

# Students' Total Experience within a Romanian Public University

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**ABSTRACT** This paper focuses on the understanding of experience marketing in a higher education context and also on its implications on students' loyalty. Therefore, the article explores the most significant determinants of students' experience, such teaching process, administrative service, courses content, library, accommodation, eating spaces and medical services, university's space and campus's facilities, university's reputation and the provided career prospects. The research aims to outline the importance of analysing students' experience in the increasingly competitive market of educational services and also to provide a sustainable basis for the Romanian higher education improvement. In its last section, the objective of the research is to measure the student's loyalty towards the university and also the experience's impact on their loyalty. The originality of this study consist in the authors attempt to design a student's total experience survey, this paper being between the first ones analysing this topic in Romania.

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## 1. Introduction

In the current economic context, more and more entities militate for the idea of *delivering customer experiences* (Buttle, 2009, p.165). The marketing literature describes this concept as the *next battlefield* in which confrontations between entities will occur, thus providing a *sustainable differentiation* (Shaw and Ivens, 2002, p. xi).

It is well known that higher education is led to a fierce competition driven by "economic forces resulting from the development of global education markets and the reduction of government funds that forces tertiary institution to seek other financial sources" (Abdullah, 2006, p. 570). This is one of the main reasons why higher education institutions must be concerned about students feelings regarding the offered study programs and their educational experience.

Generally, an experience is described as an intrapersonal response, or an interpretation of an external stimulus. Schmitt (2010, p. 8) describes the experience concept as "the perceptions, feelings and thoughts that consumers have when they encounter products and brands in the marketplace and engage in consumption activities". Thus, the students' experience with a particular study program can be defined as the cognitive and affective outcome of their interaction with the academic and administrative staff, with the university space, with all the processes and also with the available technology. In this context, interest in factors affecting students' experience has increased, mainly because of the important role of the experience economy, which Pine and Gilmore (1998) highlight as the last stage of the progression of economic value, but also due to the defining role of the student feedback in a sustained improvement process of the study program (Gibson, 2010).

The focus of the paper is on analyzing a number of factors affecting masteral students experience in a public Romanian university and also on the most important driving forces of students' loyalty in

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the context of a national low retention rate (the school dropout rate in Romania is the third highest in the EU).

The paper also aims to summarize the most important conclusions of the past research on student experience with the study program they are enrolled in. The summary reports the differences in research results according to the chosen research methodology.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Defining experience in higher education

Same and Larimo (2012 cited in Ferreira and Teixeira, 2013), claim that generally, the experience is the result of an interaction between a company or a brand, a product, a service and a consumer, modeled by the consumer's features and the brand, product or services characteristics, being always influenced by the context or the environment in which the interaction occurs.

In this context, it is important to outline the importance of studying the influence of the endogenous factors (such as student's perceptions of the provided educational service, student's motivations in choosing a masters degree program or student's personal features) as well as external factors (such as the academic and non-academic staff or the university physical environment) on the student experience with the study program.

According to Schmitt (2010 cited in Ferreira and Teixeira, 2013), experiences can be defined as the perceptions, feelings and thoughts that consumers have when they come in contact with a product, brand, or service, at the time of consumption and also when they recall a lived experience. Throughout his work on experience marketing, Schmitt focuses on creating memorable experiences through emotions and human senses.

The customer experience is a mixture of a company's physical performance and the evoked emotions, always measured in relation to customer expectations (Shaw and Ivens, 2002, p. 21). Thus, we can say that the students' experience with a higher education institution will be shaped both by the physical performance of the institution and by the evoked emotions.

Gibson (2010, p. 251) outlines probably the most comprehensive definition of academic experience as the "students' experience with teachers, classes etc. [...] influenced by experience with other aspects of university life such as administrative practices and staff, physical characteristics of academic facilities, social environment and advising support".

DeShields Jr. et al. (2005) considers that the faculty, advising staff and classes are the critical factors in influencing students' academic experience and also students' satisfaction level.

There are also other opinions regarding how students' experience is shaped. Some authors think that students experience refers to the quality of educational service (Navarro et al., 2005; Tsinidou et al., 2010; Ardi et al., 2011; Sultan and Wong, 2012a; Sultan and Wong, 2012b), others think that experience is mostly influenced by the university's physical environment (Cox, 2011), while others consider that students' experience refers in particular to classroom experience (Stodnick and Rogers, 2008).

