken within the student community

Questionnaire on "Investigation of the students of the Bucharest Academy of Economic Studies opinion regarding the changes recorded in Romanian higher education system" started with the first question on: "In conformity with the objectives of the Bologna Process the higher education system was restructured in three cycles, to harmonize the European higher education system regarding the duration of studies. How would you rate the necessity of change in your opinion?"

The distribution of responses (Figure no. 1) was concentrated on "average" level - 443 respondents consumers of educational services (about 84.38%) and 368 of them (about 70.1%) considering this restructure "highly" and "medium" necessary; under the average value being found only 15.62% (82 respondents).

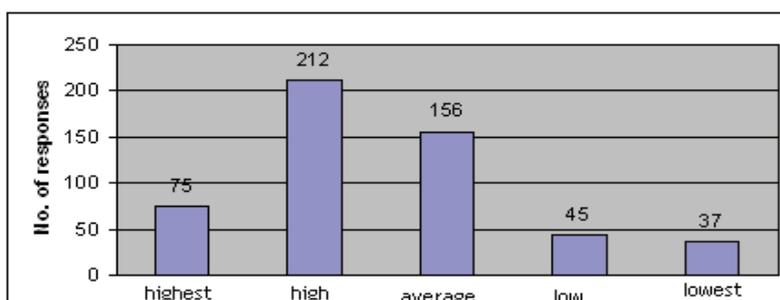


Figure no. 1: The need for restructuring the higher education system on three cycles

Knowing "that the change of the Bologna process involves the recognition of diplomas", the paper analyzed the assessments of student's vis-à-vis of this change.

The overwhelming majority of students, consumers of educational services (Figure no. 2) appreciate the recognition of diplomas and qualifications at European level, this statement was made by 452 respondents (86.1%) - to note, however, most responses ("high importance") to this question, 289 respondents (55.0%), appreciate "positive" moderate; other 13.9% shared descending from a 42 (8.0%) neutral assessment to 23 assessments ("low importance" - 4.38%) respectively 8 assessments ("very low importance"-1.52%).

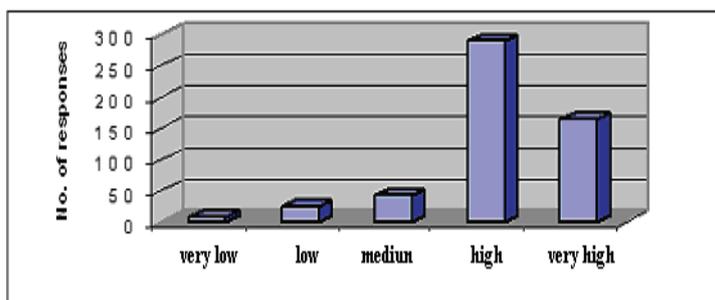


Figure no. 2: The importance of recognition of diplomas and student qualifications at European level

In assessing the “degree of utility associated to the development of a credit transfer system among EU member countries”, about 70% of students have appreciated - again majority noted, this component from the “medium” to “highest” value. The “small” and “smallest” degree of utility was assessed only by 30% of educational services consumers.

Regarding „the assurance of students’ mobility among EU countries and its contribution to raising the level of professional training of students” (Figure no. 3) over half of the respondents, consumers of educational services believe that this assurance raises “high” and “medium”, their level of professional training. Only 5% of respondents “negatively” assessed the consequence of mobility.

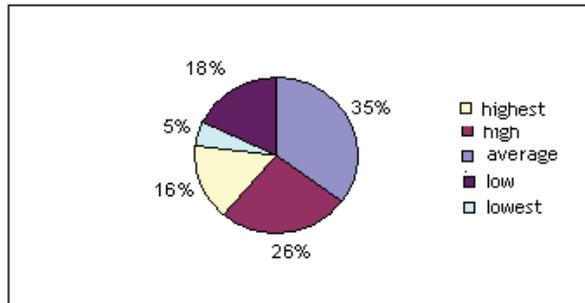


Figure no. 3: Perception of students on the level increasing of personal training by providing mobility between EU Member States

To the question, „How would you rate the role of the research in your professional training?” (Figure no. 4) an average of the responses reveal minor interest that students, as consumers of educational services show towards research, during academic years.

