Student satisfaction and quality of service in Italian universities

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Abstract

Purpose – In order to face the new competitive scenario, Italian universities are involved in a change process and are trying to adopt an entrepreneurial approach to better serve their customers/students. The paper aims to assess university performance by testing student satisfaction. It tries to provide universities with some solutions to improve its performance.

Design/methodology/approach – The case of the University of Bari has been analysed by interviewing a random (but well stratified) sample of students in order to test their satisfaction concerning services provided and quality perceived. Reasons why students decide to enrol at the University of Bari are also investigated.

Findings – Universities have to concentrate their efforts on the improvement of quality of teaching and non-teaching services, in order to promptly respond to the target, and foster a stronger relationship with surrounding economic and productive systems.

Research implications/limitations – Universities need to adopt a customer centric approach. Future research should analyse the reform period experienced by the Italian University system, in order to investigate student satisfaction concerning recent changes. Moreover, a cross-country analysis of student satisfaction, through the servqual questionnaire, would be interesting.

Practical implications – Student satisfaction at the University of Bari is higher for working students that are not interested in “additional” services. On the contrary, several improvements are perceived as urgent concerning non-core services provided, in which regular students are very interested.

Originality/value – This paper provides a wide analysis of the services perception tested and viewed through student eyes.

Keywords Customer satisfaction, Universities, Service levels, Quality, Italy

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

In modern competitive environments services are gaining increasingly more importance in the competitive formula of both firms and countries. Educational systems are becoming services for people in which global and local levels combine, thus a standardised offer is modified by local specificities. Universities become relational services, in which demand and supply (provider and receiver) cooperate to improve and design satisfying outputs. They face intense international and national
competition, and consequently choose in the same way as firms (Jarvis, 2000). In fact customers, i.e. students or rather society, play an active role in defining the offer, either by asking for courses through enrolment, or showing their disapproval by leaving university, a sort of vote à la Tiebout (1956).

The importance of such a service is highlighted by the presence of many stakeholders and their interests, either social or economic. A strategy of continuous improvement with regard to quality is important. Demand is at a higher level not only in relation to the quality of teaching but also to social expectations.

The Italian university system is trying to adopt an entrepreneurial approach in order to better serve their customers (Baccarani, 1999). It is also a case of mass customisation, in which universities are competing to attract students with a personalised offer. Evaluation is finalised towards upgrading the quality of service. The recent changes in the Italian university system are due, on one hand, to the structural reorganisation of the system and its objectives and, on the other, to the growing competition among universities, with the aim of improving quality of service. The production of the various universities is an outcome that should be measured as the impact of the supply of services on the receiver. This is perceived differently on the basis of personal background and therefore the different starting conditions should be analysed.

The Ministry of Education uses performance evaluation of each university as a means of governance, measured by three main variables: the demand for education (i.e. features of the matriculated students), results of the educational processes (i.e. number of credits obtained), and results of staff research. This measure affects both Ministerial funding and the restrictions to planning in each university. Therefore, students become an asset to be preserved and possibly increased. At the same time, many initiatives have been developed in order to analyse and satisfy the needs of the stakeholders in general (namely families, institutions, and firms) and of the students in particular. Italian universities need to develop marketing initiatives in order to increase their capacity to understand needs and evaluate quality perception, as in firms. This can be identified in customer/student satisfaction. The importance of measuring quality perception is the mark of the customer-based approach and of the importance of his evaluation in addressing governance choices.

Given that education is an experience good, its efficacy can be measured by evaluating its effect on users (students). In such a competitive scenario, the Italian offer seems to be standardised in the way it has to match Ministerial criteria, but customised in the way universities respond to the different needs of their public, providing their customers with different teaching programmes and services in order to make life easier on the campus. The extent to which these factors attract prospective students depends on individual features, such as demographic variables, perception and expectations, and on environmental factors. This paper investigates the influence of such features on student choice and satisfaction in the University of Bari, in relation to the services provided. This University has experienced a process of repositioning due to various events that have damaged its image. A questionnaire was developed and distributed to a sample of students in the twelve faculties in order to analyse their perception on didactic, administrative, logistic, recreational, computerised and placement services.
Literature review
Globalised competition has stressed the strategic importance of satisfaction and quality in the battle for winning consumer preferences and maintaining sustainable competitive advantages. In the service economy especially, satisfaction, quality and performance prove to be key factors reciprocally interrelated in a causal, cyclical relationship (see Figure 1), even though they are often used as synonymous due to the similarity in their meaning (Cronin et al., 2000; Bitner and Hubert, 1994).