Moreover, Alves and Raposo (2007, p. 3) argue that students' experience is often influenced by the university's brand image, which is "one of the main influences in students' willingness to apply for enrolment".

Another interesting point of view belongs to Quintal and Shanka (2010). They conducted a study on "the mediating effects of study outcomes on student experience and satisfaction", and found out that the students' experience with teaching, learning, university image, facilities, student services and technology has "a direct and positive relationship with study outcomes such as academic development, personal development and career opportunity" (Quintal and Shanka, 2010, p. 4).

*Study outcomes*, which is the new element considered in this study, has a crucial influence on students' experience, due to its role in developing personal skills. The same study also suggests that the main reason why students "pursue a university education is the career opportunity it presents" (Quintal and Shanka, 2010, p. 6).

## 2.2. Factors affecting students' experience with the offered study programs

Student research, as well as customer research, is mostly about determining student expectations, experiences, behaviour and the extent to which their needs are met. This analysis outlines what marketing literature calls *expectation map* (Smith and Wheeler, 2010), which is the result of what customers, students in our case, expect in any interaction with the university. For each university it is expected to find a distinct "touchline", which is defined as a series of touchpoints that will eventually map the experience the student expects to have and actually has with the study program he is enrolled in.

There are a number of key concepts that need to be clarified before talking about the factors affecting students' experience with the offered study programs. These concepts are *touchpoint*, *moment of truth* and *engagement* and they are often used when referring to customer experience, but since students are considered university customers (Yeo, 2008; Xiao and Wilkins, 2015; Finney and Finney, 2010), we considered that these concepts are also appropriate in researching students' experience.

When talking about students, *touchpoints* are found wherever they come into contact with the educational service, communications, academic and non-academic staff, technology, processes and places. A *moment of truth* is described as any situation in which the student "interacts with, or is exposed to, any institutional output that leads to the formation of an impression" (Buttle, 2009, p. 193) of the educational institution. Moments of truth are likely to occur during student interaction at touchpoints. These are the moments when students form evaluative positive or negative judgements about their experience (Buttle, 2009). Even if *engagement* is a widely used term both in literature and practice, there is still no agreed definition of the concept. In this context we can refer to *engagement* as the student's rational or emotional response to a lived experience. A great challenge for the management of any university is to create highly engaged students with a strong level of rational or emotional connection to their experience and to their university (Buttle, 2009).

In an educational context, touchpoints involve students' experience with teachers, administrative services, physical environment, facilities, technology, university's image and study outcomes.

### *Students' experience with teachers (academic staff)*

Teaching is a core service of an educational institution and it is also considered an institution's capability (Athiyaman, 2002 cited in Quintal and Shanka, 2010). Marsh et al. (1989 cited in Dalton and Denson, 2009, p. 101), assume that student evaluation of teaching is used for the following reasons: "It is a developmental tool for providing feedback to staff about their teaching; it is a measure of educational effectiveness to make personnel decisions; it assists students in selecting courses or units and teaching staff and it is a source of data for research in teaching".

The importance of studying students' experience with the academic staff is also outlined by Sultan and Wong (2011, p. 7), who assume that "the service attributes that provide core academic values include teaching quality and ability, course development and teacher-student relationships". According to Hasan et al. (2008 cited in Palli and Mamilla, 2012, p. 431), obtaining quality assurance in an educational institution requires trained teaching staff "in a way that may create a sense of facilitation by means of coordination, cooperation and empathy.

In this study, in order to observe students' experience with teaching staff, we adjusted the three categories of teaching quality characteristics studied by Pavlina et al. (2011), which are: teachers' expertise, teaching competence and teachers' personal qualities.

Teachers' expertise is defined by the teacher's knowledge in his scientific field. Our research reflected on the following teacher expertise characteristics: in-depth knowledge in his/her scientific field, offers relevant and actual examples and practical applications during courses in order to sustain the theoretical content, has the ability to answer the questions expertly in order to clarify possible misunderstandings.