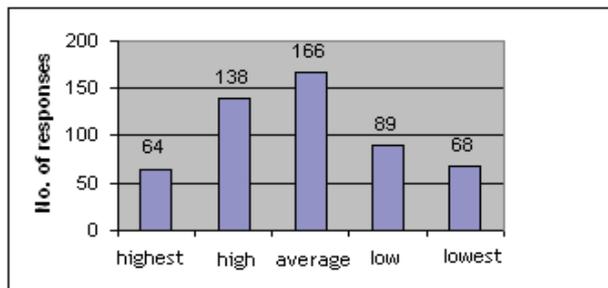


Figure no. 4: Importance of the research in professional training

This configuration, bell shaped, focused on the answer „neither favorable nor unfavorable” with close values of the right branch (203) to the left (157), is in line with the number of students participating in students scientific communications sessions, and students share in the structure of scientific research teams in the departments or research centers of each faculty in the Bucharest Academy of Economic Studies.

The affirmation is supported also by the answers for the following question: „How would you rate the involvement/possible involvement of students in research projects developed by the university departments?”. We note that 60% of students, consumers of educational services assessed with "any favorable or unfavorable" this component, above this limit

being only 6%, considering the involvement with „unfavorable” and 34% „very unfavorable”.

Regarding the “How would you rate the duration of the specialty studies for the students (cycle I)” (Figure no. 5) there was a negative focus to the “negative” responses, 316 (60%) students, consumers of educational services are “undecided”, 34% (179 students) considering the duration “unfavorable” and “very unfavorable” and only 6% (30 students) considering the new period of studies as “favorable” and “very favorable”. The responses reveal the homogeneity of those that come to higher economic education, outside the economic high school or classes with an economic profile.

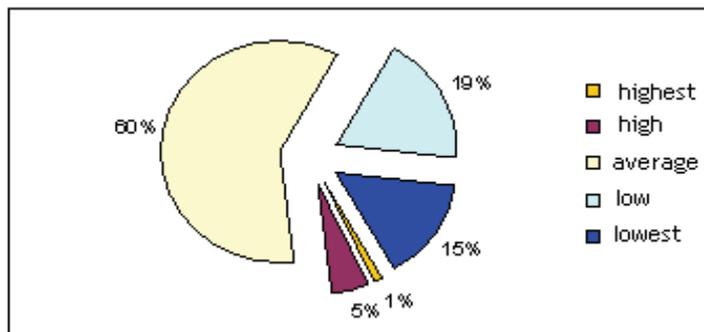


Figure no. 5: Perceptions on the specialty study period followed by students in cycle I

To the question: “How would you rate the utility degree of the courses studied in first cycle for your economic academic background?” (Figure no. 6) 36% of responses showing a perception of “favorable” and “very favorable” compared to only 15% “unfavorable” and “very unfavorable” perception, and a share of 47% indifference.

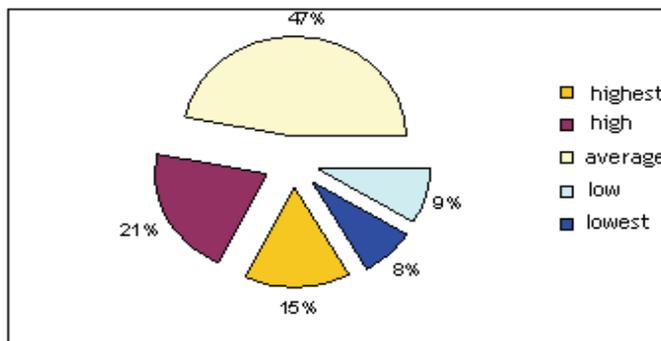


Figure no. 6: Perceptions on the utility grade of the disciplines studied in cycle I to prepare for economic domain

These values are due to a large extent, the fact that most respondents were first and second year students, and curricula in the first two years contain couple of majors.

When in the research the career term is used, (“How would you rate the utility degree of the courses studied in first cycle, for your future career, in terms of the development of skills

and competencies required by market labor?") (Figure no. 7) we noticed that to "unfavorable" and "very unfavorable" area has 47%, a noticeable decrease in the area of indifference 37% and a significant decrease of the perception area "favorable" and "very favorable" to 16%.

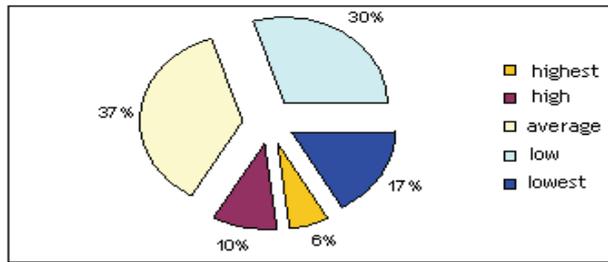


Figure no. 7: Perceptions on the utility grade of courses studied in the cycle I for career

To those specified in the previous interpretation the small dimension of applicable into practice activities and the connection with business, even the concern for certainly getting a job and, not ultimately, the current economic crisis should be added.