The higher the service quality the more satisfied the customers. Thus, satisfaction is based on customer expectations and perception of service quality (Johnston and Lyth, 1991; Ekinci, 2004; Cronin and Taylor, 1992; Christou and Sigala, 2002; Sigala, 2004a, b).

Dealing with a dynamic issue, namely the relationship with the customer, service quality and consequently satisfaction as attitude, need to be measured on three levels: cognitive, affective and behavioural (Oliver, 1997; Parasuraman et al., 1985). Satisfaction has a more evident transactional dimension linked to perception and thus to emotional aspects (Iacobucci et al., 1994), instead service quality results from a cognitive process, being more relational and so referred to sensations and evaluation of the external stimuli (Bitner, 1990; Anderson and Fornell, 1994; Christou, 2001). Indeed, they are both subjective appraisal of the service experience, based on the comparison between a standard and perceived performance (Grönroos, 1993); however satisfaction is more an experiential issue, while quality assessment does not necessarily imply a personal experience (Orsingher, 2003).

The interrelation is given by the customer involvement in the production process that the service marketing literature has widely investigated from the service operation point of view (Chase, 1978; Schmenner, 1986; Orsingher, 1999). Moreover, on the supply side this involvement strongly affects the service evaluation, characterising the experience created. Therefore, production has evolved into servuction (Eiglier and Langeard, 1987) and finally to prosumption (Sigala, 2005). Since prosumption has two dimensions, namely the willingness to be involved and the competences to take part in designing and projecting the service output, its obvious consequence is customer satisfaction (Cermak et al., 1994; Kelley et al., 1990), and, especially for services like higher education, it takes place together or interacting with other customers (Kelley et al., 1992). Moreover, customer inputs and their co-production performance

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Figure 1.
The cycle performance-quality-satisfaction
considerably affect productivity, added value (Lovelock and Young, 1979) and efficiency (Xue and Harker, 2002) of the provider.

The marketing concept which emphasises the satisfaction both of consumer and organisational needs has been applied in university issues in various studies (Amyx and Bristow, 1999; Bristow, 1998; Zafiropoulos et al., 2005). More and more universities have gradually adopted a marketing approach as they compete to attract and retain top quality students. As higher education meets all the classical features of services (Cherubini, 1996; Pellicelli, 1997; Zeithaml and Bitner, 2002), the concepts of service quality and customer satisfaction are directly applicable, moving the universities closer to their market needs. Since new generation students have more influence and greater awareness as consumers, becoming more interactive and selective as regards their future, it becomes even more difficult to attract them (Sigala and Baum, 2003). Therefore, the constant changes in student demands are shifting from a traditional system like the educational one into a totally consumer-led market, where tools such as e-learning have to be used (Sigala, 2002, 2004a, b; Sigala and Sakellaridis, 2004). In fact, quality in higher education is a relative concept, given the number of the various stakeholders involved (Tam, 2001), which ranges from the single student as the primary consumer (Hill, 1995), to the whole of society (students, parents, staff, employers, business and legislators) (Rowley, 1997).

Moreover, the higher education experience has two overlapping areas (Rowley, 1997): the evaluation of quality of teaching and learning (Cuthbert, 1996; Soutar and McNeil, 1996) and the evaluation of the quality of the total student experience (Hill, 1995). Even though the evaluation of quality of teaching and learning is the more analysed issue, it depends on each single student’s approach to learning. Instead, the student experience is much more than just teaching and learning. The other services provided by universities, such as accommodation, alumni associations, etc., have become crucial for course choice and successful course completion.

