

University impact and impress on student growth

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The aim of this paper is to find out how the institution of higher education helps the growth of students participating in the service process, what quality means in higher education, and in what dimensions the quality can be measured. We consider higher education as a long-term service process which results in student growth considered in many aspects from their point of view by the time of finishing their studies. We make an attempt to frame a model which contains the relationship between the quality factors, together with the description of the value added in this context. The planned complex model assumes that the institution and the student interpret quality in different ways and it is also assumed that the value added is a result of a double investment: the institution contributes to it in the same way as the students themselves. Finally, we make an attempt to feature who benefits the most of this investment: only the student or both the student and the institution. Is this measurable, and if so, how?

Keywords: quality of higher education, assessment of student outcomes, student growth, value added in higher education

1. Introduction

Remarkable structural and quality changes have taken place in higher education, both inside each institution and in the frames that defined their everyday operation. In this changing and intensively competing higher education environment, the following questions emerge: How can we apprehend and write down the quality of the institutions of higher education? How can we express their impact on the students, namely what does the student receive from the institution? How and in what extent will the students be better by studying at the given institution? The basis of this impact is a complex coherence-system, and both the level of education and the infrastructural background, the available services, or the inspirational intellectual and physical environment, together with the encouraging possibilities for social citizenship make an important role in it. It is also a big question whether the main goals of the Bologna process are achievable, and whether it is a realistic aim to create a student and employee mobility? What is the expected quality and result from the students and from the employees of the institutions of higher education? In what extent and why do the stakeholders put trust in the institutions of higher education taking into consideration the efficiency of the education process? How should the institution of higher education convince the internal and external, the actual and potential, and the domestic and foreign target groups about the quality eligibility of the achievable services? At all, who are those who make the value assessment on quality?

Whenever we would like to come round the quality of the tasks of higher education, we have to face with numerous evaluators. In the case of an institution of higher education, quality can have several expressional forms. One might ask whether the history of the university, the honour of the institution means quality in itself? Or quality means how graduates can come through the labour market? Or does the institution become qualitative by accomplishing the different target values, which come from the controlling environment? May the employee and student satisfaction become an adequate index? Do the higher education hierarchies actually express quality? By any chance, does quality come from the excesses that the student receives all through the years of university or college? There is no unitary standpoint with the questions above; many people give many answers to them.

It is obvious that quality actions in higher education are adjudicated by many people and in many different ways. If we want to evaluate an institution's efficiency, first we have to identify those people who judge performance and whose opinion is important for the market success of the organization.

2. Who are the stakeholders?

The primary problem of measuring the educational service is the definition of the consumer group in higher education, because the identification of consumer in higher education is more complicated than in business. There is no agreement either among the researchers, who deal with higher education, or among the different teams in the service offering institutions, on who should be considered as a consumer. While some consider only the students as consumers, in another perspective, the consumer group appears in a more differentiated way: for example, moreover the actual students, the institutional employees, the parents, the graduated students and the potential future students, the institutions which send the students, the employers, the local communities and in a broader perspective the society are listed here. At the same time it can be seen that the groups listed above are rather stakeholders than direct consumers (*Sirvanci 2004*), although there is an overlap between the two groups.

According to the above mentioned, we can measure the success of education of the institutions of higher education in several segments, the value added can be defined in a really wide scale from the moment of enrollment until the appearance in the labour market, and the satisfaction allocates longterm advantages for the institution (*Aldridge–Rowley 1998, Oldfield–Baron 2000, Kelsey–Bond 2001, Arambewela et al 2005*).

As a result of the indicated investigational approach, we narrow down the quality assessment into the student target group, on the other hand, we intend to analyze rather the question of value added in present essay.

3. Difficulties in the definition and main interpretation of quality in higher education

In connection with education, quality can be apprehended from different perspectives. According to one, the quality of the education is nothing more than the ability to educate highly-trained labour force continuously which is committed to permanent studying and self-instruction. In this approach quality means the congruity with the previously set requirements and the permanent updated information flow towards the stakeholders (students, associated-professions, labour market, etc.). From another approach the quality of the education ensures the training that is adequate to student expectations, including high-quality classrooms and physical environment where the appropriate timing and the encouraging cooperative classes associate with the possibility to improve knowledge and abilities (*Brocato–Potocki 1996*).