In our research, the studied characteristics describing teaching competence were: teachers ability to clearly define the course's goals, to expose clearly the course content, properly organize the courses, the teaching methods impact on raising students' interest in the discussed topics, asking students' opinion in defining their duties and also in setting the evaluation methods, encouraging students' involvement in the teaching process, providing feedback following students' involvement,

using proper communication techniques and create a pleasant climate during courses, respecting the course schedule, increasing the teaching quality by using multimedia technologies during courses, respecting the evaluation method agreed upon with students and using an objective evaluation method.

Teachers' personal qualities we were interested in were: teachers' respectful attitude, treating students equally (not having subjective preferences), the teaching staff motivation, their availability for additional consultations, having always a positive attitude, being friendly and open-minded.

#### *Administrative services*

Administrative services provide support for both national and international students and has a crucial role in shaping students' experience. Improving administrative processes is so important for a positive student experience that more and more public universities have begun to implement a Total Quality Management (TQM) system within their administrative service units; for example, in the state of California, more than half of public universities are implementing TQM within their administrative units (Lawrence and McCullough, 2004, p. 236).

Administrative service's quality is often related with the "attributes that provide support services for smooth functioning of academic activities" (Sultan and Wong, 2012, p. 77). These attributes include administrative staff's skills and abilities and also their relationship with students.

In order to design a total experience survey, we considered more than important to include in our study the students' perception towards their experience with the university's administrative service. The studied dimensions related to the administrative services were staff's willingness to help, contact hours, willingness to answer the questions and offer the requested information, staff's positive attitude, fast and adequate provision of the administrative service, staff's respect towards students and inclination towards problem solving, staff easily reached by phone or via e-mail and the administrative office design.

#### *Course content*

The course assessment aims to provide valuable feedback about students' experience with key elements of the course. In the present context we agree with Solinas's et al. (2012, p. 37) opinion, that "students are *judges* of the valued aspects of teaching". The same authors consider that student's perceived quality of the courses "is essential for planning changes that would increase the level of quality of educational services". Palli and Mamilla (2012, p. 432) assume that "like every service oriented organization, a university seeks to satisfy its customers, namely its students, by offering courses that help the student to realize his dream of choosing a career that he likes most".

The results of other studies (Palade and Brătuțu, 2013, p. 57) also conducted in a Romanian public university, have shown that "courses should contain more practical knowledge than theory if we want the students to have success in their future careers and find a suitable job". Given the previous results, our research aims to find the student' opinion on the extent of the practical content of the courses.

There are also studies confirming that another important aspect of course content is "providing courses and programs that are relevant in subject matter and teaching approaches" (Yeo, 2008). Thus, it is imperative that the course content has to be relevant and useful for students. Considering the previous studies, we examined the students' opinion of the proportion between the theory and the practical knowledge, their understanding of the key concepts, the importance of the debated course subjects and their practical application, the amount of knowledge acquired during courses, courses content relevance in subject matter, contribution to professional skills development, matching content with the economical reality, the variety of optional courses and the usefulness to the discussed topics.

#### *Library, accommodation, eating spaces and medical services*

These are key elements in influencing students' experience with their university. Paswan and Ganesh (2009 cited in Quintal and Shanka, 2010, p. 3) think that these facilities "add value to the student experience". Effah (1998 cited in Larson and Owusu-Acheaw, 2012) underlines that "the academic support service provided by the library is critical to the achievement of the university's central mission of teaching, research and service" (Larson and Owusu-Acheaw, 2012, p. 3). Kargbo (2002, cited in Larson and Owusu-Acheaw, 2012, p. 3) emphasizes that the library is "the central organ if the

university and this, together with good laboratories and faculty, are the parameters used to judge a good university”.

Regarding the faculty’s library, we were interested in discovering the students’ opinion towards the library schedule, book lending procedures, the library’s access to International Databases, the variety of books available, the number of computers in the reading room and their functionality, the library staff’s willingness to help and the reading room design (space and furniture).

Koch et al. (1999) and Olujimi and Bello (2009 cited in Najib et al. 2011, p. 53) assume that “kitchens, private bathrooms, study lounges and social spaces are considered basic necessities in student housing”. Foubert et al. (1998 cited in Najib et al. 2011, p. 54) assume that “residential satisfaction among students stems from high-quality facilities, positive roommate relationships, strong floor communities and quiet study environments in their living accommodations”. In this study we were interested in knowing students’ opinion about accommodation locations, accommodation accessibility and cleanliness.