**Performance assessment and customer satisfaction in Italian universities**

Customer orientation and evaluation of customer satisfaction are typical concerns of private sector organisations, since firms have to care about customers in order not to be excluded from the competitive arena. In the last decades also public administrations have started to undertake marketing initiatives moving from the simple supply of service (production for the public sector) to the customer (Mele, 2003). Thus, the peculiarities of the public sector, such as the coincidence of the figure of the shareholders, customers and stakeholders in citizens and firms, has shifted the attention to customer satisfaction and so to the perception of the public output (Rebora, 2003).

Quality of service, and particularly the perceived one, is produced at the same time as the service supply and consumption (Mele, 2003). It is exactly in this crucial moment that customer satisfaction has to be produced and possibly tested. Therefore, a strict link between customer satisfaction and quality of service exists (AA.VV., 2003). Customers are satisfied when the service fits their expectations, or very satisfied when the service is beyond their expectations, or completely satisfied when they receive more than they expect. On the contrary, customers are dissatisfied when the service is below their expectations, and when the gap is high, they tend to communicate the negative aspects.
Customer satisfaction measures are also a tool for discovering customer tastes and understanding their needs and expectations; such investigations have to be considered as the basis of optimal characteristics of the service provided. Moreover, customer satisfaction research contributes to defining and drawing up a more precise profile of the typical customer and of the specific service. Several instruments have been used in order to test customer satisfaction; these aim to support the analysis of socio-economic contexts characterised by high dynamism and complexity and can facilitate the work of decision and policy makers of public administrations, especially when dealing with the definition of future strategies, in the attempt to better understand the future development of the whole system.

Management standards, typically adopted by private sector firms, are progressively influencing the Italian public sector whose action is permeated by an accountability approach, aiming to let citizens be part of the decision making process and show the results previously projected (Paletta, 2005). Therefore, a performance assessment system is necessary; but the absence of a real market on the output side and the transfer of resources from central institutions create difficulties in a non-arbitrary evaluation of public administration performances (Farneti, 2004). Despite this, the added value could be defined as the perceived value of the final goods or services which has been added to the resources consumed in the “production process” of public administrations (Farneti and Pozzoli, 2005). Thus, the emphasis shifts to perception. Public administration creates value if such perception is higher than the sacrifices of its community (Coase, 1960; Farneti, 2004). This means that it could be measured by an indicator system that should be able to reveal more qualitative and less quantitative aspects (Mazzara, 2003). Furthermore, the need for a clear and correct communication from the public administration to its community strongly arises, in order to reduce the existing gap between the value created and the perceived one.

The university system is a particular kind of public administration. It provides the highest level of education, thus it is necessary to evaluate its performance both in terms of quality of the services provided and of the resources employed. Quality of service could be tested by assessing student satisfaction, since students are the real customers. This process could be carried out by comparing quality expected, quality provided and quality perceived (Baccarani, 2003, 2004).

The educational offer is moving from a standardised service to a localised one which considers territorial needs of specialised workers and/or professionals (Barnabé, 2003). Consequently, in order to support and facilitate this process managerial and market mechanisms have been introduced. New structures, organisational models and roles, and higher responsibilities, have nowadays to be satisfied by the university system. This consequently determines the need for managerial skills in all subjects involved. Moreover, the modification of the funding system of the universities at ministerial level, linked to the costs and quality of the services provided, have shifted the attention to the high quality of education and its related services and on its financial management, given the progressive decrease of the transfers from central institutions (Rebora, 2003).

University education, as an experienced good, has to be evaluated. Its intangible component proves to have more importance than the usual intangibility of services, since in the long run it affects the future life of students and the evolution of society as a whole. Therefore, in all European countries attention paid to performance assessment
is increasing, creating, in turn, ad hoc boards and bodies, standards and operating procedures of the main results of the university activities such as teaching, research, and various additional services offered to students and to the other stakeholders.

