

IMPLEMENTATION MODEL OF THE STUDENT CENTRED EDUCATION IN A UNIVERSITY IN ROMANIA

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Abstract

The promotion of the student centred education paradigm in the Romanian universities represents a priority in the actual context in which they activate, characterized by: the reduction of the student number, the increase of the competition between universities also due to the promotion of the foreign universities on the Romanian market, significant changes in the students' learning style, the increase of the students' abandon, the increase of the employers' demands and of the importance of education as a vital factor of competitiveness of a national economy. As a consequence, the decision factors at the level of the Line Ministry, ARACIS, especially in universities, should be aware of the importance and the necessity of implementing the student centred education in the Romanian academic educational system. The purpose of this paper is to facilitate this awareness but also to offer a guide, a model for the actual implementation of the student centred education. In time these will be reflected on the competitiveness and the development level of the Romanian economy, on the living standard and the quality of the citizens' life.

Keywords: *good practice guide, organizational culture, student-centered education.*

JEL Classification: A23

I. INTRODUCTION

The exponential growth of the competition on the academic education service market in Romania and due to the more and more aggressive approach of the foreign universities, the significant reduction of the students' number in the last years (www.mediafax.ro accessed 16.02.2015), the growth of decommitment among students (Sperlich & Spraul, 2007), claim the necessity of promoting some efficient marketing strategies in the universities from our country and not only, strategies that ought to have the student in their centre in order to create value for him/her (Yvonne J. Moogan, 2010).

Unfortunately the transfer of good marketing practices from the business sector into the education sector is far too slow compared to the necessities of the latter. The image of an education system centred on itself, the equivalent of a marketing myopia, whose connections with the environment (the employers, the society) are insufficiently valued (ARACIS; Quality barometer in 2010) imposes a major managerial philosophy change, absolutely necessary in order to ensure its survival. In this context, student centred education (SCE) offers an organizational culture that has to represent the core of the new managerial philosophy and a portfolio of instruments that allow the operationalization of it in the present practice from the universities.

The purpose of this work is to promote the SCE paradigm among the decision factors in the Romanian academic education system and to offer a guide that facilitates its actual implementation at university level or structures of it. In order to achieve this purpose, within the work we have:

- ✓ analyzed the context that makes the SCE paradigm required;
- ✓ defined SCE;
- ✓ created an implementation program for SCE within a high education institution (HEI).

To facilitate SCE's implementation, we consider that answering the questions that represent the titles of the following two chapters is vital.

II. WHICH ARE THE MAIN CATEGORIES OF STAKEHOLDERS WHICH CAN BE ASSIMILATED TO THE ROLE OF CUSTOMER IN THE CASE OF HIGH EDUCATION SERVICE?

The analyzed literature (Kotler P., & Fox, K.F. A., 1995), highlights the existence of a significant number of customer stakeholders for a HEI: the student, their family, the employers, the society and the employees of the HEI. We will focus on the student, employer and the society because: the student's family has almost the same needs as the student; HEI employers have the role of internal customers, being part of the quality management concerns.

a. *The student* is the most obvious customer of the education service as he is the direct beneficiary of the service and pays for it in general. His further success in life depends on the quality of the service. The customer student must be treated by HEI in terms of *output quality* (student's competence at graduation is obvious in his ability to integrate on the labor market or to become an entrepreneur) as in terms of *the experience gained while studying in his relationship with the university* (the quality of the interaction with his colleagues and the teachers, the conditions in the campus, the trust in the institution). Neglecting the second aspect can influence the quality of the first one and can have a negative effect on the rate of retention of the students from the institution. (Michael Fontaine, 2014).

b. *The employer* is a customer of the education service because he pays for the student as an output/product of the education system as taxes to the state, which redistributes a part of these to The Ministry of Education and Scientific Research. Also, he pays a salary to the graduate that he hires depending on his skills. If the employers didn't do this, the probability that high school graduates would wish to go to college and so to pay for the high education service is very low. The student-product quality is extremely important for the employers because the human resource is the most important resource of an organization, especially in the actual context of economy based on knowledge (Simon Marginson, 2010).

c. *The society as a whole*, relevant in this regard being the following statement: „*preparing the students as active citizens in the democratic societies is indicated as the essence of the mission of high education institutions.*” (Hüseyin Gül, Songül Sallan Gül, Eylem Kaya, Ayşe Alican, 2010). As a consequence, the role of HEI is not only to prepare highly qualified human resource for the employers of an economy. The role to educate responsible and involved citizens into the life of the city must be also taken into account.

The importance of the student – employer – society triad as clients of a HEI resides in the balanced approach it facilitates regarding the conception of the strategy of a university, taking into account the needs of every category. Any other approach is an unbalanced one.

III. WHAT DOES THE STUDENT REPRESENT TO A HEI?

The answers to this questions are extremely important in defining the strategy of a HEI, strategy that will also reflect in its current practices. In this regard the subject was treated with a lot of interest by the researchers preoccupied by the educational field, the following roles of the student within a HEI being inventoried:

- Student – customer.
- Student – product.
- Student – employee.
- Student – partner.