In connection with the quality of higher education, we have preferred a broader understanding which is defined in the essay of Tam, M: according to the author, we have to handle the student growth, the value added, in a holistic connotation, where we have to pay attention to the social, emotional and cultural development, not only to the intellectual development (*Tam 2002*). Our conviction is that the “student being” is a long period in one's life, where one does not only learn instructional knowledge, but participates in events, is part of processes where one uniquely socializes and builds up an advantageous social-network that will follow him all through life.

In case of the educational service, the fluctuant quality is more likely to appear, as standardization is not practical here, and on the other hand, the parties' subjectivity affects the assessment of quality more powerfully, because of the complexity of the service-dimensions.

Education is a service process, where both parties remain in the “system” for a long time, and because of that the importance of the process is outstanding for the consumer assessment of the service-quality. Long since, the participation in the process means also that the student gets involved in the service process very intensely. This is why the adequacy for consumer expectations cannot be interpreted for two reasons: the first one is that the expectations are so much differentiated, the students’ expectations can barely be segmented, they are rather unique; the second one is that the function is bifold in this service process. Here, it is not just the receiver, who evaluates, but rather the service provider. The function of the teacher and the trainer is valorized in the process, and an entirely different context evolves in the “consumer - service provider” relationship than in the case of other services, where the receiver is entitled to call the service provider to be accounted for the quality. In education, and especially in higher education, this relationship is fairly peculiar; here it is rather the teacher, the service provider, who is entitled to call the student to be accounted for. The students – despite their longterm interests – try to find the line of least resistance, while the teacher tries to get the best out of them. Then this bifold game results in the quality of the service, and this game is very fragile. Even the time spent in the process can affect the quality: the ratio of the bifold efforts and their dynamics are ever-changing and it is common that the student’s value added evolves on account of big amplitudes.

4. Value added student growth: a quality measure?

It is a common feature of most of the definitions used for higher education value added, that it is considered as an excess gained by a student who attends higher education. This excess can be knowledge itself, acquired abilities, skills, or any other factors. (*Pascarella–Terenzini* 2005, *Harvey–Green* 1993). In the interpretation of *Bennett* (2001) the value added of higher education is the ability or knowledge of the student that have been developed during their studies in the given institution. If we wanted to measure it, we would measure the performance of the student during the time of enrollment and after graduation. Value added is nothing more than the difference between the two performance indicators.

Numerous models have proceeded that institutions of higher education affect their students, and because of that they need to ensure such useful environment which support them in studying and growing. We do not mean only the infrastructural environment in a physical way, but that intellectual and ceriferous agent which surrounds the students, inspires and encourages them to develop and learn. Beside the environment, we have to emphasize the importance of student engagement to learning and higher education as a service. In this aspect the more engaged the students become and the more they participate in the institution’s daily life, the more they make profit of all through their higher education studies, and the value added, generated by the institution, will be greater (*Pace* 1984, *Astin* 1993).

Out of these theories that fit into this notion-system, we would highlight Ernest Pascarella’s College Impact Model and Robert C. Pace’s College Impress Model.

Pascarella builds on Vincent Tintio’s theory, the Student Attrition Model, who thinks that if a student wants to finish his studies successfully, it is inevitable to get engaged with the institution, to be part of the community, to interact continuously with the teachers and students, and to accept the common values and cultures. The student’s basic individual and social characteristics play an important role in all these. Pascarella further developed this and highlighted five varying-groups, which affect the conformation of the relation between the given institution and the student: student background and precollege traits, structural and organisational characteristics of the institution, institutional environment, nature and frequency of interactions with the faculty, their peers and other socialising agents, and the quality of student effort (*Pascarella–Terenzini* 2005).

Beside the impacts of the institutional environment, Robert C. Pace also emphasizes the responsible behaviour of the students, the intensity and the quality of their efforts during their studies. This is essential so that the student can apply all what the institution can offer. It is important to create a bilateral relationship between the institution and the student, so from one side the student has to invest time and effort into certain actions, and from the other side, the institution has to take responsibility to ensure the most favourable conditions and circumstances. Pace has developed the College Student Experience Questionnaire for measuring the quality of this bilateral relationship. With the help of the questionnaire, one can measure the student's growth, the quality of the student experiences, concentrating on the efforts made during university activities. According to Pace it is also important to know what characteristics, features do students have in the time of enrollment, but it is even more important to know what efforts they have made during their studies, what else they have done and how active their time have been (*Tam 2002*).