The new “vision”, including results assessment and quality assurance, becomes the starting point of any university reform, also as a fair compensation of the recognised autonomy of university (Felt, 2004). In fact, regulation policies of universities supported by national governments should be combined and integrated with the system of performance management, recalling the new public management. However, the concepts of autonomy and assessment have become part of the Italian university system only in the last few years, despite the fact that the autonomy of universities had already been ratified by the Constitution. The concept of autonomy and the consequent competitiveness among different branches of Italian universities must imply a control on behalf of the state as the main endower of the universities. Thus, the assessment of activities and results becomes an important indicator for the distribution of funds. The better knowledge of customer expectations enables universities to reduce the gap generated in the contact between staff and “purchasers”, since human resources are permitted to develop their own skills and to improve their performances. A higher customer satisfaction implies several improvements, such as higher customer loyalty, higher consumption of the service, acquisition of further customers (Mele, 2003).

University, as a particular kind of public service provider, has to carefully consider evaluation expressed by students on the quality of teaching. In Italy, as in other countries, student rating of teaching (SRT) is the main instrument for the evaluation of teaching, used also as a communication medium towards students and public opinion. The idea is to consider students as “consumers”, a reductive view of the entire university experience. Therefore, for a correct reading of the process and a better understanding of the generated value, it is of primary importance to focus attention on the most essential and critical characteristics, that are firm specific, connected to the typicality of the operating processes of a particular firm or institution (Rebora, 2003). Consequently, it is a matter of judgement, value attribution, a result of a non-objective analysis, since the importance of qualitative and intangible factors in the service provided tends to generate firm specific situations.

Therefore, Italian universities, in order to satisfy different needs depending on the features of the geographic area where they are located, no longer provide standardised services; the “market” requires personalised services whose main characteristics try to meet the real needs of the job market. In other words, universities have to provide the surrounding territory with graduates it needs; therefore, the educational career at university should be based on the real needs expressed by the local job market. On the other hand, student satisfaction also depends on placement chances after graduation and the relative skills acquired during the course. This makes it difficult to implement a non-arbitrary system of indicators aimed at testing student satisfaction and, as a consequence, assessing university performance. Indeed, student satisfaction assessment is the basis of a competitive strategy that every university should undertake in order to gain preferences and reach high ranking by their prospective customers. Students should be considered as a strategic asset to be retained and possibly increased in order to gain more funds from the Ministry that transfers resources also based on the number of enrolments.
Measuring student satisfaction: the case of the University of Bari

The Italian University system is facing a period of reform in which university management has to undertake competitive strategies in order to face the strong competition from other Italian and European universities and, thus, to build a positive image. The University of Bari, one of the biggest campus in Italy, especially in the South, has been chosen. This University is experiencing a process of repositioning due to various events that have damaged its image. Since it has been chosen to deal with identity perception in order to understand the factors on which university image is based and that match student needs, it has been hypothesised that student satisfaction is strongly linked to the geodemographic and cultural background of the students and of their family. Moreover, the more convinced a student is of their choice, the more empathetic they will be with the university. Indeed, a more critical approach to the offer and to university life is hypothesised according to the year attended, since the longer the student experiences university, the deeper their knowledge of all the offer and the more accurate the formation of satisfaction.

The study is exploratory in nature and intends to understand the perception of what a student considers an “excellent university”, that means a university able to grant a good quality of education and services, which represent students' main choice criteria (Veloutsou et al., 2004). In this sense, it becomes an interesting issue which should receive more attention in terms of marketing (Zeithaml and Bitter, 2002). Data were collected over a two-month period by interviewing a random sample of 1,147 student, stratified according to the number of students enrolled in the twelve faculties of the University of Bari. The 12 faculties represent the situations in which the students and their needs are located. The dataset has been analysed with SPSS; descriptive statistics were performed first in order to describe the main characteristics of the sample; second, the MDS technique and the Chi-square test were performed to measure the perception of Bari University through the eyes of its “customers” and to unveil the most important variables influencing the student opinion (Amendola and Vitale, 2004; Ghellini and Maccari, 2004).