The *customer* role of the student is highlighted also by the researchers Robert Ackerman and John Schibrowsky through the following statement: „*The universities must treat their students like a company treats their best customers. As a result it is important for the universities to make the effort to know the students, their needs and preferences and the criteria to make choices.*” (R. Ackerman, J. Schibrowsky, 2007, page 328). We totally agree with this approach, the student customer must be in the core of any HEI concerns, the core of its marketing mix. As a result, the processes from a HEI must be designed to create, share and communicate value to the students, value understood both through the skills acquired by these and through the experience gained while studying (Söderlund, M., 2006). Any HEI that does not treat its students as customers will have serious competition problems in a powerful competitive environment like the present one.

The student as a *product* is absolutely justified given that the student is the main output of the high education process, an output that has to correspond to the requirements of the society and employers, two important customers of a HEI. The failure of a HEI to satisfy the requirements of these customers can lead to the damage of the relationship with them and finally to its disappearance.

Although some authors promote the idea of the student as a work contributor involved in his own educational process, of co-worker in the process rather than customer student (Halbesleben et al. 2003), we consider the idea of *employee* student a little bit forced because he is not paid by the HEI and he is not a colleague of the teachers. Even though students can have decision-making roles within the management

structures, be involved in research together with the teachers, or can assume responsibilities in teaching, they can't be considered employees of HEI.

All the aspects previously presented referring to the involvement of the student into a HEI processes recommend him for the role of *partner* of it. The importance of this role is growing in the context of the crossing between the traditional approach for the high education, where the student was a passive part of the process, an information receiver, to the current approach of HEI where the student is an active part of the process and the teacher is a learning opportunity provider. The need for promoting the partner role resides also in the major influence of student's involvement in the quality of the education service. HEI will have to offer students as many opportunities to manifest as partners as possible. This way the conditions for a VAD (value, belonging and direction) experience of the students during the study will be created, an experience which generates satisfaction and retention. Thus „*treating the students as partners is crucial for the optimization of students' experience from admission to graduation*” (Kotler and Fox 1995).

In conclusion all the three major roles of the student within a HEI must be taken into consideration, as a customer which we need to know and which needs a top value, as a product which requires training for the quality level requested by the labor market and by the society and as partner involved in the HEI processes.

IV. STUDENT CENTRED EDUCATION – A HOLISTIC CONCEPT

Starting from the answers offered in the previous two chapters we will try to define the student centred education paradigm:

- A partnership between the main stakeholders of the high education system, student– teacher – high education institution – employer, which has the role to maximize their interests. The synergic role of these four interest-bearers is focused on the student. Improving the quality of his experience in the academic system and his skill on the more and more competitive labor market will generate a wave of value in the whole society.

- “... *process defined through the student training for life, for a future career, active citizens in a democratic society, their self development and provision of an advanced knowledge base, well done, which stimulates learning, research and future innovation*” (The quality barometer in 2010, page 102). We notice the holistic approach of SCE, the student seen as a vector of the social-economic progress, of the welfare of a society in general and not only as a competent actor on the labor market. The student, future adult, is not exclusively seen as homoeconomicus but as an active citizen in a democratic society, as a person able to innovate for a better future of the humanity. In other words, the role of SCE is not only to train but also to educate.

- A tendency to turn the teacher from a knowledge provider into a partner that assumes the following roles in the relationship with the student: motivator, facilitator, learning opportunity provider, mentor, guide, therapist. Assuming these roles is not simple as it demands many skills and a greater effort for the teacher than in his “traditional version”.

Starting from these SCE approaches, we will dedicate the next chapter to presenting one of its implementation models within the universities in Romania.

V. IMPLEMENTATION PROGRAM OF SCE INTO A HEI

The role of this chapter is to present a SCE implementation programme into a HEI. We underline the fact that it is a guide and it can be implemented in any university or structure of it whatever the size or domain.

STEP 1. Being aware that the need of change exists represents the trigger of the entire changing process. This awareness can come from an employee who understands the reality in the institution and has a sustained concern for what SCE means or it can be the result of a conscious and planned effort of measuring the specific SCE performance indicators (Tinto, V. 1993), such as: student satisfaction degree; the exam promotion rate; extracurricular activities offered as learning opportunities to students and the involvement extent of the students in them (student circles, volunteering, internships, etc.); the study drop out rate; the integration rate on the labor market six months after the graduation (The external evaluation standard, standards, reference standards and the list of performance indicators of ARACIS in Higher Education, Bucharest 2006).

STEP 2. Forming the team which will coordinate SCE's implementation process. When selecting the members which will be part of the implementing team we must take into account the following set of characteristics (after Kotter J., Cohen D., *The heart of change*, 2008, page 49): be adepts of SCE; know the internal and external environment of the organization which allows the change vision development; know the internal mechanisms of the organization that will facilitate the elimination of the barriers of the vision implementation, credibility within the organization.