Research is nuanced by the following question relating to "How would you rate the fact that economic knowledge acquired in the Romanian higher education simplifies further studies in the European Union?". Analyses of responses indicate the fact students, as consumers of educational services are conscious by the necessity of good accumulation of economic knowledge in the country to continue studies in Europe. Only 79 students (15.05%) rated with "small" and "very small" the necessity of economic knowledge acquired in the Romanian higher education to simplify future studies in EU, the rest (84.95%) rated with "medium", "high" and "very high" this aspect.

From question number 11, the emphasis is on teaching activities carried out in the Bucharest Academy of Economic Studies. Thus, to the question "What is your overall opinion on the quality of teaching and seminar activities that you followed up to now?" (Figure no. 8) there is an assessment of majority "very favorable" (162 students) and "favorable" (248 students), only 52 undecided assessments (9.90%) and 63 negative (12.00%) – "unfavorable" (38 students), "very unfavorable" (25 students). 78.10% of the responses were "favorable".

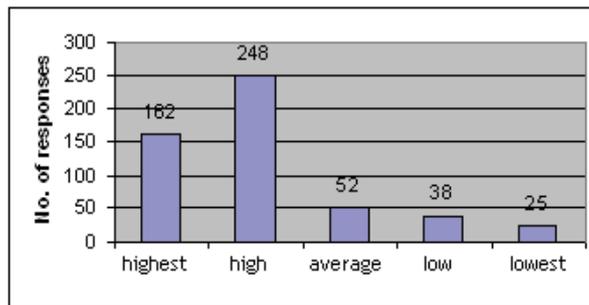


Figure no. 8: Opinion on courses and seminars activities

Related to “the activity in classes and seminars?” (Figure no. 9) analysis of the responses reveal the existence of 77% of students “satisfied” and “totally satisfied”, 15% of the students are “less satisfied” and 8% “dissatisfied” or “totally dissatisfied”.

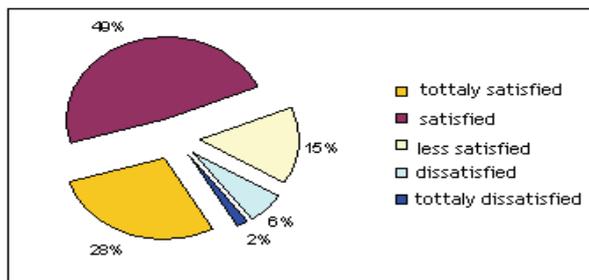


Figure no. 9: The degree of satisfaction on the courses and seminars activity

Regarding “the main causes underlying grievances” nominations like: “too much theory; unnecessary information for the profession” (Figure no. 10) were found - for other reasons and between those who qualified with this issue (23% of previous question respondents: “less satisfied”, “dissatisfied” or “totally dissatisfied”).

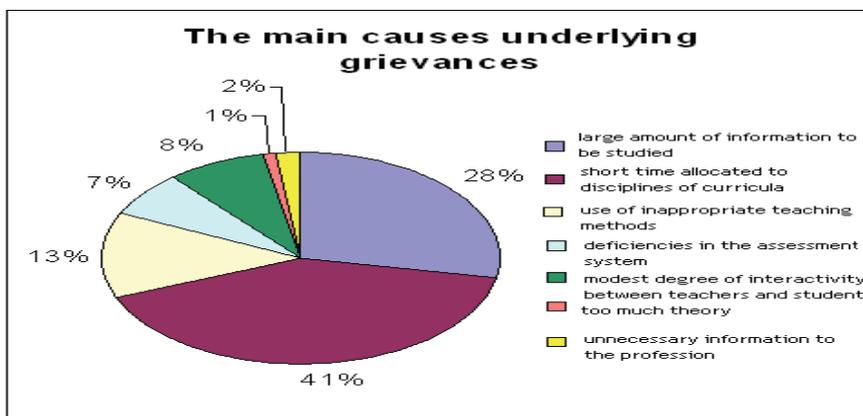


Figure no. 10: Causes of dissatisfaction

The main complaints had the following values:

- large amount of information to be studied - 32
- short time allocated to disciplines of curricula – 47
- use of inappropriate teaching methods - 15
- deficiencies in the assessment system – 8
- modest degree of interactivity between teachers and students – 9
- too much theory – 1
- unnecessary information to the profession - 2

For the next interrogation “How would you rate the professional training of the teachers who have taught courses and seminars on subjects that you studied till now?”, (Figure no. 11) the vast majority of teachers were categorized to have had “average”, “good” and “very good” professional training, only few were classified with an “inadequate” or “very inadequate” training.