The sample has been well balanced with regards to gender (43.8 per cent M and 56.2 per cent F), student origin (38.6 per cent from Bari, 43.7 per cent from other cities of the province, 12.0 per cent from other Apulian cities, 4.3 per cent from other Italian regions and 1.4 per cent from abroad), the year (first, second and third years, over third year but within regulation times and the undergraduates who have failed to graduate in the minimum time required). Almost half of the students interviewed would attend Bari University again (46.7 per cent), one-quarter would change (30.3 per cent) while another 23.1 per cent is uncertain. This clearly shows that some actions have to be carried out to investigate student dissatisfaction. In fact, in giving the reasons why they preferred to enrol at the University of Bari, only a few chose it for its prestige or good educational offer, which are the most expected characteristics of an educational institution, while a considerable number of students showed a high practical sense: 45.7 per cent chose Bari because of its proximity to the places of residence, for the good connections with the other neighbouring towns (16.9 per cent) or for the presence of parents or friends (22.1 per cent). On the contrary, very few students indicated the presence of remarkable teachers and the good level of services.

As regards student satisfaction, the main factors which give rise to a positive judgment are a good response to the student needs in general (39.7 per cent) along with
a good level of education (15.1 per cent) and the location of the university (23.2 per cent). A moderate number of responses (about 12 per cent) show that some students appreciate one of the main elements of the “mission” of the university of Bari that is to grant the possibility of a high education to people of all ranks and classes. The localisation of Bari, namely in the south of Italy, influences this aspect in the way that it is a big region in which the income level is lower than in the rest of Italy. The economic conditions of Apulia may explain the strong relationship between Bari university and the surrounding territory. Since the university is the oldest in Apulia it has the widest educational offer in terms of faculties and courses, still attracting students from the other Apulian provinces.

The “dissatisfied students”, identified their disappointment with bad organisation (46.9 per cent) and a general failure to meet their expectations (32.4 per cent). The judgments of this second group seemed to be less clearly defined than the first one, meaning in some cases a certain disappointment due to the lack of strong motivation in choosing the faculty or the university to attend. In order to understand which factors may have influenced student judgment the average marks given to each of the services actually offered by the University of Bari have been calculated.

As can be seen in Table I, sufficient rankings are scored for lecture halls, laboratories, equipment to support the teaching, accommodation, libraries, scholarships and internet facilities, while all the other services score insufficient rankings. However, it should be noted that for some items there was a high percentage of missing answers, due to two different causes: on one hand, services such as counselling, free language courses and leisure activities, are almost unknown to students, proving that they need a strong marketing action; on the other hand, services such as placements, internships, international relationships and tutoring, are

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lecture halls</td>
<td>2.15</td>
<td>0.811</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laboratories</td>
<td>1.96</td>
<td>0.850</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equipment</td>
<td>1.94</td>
<td>0.836</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Library</td>
<td>2.51</td>
<td>0.828</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refectories</td>
<td>1.71</td>
<td>0.850</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accommodation</td>
<td>1.94</td>
<td>0.992</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leisure</td>
<td>1.66</td>
<td>0.799</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language courses</td>
<td>1.45</td>
<td>0.752</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scholarships</td>
<td>2.04</td>
<td>0.932</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational offer</td>
<td>1.90</td>
<td>0.820</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet access</td>
<td>1.97</td>
<td>0.911</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exam booking</td>
<td>1.76</td>
<td>0.985</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contacts with teachers</td>
<td>1.71</td>
<td>0.861</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative services</td>
<td>1.80</td>
<td>0.816</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tutoring</td>
<td>1.64</td>
<td>0.755</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counseling</td>
<td>1.40</td>
<td>0.719</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internship</td>
<td>1.58</td>
<td>0.779</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International relationship</td>
<td>1.51</td>
<td>0.774</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Placement</td>
<td>1.39</td>
<td>0.681</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table I.
Services actually offered by the University of Bari

Note: a Range: 1-4
inefficiently provided by the University of Bari. Such answers are influenced by the lack of experience of freshmen and by the dissatisfaction of the students approaching graduation. Moreover, such rankings depend on the situation of each single faculty: some have new, comfortable, technological buildings projected *ad hoc*, and thus the infrastructure assessment scores high values. On the contrary, especially for the arts faculties, the infrastructures are outdated as they are mostly public offices adapted to faculties. Obviously this gap between arts and scientific faculties widens with respect to the use of internet, teaching support equipment, online exam booking and e-mailing with professors and staff.