Regarding eating spaces, we studied students’ perception towards cleanliness, food prices, food freshness and cafeteria’s staff.

Provided medical services are also very important for students’ university experience especially if the students are not residents, which is also our case, and in this context, we were interested in the students’ opinion about university medical staff, medical centre schedule and accessibility.

#### *The university’s space.*

Yeo (2008) appreciates that experience within the classroom, which is the primary learning space, needs to embody students needs and expectations although the wider spaces of social interaction and learning involving laboratories, computers, cafeterias also contribute towards the students’ experience.

Bennett (2005, 2006, 2009 cited in Cox, 2011, p. 199) suggests that “there is a need to let students own space, to use it in different ways, at different times, to work in a context where they know others and feel safe such that social aspects of learning can take place”. Also, Chism (2006 cited in Cox, 2011, p. 198) proposes that “learning space needs flexibility, comfort, sensory stimulation, technology support and decenteredness”. Douglas et al. (2006, p. 253) assume that students’ perception towards university’s facilities (such as the lecture theatres, classrooms, decorations, the level of furnishing, lighting and layout or the recreational amenities) are one of the most important determinants of their decision to enrol.

Given the lack of research within this field in the Romanian public universities, our study involved university’s space attributes such as yards’, buildings’, laboratories’ and theatres’ design, theatres’ and classrooms’ level of furnishing, available technology within classrooms and theatres, computers’ functionality within laboratories.

#### *The campus facilities.*

Archambault’s (2008, p. 42) research revealed that today’s students expect “appealing campus facilities, quality/modern equipment and prompt service”. Schreiner’s (2009 cited in Olson, 2010, p. 2) research indicates that students’ satisfaction with campus environment “is a predictor of students’ retention”. Olson’s (2010) research has shown that campus’s safety and security are one of the main attributes of students’ satisfaction with the campus climate.

Because one of the biggest problem of the Romanian higher education institutions is students’ low retention rate, our research involves students’ perception towards campus’s location accessibility, campus’s safety and security and campus’s location influence on students’ decision on choosing the study program.

#### *The career prospects.*

Telford and Masson (2005 cited in Quintal and Shanka, 2010, p. 3) consider that the study outcomes are “goals that students set out to achieve from their education, students need to perform their roles effectively in order to achieve desired outcomes”. Thus, “students who are more involved in academic work, extra-curricular activities and interaction with staff, achieve higher study outcomes” (Astin, 1999 cited in Quintal and Shanka, 2010, p. 3). Students’ involvement in organizations, extra-curricular activities and students’ clubs is very common in our days (Yin and Lei, 2007). Moore at al.

(1998 cited in Yin and Lei, 2007, p. 282) assume that “in order to maximize cognitive and affective growth, students should be involved in both academic and extra-curricular activities as much as possible”.

Considering that extra-curricular activities and volunteering are as important as students' academic activities, our research has tried to evaluate student experience with the offered career opportunities by examining students' opinion towards the university relationship with the business environment, volunteering activities, students' organizations and their implications in students' personal and professional development, the offered support in finding a job, and available postgraduate study programs.

### 2.3. Approaches in measuring students' experience

Together with the conversion of the experience into a strategic tool, it becomes imperative to manage and systematically evaluate the experience, the starting point in this context being the understanding of the consumer's *journey*, from his expectations to the judgements he makes after the experience ends.

Palmer (2010 cited in Ferreira and Teixeira, 2013) draws the attention about the difficulties of the development of a measurement scale for customers' experience, mostly because of the complexity of the concept but also because of the multitude of the variables involved in generating experience, this concept being more vaguely delimited than, for example, customers' satisfaction. This was the main reason why we decided to agree with Froehle and Roth (2004 cited in Gungor, 2007, p. 20), who use a new construct when measuring customer service experience: "Attitude towards contact episode ... [which] reflects the customer's overall attitude towards the entire contact" (Gungor, 2007) and, therefore, to use this approach in our research.

Săvoiu et al. (2014) propose a model for measuring students' satisfaction, using four categories of items, these being: students' demographics, students' satisfaction with the university, students' perception towards the available information quality, students' satisfaction with the offered courses.