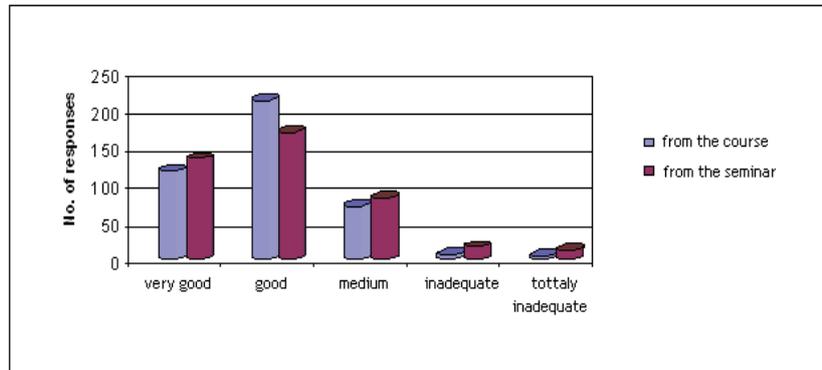


Figure no. 11: Perceptions on teacher professional training

Additionally, it can be mentioned that teaching staff at the tutorial classes have a higher professional training than those from the teaching classes - classified with grade “very good”; teaching staff at the classes, generally better trained than the segment of the tutorials - are rated with grade “good”; and cases of teachers with “inadequate” or “totally inadequate” training are more common in tutorials activities, than in the teaching classes.

Regarding “the aspects of the teaching system in higher education” (Figure no. 12) students responded that higher levels are achieved by the applicability of gained knowledge; content of the subjects taught; teaching style. The teaching methods used in the educational process receive lower grades. First position assessments, 74% of assessments were rated “very satisfied” and “satisfied” (the highest absolute value of the grade “very satisfied” - 34%).

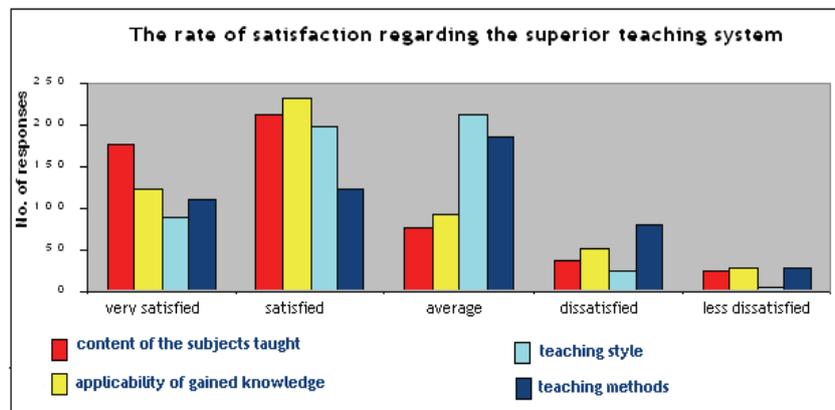


Figure no. 12: Grade of satisfaction on teaching system in higher education

The second position of assessments, 67% rated “*satisfied*” and “*very satisfied*” (the highest absolute value of the grade “*satisfied*” - 44%).

The third position of assessments, 55% rated “*satisfied*” and “*very satisfied*”, a higher percentage for undecided (40%).

The fourth position of the assessments, 44% rated “*satisfied*” and “*very satisfied*”, a higher percentage for “*dissatisfied*” and “*very dissatisfied*” (20%), significant percentage of “*undecided*” (36%).

Research has also addressed the issue of the evaluation system through the question: “*is the student assessment system objective?*” Based on the results, 65.33% of students considered that the overall student assessment system is “*objective*”, 20% - “*do not know/ not realize*”; 6% - “*no, never*” respectively, 9% - “*no, in isolated cases*”. Therefore, 85% of students declare that there are no major issues regarding the assessment process, 40% considering “*the evaluation system of students to be objective*”.

Regarding “*the necessity to develop an internal system to ensure quality, which favors an increased quality of higher education system*” (Figure no. 13) respondents, consumers of educational services agreed, respectively “*total agreement*” for the existence/development of this type of system at a rate of 94%, only 4% are “*indifferent*”, and 2% being in “*disagreement*”. In the vast majority, students are in “*total agreement*” with the need for an intern system to ensure the quality and contribute to the increasing quality of higher education system. Nobody has considered it in “*total disagreement*” with this necessity, being one questions of the questionnaire that met a mostly positive view.