As can be seen in the perceptual map (Figure 2), six segments are identified: the first two group the services that are clearly separated from the others, i.e. lecture halls and library, and scored the highest rankings, thus being perceived as high quality. The third group shows the services strictly related to didactic activities such as internet facilities, laboratories and teaching support equipment, whose perception resulted as similar for all the students. The fourth is composed of services that can be defined “additional” in relation to “basic” educational services (i.e. scholarship, accommodation, canteens, leisure activities). The fifth group represents the inefficient or poorly perceived services, such as administrative services, tutoring, placement, international relationship, counselling, and free language courses. In particular, since tutoring, placement and counselling are new but also “innovative” services for the University of Bari, they scored rankings slightly below average. In the end, the sixth group is composed of the services that are more linked to the staff, i.e. “online exam booking” and “contacts with staff”, that scored controversial evaluation in relation to the attitude of students, closely linked to the faculty attended and their technological background.

![Perceptual map of the services of the University of Bari](image)
In order to closely analyse the connections among the variables investigated with the MDS, a chi square analysis was carried out with the aim of tracing a possible identikit of the satisfied and loyal students. Therefore, the decision to enrol at the University of Bari again, which measures the retention rate, is strongly influenced by the following variables:

- professional condition of the student – $p = 0.000$;
- father’s position – $p = 0.003$;
- high school – $p = 0.002$;
- high school qualifications – $p = 0.003$;
- faculty – $p = 0.000$;
- year attended – $p = 0.000$; and
- choice motivations – $p = 0.013$.

The professional condition of the students who are likely to study conscientiously, is relevant for those who contemporarily work. In fact, working students showed a good evaluation of the University of Bari, since they are mainly interested in the basic services and not in the additional ones, i.e. international relationships and placement, or in those closely linked to university life, such as lecture halls and infrastructures.

Most of the interviewees come from a middle-to-low income family, where the father’s condition (i.e. unemployed, unskilled worker, clerk) affects the retention rate, while the choice to re-enrol seems to be indifferent for those students whose fathers hold an executive position. On the contrary, the decision is not influenced by the sector where the father works.

The correlation between satisfaction and the variable “type of high school” depends on the coherence with the faculty chosen, as an ideal continuation of the high school. Such coherence could have reduced the gap between the expectations and the reality and, together with the high school mark, underlines the deeper evaluation capacity of the students who had high marks and are consistent with their choices.

While student expectations are formed prior to arrival at university (Hill, 1995), student perception of service depends on the experience and, thus, it is not stable over time (O’Neill, 2003; Darlaston-Jones et al., 2003). In fact, both new entrants and more mature students may become increasingly discerning over time and their perceptions of the service provided are likely to change during the course of their studies, without such change meaning necessarily actual changes in service quality. Obviously there was a difference between the students enrolled in the first years and those nearing graduation: the former are more satisfied and are more enthusiastic for the new experience while, proportionally to the time spent at university, the unsatisfied and the undecided increase. This can be due to many reasons: tiredness, limited opportunities for foreign experiences and a total lack of placement. In fact, it should be noted that for most of the students in Southern Italy, a university degree represents one more chance to find a job so that great expectations are placed in the role of the university as a link with the job market through internships.
Limitations and future research
In conclusion, the present study, though exploratory, has underlined that the competitive threat posed by the university reform is addressed by both presence and market power variables. Alternatively, the educational offer may be part of a larger game where teaching courses, services and leisure activities are all jointly determined endogenously. Certainly, the analysis has some limitations, such as the sample size and the area considered; therefore, future research should be based on at least other three factors:

(1) ICT competitive effects;
(2) course proliferation and entry deterrence; and
(3) local market effects.