Because of the satisfaction scales' deficiencies, Gruber et al. (2010) proposed a new model of measuring students' experience, using the five points Likert Scale. The research tool in their study has 15 dimensions related to the qualitative aspects inspired from Harvey's (1995), Hill's (1995), Elliot and Healy's (2001) and Wiers-Jenssens's et al. (2002) studies. These dimensions are "the administrative and student services, the atmosphere among students, the attractiveness of the surrounding city, the computer equipment, the courses, the library, the lecturers, the lecture theatres, the cafeteria, the relevance of teaching to practice, the university's reputation, the school placements, the lecturers' support, the information presentation and the university's buildings" (Gruber et al., 2010, p.111).

Other researchers use SERVQUAL when measuring the perceived service's quality (Tsindou et al., 2010; Ijaz et al., 2011; Letcher and Neves, 2010; Stodnik and Rogers, 2008). The service's quality dimensions were outlined by Parasuraman et al. (1991 cited in Ramaiyah et al., 2007) and they are *tangibles*, meaning the physical facilities, the available technology and equipment and also the personnel appearance, *reliability*, representing "the ability to perform the desired service dependably, accurately and consistently" (Ramaiyah et al., 2007, p. 5), *responsiveness*, defined as the staff's willingness to help and provide prompt service, *assurance*, meaning employees' knowledge, staff's courtesy and their ability to convey trust and *empathy*, or providing individualized attention and care to customers.

Klaus's and Maklan's (2012, cited in Ferreira and Teixeira, 2013) researches reveal that studying customer's satisfaction or the perceived service's quality is not enough in the current economic environment. The same authors' studies outline that the service experience has a strong impact both on customer's satisfaction and on customer's loyalty. Thus, even if measuring service's quality is necessary, we strongly believe that it is not sufficient.

These results had an important role in designing our research, the experience-satisfaction-perceived quality-loyalty relationship being the starting point in substantiating our research's hypotheses.

Another method, often used for measuring students' experience is HEDPERF scale (Firdaus, 2006 cited in Randheer, 2015; Tsindou et al., 2010; Sultan and Wong, 2012; Abdullah, 2006), which is

derived from SERVQUAL. HEdPERF is composed of 38 items, divided into 5 dimensions, all related to the educational service's quality. The five dimensions are (Firdaus, 2006 cited in Randheer, 2015): *non-academic aspects* such as the relationship between students and the administrative staff, *academic aspects*, like student-teacher relationship or the teachers' willingness to support students, the institution's *reputation*, or those tangibles representing facilities and advantages perceived by students, parents or stakeholders, *accessibility* and *program issues*, referring to programs, courses schedule, specializations and structures.

Rowley (2007) draws attention on the longitudinal nature of the students' educational experience. This characteristic refers not only to the cumulative changes of the quality, but also highlights the need of taking into account the students' knowledge and perceptions changes.

The Critical Incident Technique (CIT) is another research method often used (Cadotte and Turgeon, 1988; Hoffman et al., 2003; Johnston, 1995; Maddox, 1981; Swan and Combs, 1976; Wong and Sohal, 2003 cited in Douglas et al., 2008) in studying the higher education sector. Probably the biggest advantage of CIT is the respondents' opportunity to express freely their feelings and experiences.

Flanagan (1954 cited in Douglas et al., 2007) defines the Critical Incident Technique as "a way to identify a significant factor that contributes to the success or failure of a human event" (Douglas et al., 2007, p. 26). Used for the first time within military training, in the current context, CIT is encountered within the services' research, helping to identify the critical aspects of the service's encounters (Douglas et al., 2007). A real challenge in this case is to identify the *critical aspects* of the students' experience, problem that can be solved by measuring students' satisfaction using SERVQUAL.

The previously described research methods influenced the development of the approach used in this paper by providing the basis in choosing the studied experience dimensions and the research methodology. Thus, we combined the dimensions studied in these studies and tried to design a total experience survey in one of the biggest universities of Romania.

A very important objective of our research was to measure the students' experience impact on their loyalty towards the university. Our study confirmed the results of other researches, such as Navarro's et al. (2005), Alves and Raposo (2004) whose studies show that the students' loyalty is positively affected by the students' satisfaction with the courses and it is measured through the students' favourable interpersonal communications and also through their intention to return to attend the same university's courses.