Compared to the above mentioned models, Rodgers interprets the notion of value added differently, mainly from an economic point of view. According to his definition, the value added is nothing more than an economic value added in a relative connotation which comes from the difference of the expected wage at the time of enrollment and the actual wage five years after graduation. He categorizes the students on the basis of the expected value of the degree and associates them with an expected wage after graduation according to a degree-category. He confronts the expected wage with the actual wage within five years after graduation, because he assumes that there is a connection between the quality of the degree and the wage in the first five years. This way he defines the groups' relative value added. First and last, the difference between the expected and the real wage will define the value added of the institution (*Rodgers 2007*).

The theories, which analyze the impact exerted by the institution of higher education and the created value added, concurrently emphasize the significant role of the value added in measuring the quality of higher education, but also note the difficulties of measuring. It makes measuring even more difficult that the excess given by the institution can only be seen as time passes, and the institutions are different, they have various aims, mission, and they hand over distinct values during their activities. Moreover, none of the institutions aim at improving only one skill of a student, but a combination of a set of skills. Accordingly, the measuring of the value added also has to act on the combination of these skills (*Bennett 2001*).

5. The conceptual model of the value added at a higher education institution

It can be seen, from the above mentioned overview, that the definitions are not unambiguous regarding the quality of higher education, and there is also no agreement on what the result of higher education is, and what the growth of value added is which could be expressed as an accomplishment for the service process participants. In the following paragraph, we try to unify the quality and efficiency of higher education activities, and the common outcome of the collective efforts of the students and the institution into one model; it will overcome those models that describe quality with a satisfaction dimension.

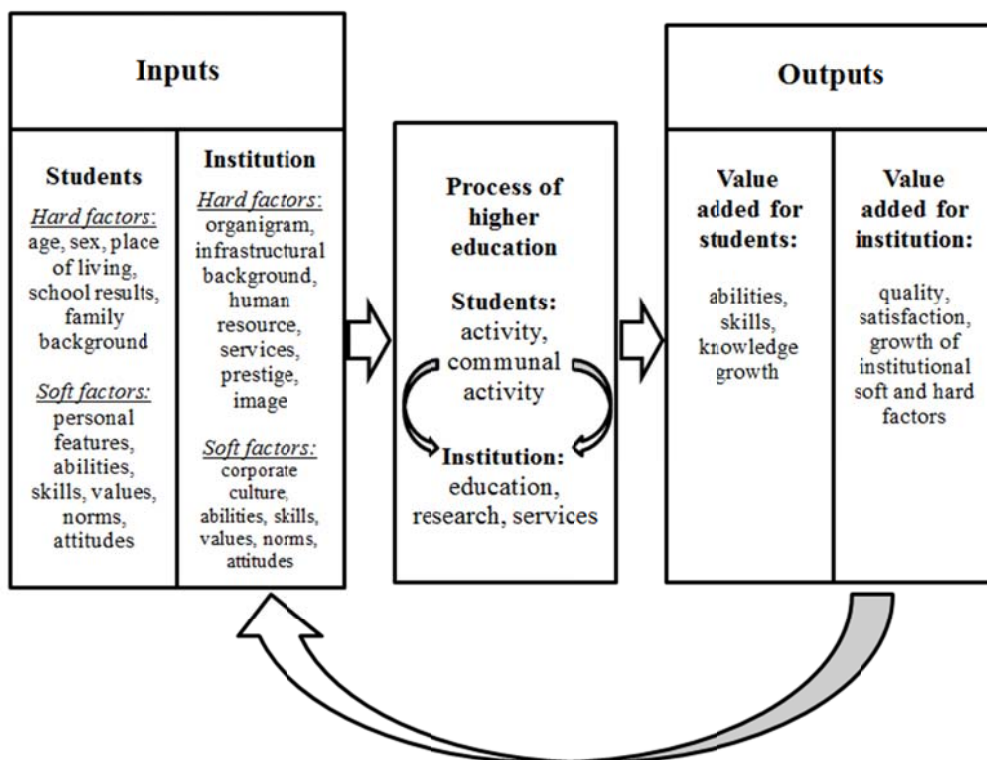
We define the following starting points for our model-creation:

1. The service activities of the higher education institutions lead to student growth, which value growth has to be approached from a holistic point of view.
2. On the basis of this holistic approach, value growth does not only mean knowledge growth, but requires a complex, multidimensional approach: it means also fields of socialization, as active participation in learning and community life, resorting cultural and other service opportunities, establishing social networks, forming values and norms to-be-followed.