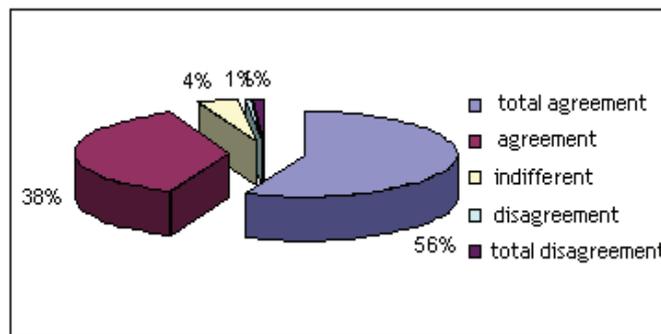


Figure no. 13: The need to develop a national quality assurance system

To the question “*do you believe the student involvement in teacher periodical evaluation will help at the increasing quality in the higher education system*”, 86% of respondents appreciated *necessary* the involvement of students in the regular evaluation of teachers, showing their interest in enhancing the quality of higher education system.

The range of responses is due largely to their professional training; economists are those specialists who are accustomed with evaluation and the measurement of actions and activities they undertake and not ultimately the necessity of the profit existence. The following responses are 9% - “*modest involvement*” and 5% - “*very modest involvement*”.

Students, mostly, want to be involved in regular teacher assessment and consider this contributes to the increasing quality in a higher education system.

Knowing that the Academy of Economic Studies, Bucharest is a state university, one question focused on “the state's involvement degree in stimulating students' performance”.

Unfortunately, (Figure no. 14) student responses highlighted the “low” degree (254 students) and “very low” degree (89 students) of state involvement in increasing students' performance - 343 replies, respectively 65.33%; 163 respondents rated the involvement of the state as “average” - 31.05 %, and only 19 respondents (3.62%) have labeled the involvement degree of the state as “high”.

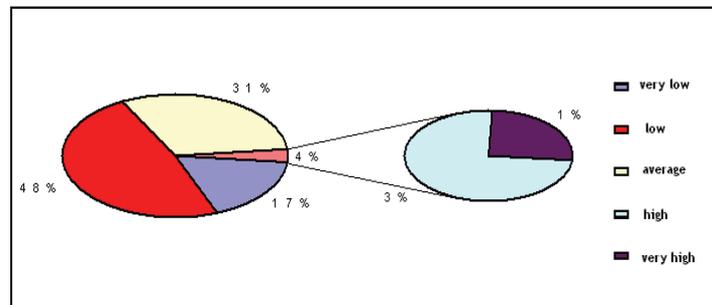


Figure no. 14: Perceptions of the degree of state involvement in fostering students' performance

Only an extremely low percentage (4%) believes that the state is involved in stimulating performance of students, while almost half believe that the state's involvement is modest.

For interviewed students were in the first academic cycle, the question before the last was “are you planning to follow a master's program at the Academy of Economic Studies, Bucharest?”, 60.19% (316 students) “want” to pursue a master's program at the Academy of Economic Studies, Bucharest, 26.86% (141 students) “do not want” to continue studies and 12.95% (68 students) are undecided on the intention of continuing studies.

To the question related to “the intention to follow a doctoral program at Bucharest Academy of Economic Studies after completion of the master program?” to this question only those who said they intend to pursue a master in the Bucharest Academy of Economic Studies responded. Therefore, from 316 students, 68 (21.52%) responded “positively”, 192 students (60.76%), “negative” and 56 students (17.72%) are “undecided”. Among those who intend to continue studying more than half are not interested in obtaining a PhD in Academy of Economic Studies, Bucharest.

Conclusions of the undertaken research

The area proposed for research is vast and very interesting, for the inferred complexity springing from the changes in Romanian higher education system under the Bologna process and the dynamic economic environment. Empirical component is represented by the model, which will be developed next year in two or three universities, regarding the trend of Romanian higher education change and its consequences on consumer behavior of educational services.

Literature regarding change management - applicable to higher education – and protection of education services' consumer are budding (almost non-existent in Romania), showing that area is wide opened to empirical approaches. European academic systems are part of an ongoing reform process (Bologna process) to which Romania adhered from the beginning, since 1999. Bologna reforms provide some tools for change, which, if they are correctly designed and applied, will produce positive outcomes including protection of students' rights, as consumers of educational services.

Therefore, we ascribe to research the role of conceptual analysis approach and of structuring of the theory and practice through specific study on change management strategies, with applications in higher education institutions, with the need to protect the rights and interests of students, in their quality as consumers of educational services.

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