The numerous challenges that the social and economic environment are posing to the educational industry are forcing universities to rethink their offer, either in teaching or in providing even more services. However, educational provision is still focused on traditional skills while the changing labour market requires flexible skills in order to fit the macro environment changes (Christou, 1999). The growing importance of knowledge in every aspect of society has highlighted the need for the development of information literacy and knowledge management skills (Young, 1998), thus generating the need for new types and combinations of knowledge and skills.

Moreover, the growing importance of strategic alliances in the industrial environment (the coopetition model), leads universities to consider forming partnerships with industries and other universities (Sigala and Baum, 2003). In fact, especially joint programmes and the share of resources are the most evident collaborative activities that can lead to efficient development of teaching material and great accumulation of knowledge and expertise from different perspectives.

As the potential student market is growing, also due to the number of mature students entering higher education, the needs of potential students are transformed and enriched by ICT stimulating higher education institutions to propose flexible offers. Indeed, the socio-economic characteristics of the students are reshaping the educational offer towards a more flexible system (Pritchard and Jones, 1996) in order to have the possibility to work part time during the courses.

Since universities are moving towards a more market-led approach, the Servqual questionnaire seems to be an appropriate instrument to measure quality (Pariseau and McDaniel, 1997; Chua, 2004; Sherry et al., 2004). Thus, it could be interesting to investigate the level of satisfaction and service quality from the faculty standpoint and the other stakeholders (parents, employers and institutions) in order to evaluate the effect of the educational offer on the society, that is one of the objectives of the Italian reform. Moreover, it is interesting to assess the perceptions of international students as opposed to local ones with intention to better serve the legitimate needs and expectations of services offered to this group of students. Furthermore, following marketing literature, the different approach with respect to student segments could be analysed, in order to match the benefits sought by consumers.

Conclusions
The trend of the main variables concerning university students shows how the passage from a small, elite system for few students to a mass university system has been
accompanied by a loss of efficiency. This is demonstrated by the high drop-out rates and by the long time needed to complete the curricula, on average much longer than indicated by the system itself.

The latest data available show a picture of a student body strongly diversified: there are, for example, many more students who work while attending university. Therefore, the dynamics justify and call for tools to assess student satisfaction not only of the research programmes and those taught, but also of the services provided.

The innovative process that Italian universities are currently undertaking has stressed how the supply side is absolutely inadequate to support the strong competitive arena. It is the demand side that is the key success factor; the needs and behaviour of demand address the real development dynamics of the educational systems. Therefore, there are two main areas in which universities ought to concentrate their efforts:

(1) The improvement of quality of teaching and not teaching services, in order to promptly respond to the target, ever more formed by adults and workers who require space, services, etc.

(2) A stronger relationship with local economies and productive systems, in order to respond to the demand for training and competence.

This paper has aimed at outlining insights on the expectations and motivations at the basis of the decision making process when choosing which university to attend. The results highlight some interesting aspects to be investigated in more detail, which the university management should take into consideration when deciding the most appropriate choices (see Figure 3).

Figure 3.
The services of a University through the Kano model

Note: The order in which the services appear reflects graduation through the vertical axis
In general, students have stressed some well-known gaps for which it is not easy to find immediate solutions. In particular, the issue of the relationship between the university and the job market is common to all the universities in the south of Italy that operate in an area where the unemployment rate is higher than the national rate, and the industrial structure is composed mainly of family firms and SMEs with few employees.

The southern universities, and in particular the University of Bari, have first, to face an exogenous threat, namely the lack of a competitive job market, and second, the more important endogenous threats linked to inefficiencies due to poor organisation, an unsatisfied relationship between students and staff, the non-optimal allocation of the scarce resources. As resulted from the field analysis, satisfaction proves to be influenced principally by economic conditions and by a positive but parochial attitude that forces students to appreciate universities in the region of origin.

References


**About the authors**

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