3. The efficiency of higher education depends on both the individual and social features that describe the students and the characteristics of the institution.
4. The value added is the result of the two performers', the student's and the institution's collective activity. The basis of both parties' growth is a process during which the characteristics, quality, intensity and length of the interactions between the students and the institution have accentuated importance. The more fields the institution can offer as a possibility to develop and the greater the cooperative readiness is between the student and the institution, the bigger the value added will be.
5. The bigger the investment from both parties is, the bigger the return of investment will be for both.
6. During the long service process, the quality is significantly fluctuant and both parties often define it differently.
7. The quality outcome of the efforts can only be defined in the long term.
8. The assessment of the value added reacts to the input side of the service process.

Our model can be summarized as below:

Figure 1. Model of value added of higher education as service



Source: own construction

In our approach we assume that higher education is a service where result depends on the collective effort of both parties, similar to other services, although on account of the long time spent in the “system”, together with the occasional counter-interest, and because of the intensive quality-fluctuation, the outcome (the value added) needs to be handled very differently. Our model reflects an input-outcome apprehension and its essence is that both parties give in their extant means, and then their conflict-cooperation usage results in a certain payback for both of them. On the input side we differentiate soft and hard factors between the

characteristics of the students and also the institution on the basis of their measurability. From the aspect of higher education as a service, basic characteristics such as age, sex, previous studies, family background, just as the more elusive social characteristics, abilities, skills, admitted and followed values have significant role from the students' side. From the institution's side, beside the extant physical infrastructure and human resources, the educational, research, service activities, the structural culture that influences the operation, the value- and norm-system, the history, or the percept image have important roles.

In the point of higher education as a service, we put emphasis on the process of the interference of these input factors, their intensity and counter- and back-interests. During this long process, parties interact with each other, which impact continuously influences the assessment of its efficiency, effectiveness and quality. In certain moments, this action-reaction is adjusted, sometimes it shifts towards one of the parties and that permanently changes the percept quality and satisfaction.

The result of the process is an excess, or value added, that can be detected through several factors from both the student's and the institution's side. The students' values added are their abilities, skills, knowledge, values, and approach during growth, while the institution's value added is its quality assessment and satisfaction level. If the institution is willing to offer developmental possibilities in numerous fields and the cooperational skill is big between the student and the institution, the value added will be greater. The bigger the investment is from both parties, the greater the payback will be for both of them.

The value added that comes into being as a result of the higher education process does not only affect the personal growth of the student, but also affects his position in the labour market, his assessment by the employers and also his ability to fit into society. Although, from the institutional side, it inspires continuous growth and attention that is a feedback on the institutional factors described above.

6. Research plan

The first step of the testing of the model will take place at one of the biggest universities of Hungary, by analyzing both input and outcome sides, together with the process that creates the bond between the two. We rely on the secondary data in all three segments, and deliberately on the primary data that have been created for the model testing.

We are going to analyze those secondary data from both the student and institutional input side that can be found in the various database of the university, together with former research data (institutional image researches, results of internal employee researches). Regarding the hard factors on the student side we are going to analyze the enrollment questionnaire researches, while we intend to use qualitative methods for analyzing the soft factors: we plan to transact deep interviews and focus-group talks for revealing attitudes, and then make questionnaire researches on the basis of the results.

In connection with the audit of the process, we rely on the results of the former student researches, but we plan to give out questionnaires to two parties (students, institution) which we will analyze the factors in the model with.

In connection with the output side, we also have some analyzable secondary resources (longitudinal alumni audits), which will be amended with the data regained during our questionnaires. In the long term, our aim is to map the feedbacks of the labour market regarding this segment.

We are aware of the fact that we can only get reliable results with longitudinal analyses regarding value added, and this is why we plan to make further researches as a confirmation for the first results. Our aim is to amend the results of satisfaction monitorings that have been made in the institution regularly, with a value added dimension that describes the performance of higher education as a service.

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