### 3. Research methodology

#### *The research objectives*

Generally, the research aimed to outline a complex analysis of the students' total experience within a Romanian public university. Given the fact that all the Romanian studies covering this field, involve just the research of the students' satisfaction with the teaching process, our study stands for a complex analysis of the students' experience, including in our research the students attitude towards their experience with other aspects, such as administrative services, physical space, accommodation, medical services and even career prospects.

In the study's first section, we aimed to measure students' perception towards their experience with the most important aspects of their academic life, such as their experience with the academic staff, their experience with the administrative services, with the courses' content, the library, the accommodation, the eating spaces and the medical services, the university's space, the campus's facilities and the provided career prospects.

Second, the research aims to study the students' loyalty towards the university and the experience's impact on the students' loyalty level.

#### *The population sample*

In order to meet the study's objectives, we have conducted a quantitative research, with the main purpose of obtaining a thorough description of the students' experience within the university.

The survey was conducted among Masters Programmes' students, enrolled in the last year of study, within a Romanian public university. The sample consists of 45 males and 95 females with ages between 23 and 25 years. Using the convenience sampling, we chose the students' from 8 of the

17 master's degree programmes. The study programmes involved in our study were: Marketing Policies and Strategies, Finances, HR Management, Tourism, Banks, International Business Management, Statistics and Accounting Expertise. We questioned a number of 140 students from a total of approximately 340 students enrolled in all the economical master's degree programmes available in Babeş-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca, Romania. From the 140 responses, 100% were valid.

Most of the questioned students (60 percent) don't work within the main field they are studying in. Also, most of the students are the same university's first study level graduates. The research was carried out between March 22 and April 10, 2017 and the questionnaires were distributed during the students' last semester of studying.

#### *The research tool*

Since we mainly studied the students' attitude towards their experience with the university, we used the five points Likert Scale. In this case, students had to express their agreement or disagreement, from 1 - Total Disagreement to 5 -Total Agreement.

The main section of the questionnaire was meant to describe the students' attitude towards their university experience. In this case, students' had to express their agreement or disagreement regarding certain statements describing their possible experience with the teachers, with the administrative services, with the course content, the library, the accommodation, the eating space (the cafeteria), the provided medical services, the university's space (the physical environment, the furnishing level etc.), the campus facilities (the campus safety and security, the campus accessibility), the university's reputation and also with the provided career prospects (university's support on finding a job, university's relationship with the business environment and with other universities and also the university's offer of postgraduate studies).

The last section of the questionnaire aimed to research the students' loyalty, investigating the students' willingness to recommend the university to other acquaintances and their desire to choose the same university if they had to choose again.

## **4. Findings**

First, we ran some simple analyzes, in order to measure the students' attitude towards their experiences with the most significant aspects of their academic and non-academic life, and also to determine if there are significant differences in students' perceptions depending on the study programme they are enrolled in.

The research showed that there are indeed significant differences in students' attitude towards their experience with the academic staff (if the students enrolled in Finances and Insurances have a positive attitude towards their experience with the teachers, the students enrolled in Tourism and Business Administration have a less positive experience with the teachers issues) and also with the course content (if the Tourism and Business Administration students have a negative experience with the courses content because they think the courses contain more theory than practical knowledge, the Accounting Expertise students have an opposite opinion).

Regardless their study programme, students have a negative experience with the administrative services, especially because of the inappropriate contact hours, with the library, mostly because of the poor performance of the available computers and also with the available career prospects, students claiming that the university has few partnerships with the business environment.

Students have a positive experience with the University's location, considering in very accessible, with the university's physical space, agreeing that both the interior and the exterior design of the university is a pleasant one and also with the accommodation and eating facilities.

As it was previously indicated, student loyalty is a highly debated topic within marketing literature (Alves and Raposo, 2004; Navarro et al., 2005; Helgesen and Nettet, 2007; Douglas et al., 2007). In order to reach our objectives, we analyzed the impact of the students' experience with various aspects of their student life on their loyalty towards university.