STEP 3. SWOT Analysis of SCE (The European Students Union, student centred education, student guide, teachers and high education institutions, 2010). At this stage we must:

- ✓ Analyse the level of the main performance indicators regarding SCE and identify the causes that led to these unsatisfactory performances.
- ✓ The initiation of a benchmarking in order to find out the performance level of the participants and the good practices used by them.
- ✓ Identify the main barriers which may block the change process.
- ✓ Identify the opportunities and the factors of SCE implementation into a HEI.

STEP 4. Setting goals will be done taking into account: the current stage of SCE within the HEI and that has been rated in the previous step, the position of the faculty / university on the market in the sense of competence through which it wishes to excel and the resources it has in order to sustain the change process. In the case of a SCE implementation programme we could take into account the following goals:

- ✓ Growing and diversifying the learning opportunity portfolio offered to students.
- ✓ Growing the share of students involved in extracurricular activities : volunteering, work visits, internships, etc.
- ✓ Growing the partnership number developed by the HEI with the employers.
- ✓ Growing the student satisfaction rate.
- ✓ Growing the skill level of the graduates.

STEP 5. Developing the SCE implementation plan. After setting the goals, we will design the plan which will allow their achievement. The specific stages of the plan are: setting the main activities within the change plan; planning the activities on time; setting those in charge with the activities and the resources allocated where needed. As far as the first step is concerned, the following can be undertaken:

a. Activities and measures about the infrastructure:

- ✓ creating a department / council at faculty/university level dedicated to SCE and naming a manager of it;
- ✓ designing and implementing an informational system dedicated to SCE which allows the assessment of the organization's capability to practise SCE and the transmission of the specific info to the targeted stakeholders.

b. Activities concerning the management engagement in SCE's issue:

- ✓ designing the values set which will form the core of the organizational culture specific to SCE;
- ✓ setting the goals specific to SCE;
- ✓ practising a leadership pro SCE.

c. Educational and instructional activities:

- ✓ preparing the change team members for the possible questions which may come from employees and / or students;
- ✓ presenting the teachers, students and employers the goals which refer to SCE
- ✓ the dissemination of the best practices specific to SCE used by the competition within the organization;
- ✓ the development of a good practice guide regarding SCE for HEI and their dissemination among teachers, students and employers.

d. Promotion activities of SCE:

- ✓ the presentation of some films about the excellent performances of other universities regarding SCE or of the employees and/or departments within their own university;
- ✓ publishing in the magazine of the faculty / university of some articles about SCE and its impact on the organization's performances and the stakeholders' satisfaction;
- ✓ yearly publishing of a top with the best ideas to improve SCE and their award;
- ✓ developing a SCE decalogue and displaying it in the whole organization;
- ✓ displaying a message and a relevant picture about the importance of SCE on every PC in the organization.

e. Activities and measures regarding the motivation of the stakeholders in order to involve into SCE:

- ✓ setting some goals specific to SCE at department and employee level;
- ✓ the assessment of the teachers using criteria specific to SCE (e.g the average number of different learning opportunities offered to the students);
- ✓ connecting the organization's reward system to the employees performances in practising SCE;
- ✓ developing some procedures for the key processes within the organization, like developing the discipline sheet which contains clear requirements about the teacher's involvement in SCE;
- ✓ promoting the employer brand to companies which run partnerships with HEI;
- ✓ public recognition of the performances made by the involved students and their recommendation towards hiring by the partner organizations.

STEP 6. Plan implementation. At this stage we work on the actual implementation of the activity plan developed for achieving the proposed SCE goals.

STEP 7. Strengthening the change. The essence of this stage consists of making the organization's performance management suitable for the change, in order to avoid sending contradictory signals to the employees. This step can be accomplished if the organization changes the way in which it manages and motivates the staff performance so that the new values and SCE specific practices could be "grounded" in the organization.

VI. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, implementing SCE in the Romanian universities is a difficult responsibility and, in the same time, a challenge for the managing teams that lead them. The success of this step is a condition for surviving on a more and more competitive high education service market. If we also consider the perspective of the privatization of the public universities from E.U., the ability of HEI to practise SCE will represent the main competitive advantage. If we want that SCE implementation to be successful we have to understand that: the main stakeholders who are the customers for a HEI are the student, the employers and the society in its whole; the student must be treated by the HEI in which he studies as a customer, product and partner, to offer him a superior value in terms of the acquired skills and experience during the study years.

Implementing SCE into a HEI must be a strict and planned effort whose main steps are: the awareness of the need for change; forming the team which will lead the entire change process; making the SWOT analysis for SCE; setting the goals specific to the change process; developing the change plan; implementing the change plan; strengthening the change. Even if this is time and energy consuming because of the employees' reluctance to change, it must be done due to the advantages for the stakeholders in a HEI (students – a positive experience during the study years, a value and competence system which brings them success; the employers – the access to good quality human resource; the teachers – a pleasant and motivating work environment) and the competitiveness of the HEI.

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