Therefore, we assumed the following hypothesis:



- H1.** Teacher's expertise has a direct and significant influence on students' loyalty towards the university.
- H2.** The academic staff's teaching competence has a direct and significant influence on students' loyalty towards the university.
- H3.** The teachers' personal qualities have a direct and significant influence on students' loyalty towards the university.
- H4.** The students' experience with the provided administrative service has a direct and significant influence on students' loyalty towards the university.
- H5.** The students' experience with the courses content has a direct and significant influence on students' loyalty towards the university.
- H6.** The students' experience with the university's library has a direct and significant influence on students' loyalty towards the university.
- H7.** The students' experience with the provided accommodation facilities has a direct and significant impact on students' loyalty.
- H8.** The students' experience with the eating spaces has a direct and significant impact on students' loyalty.
- H9.** The students' experience with the medical services has a direct and significant influence on their loyalty.
- H10.** The students' experience with the university's space has a direct and significant influence on their loyalty.
- H11.** The students' experience with the campus's facilities has a direct and significant influence on their loyalty.
- H12.** The students' experience with the provided career prospects has a direct and significant influence on their loyalty.

Second, to test the given hypothesis, applied the Factor Analysis was applied in order to regroup the most relevant variables for each dimension we studied. Then, each factor represented the Fixed factor in a multivariate analysis in which the Dependent variables were *I would recommend the university to my friends* (L1) and *If I had to choose again, I would go for the same university* (L2). The results of those analyzes are centralized in Table 1.

The  $p$  values revealed in Table 1 indicate that we can confirm H1, ( $p = 0.000$  and  $p = 0.000$ ). In our case, teachers' professional expertise has a significant effect on students' loyalty, both on students' recommendations and on students' decision to choose the same university. We can also confirm the third assumption, H2, according to  $p$  values ( $p = 0.000$  and  $p = 0.001$ ), the academic staff's teaching competences have a significant effect on students' loyalty.

Regarding H3: *The teachers' personal qualities have a direct and significant influence on students' loyalty towards the university*, H6: *The students' experience with the university's library has a direct and significant influence on students' loyalty towards the university* and H10: *The students' experience with the university's space has a direct and significant influence on their loyalty*, we encounter an interesting situation. The  $p$  first value (which refers to the students' recommendations), is less than 0.05, meaning that their experience with the teachers' personal qualities, with the university's library and with the university's space has a significant influence on their recommendations, but it has no influence on their decision to choose the same university if they should to (the  $p$  second value is greater than 0.05 in these cases). These results can lead as to the conclusion that students' experience with the teachers' personal qualities, with the library and with the university's space is good enough to encourage them to recommend the university to their friends, but it is not positive enough to make them choose the same university.

H4: *The students' experience with the provided administrative services has a direct and significant influence on students' loyalty towards the university*, H7: *The students' experience with the provided accommodation facilities has a direct and significant impact on students' loyalty*, H8: *The students' experience with the eating spaces has a direct and significant impact on students' loyalty* and H12: *The students' experience with the campus's facilities has a direct and significant influence on their loyalty* cannot be confirmed,  $p$  values in these situations being greater than 0.05 ( $p = 0.294$  and  $0.740$ ;  $p = 0.109$  and  $0.810$ ;  $p = 0.052$  and  $0.414$ ;  $p = 0.421$  and  $0.856$ ). Thus, the students'

experience with the administrative services, with the provided accommodation facilities, the eating spaces and also with the campus's facilities has no influence on their loyalty towards the university.

**Table 1.** Experience 's impact on students' loyalty

Source	Dependent Variable	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Professional expertise_Factor	L1	88.572	27	3.280	6.486	0.000
	L2	130.114	27	4.819	5.216	0.000
Teaching competences_Factor	L1	142.555	125	1.140	5.987	0.000
	L2	228.433	125	1.827	4.952	0.001
Personal qualities_Factor	L1	133.333	96	1.389	5.023	0.000
	L2	180.294	96	1.878	1.515	0.065
Administrative service_Factor	L1	141.326	132	1.071	1.691	0.294
	L2	220.275	132	1.669	0.759	0.740
Courses content_Factor	L1	144.721	134	1.080	10.800	0.007
	L2	233.100	134	1.740	17.396	0.002
Library experience_Factor	L1	134.805	113	1.193	2.978	0.001
	L2	201.367	113	1.782	1.437	0.143
Accommodation experience_Factor	L1	54.971	43	1.278	1.360	0.109
	L2	60.807	43	1.414	0.786	0.810
Eating space experience_Factor	L1	93.278	76	1.227	1.489	0.052
	L2	130.877	76	1.722	1.056	0.414
Medical services experience_Factor	L1	63.937	40	1.598	1.947	0.004
	L2	93.903	40	2.348	1.664	0.022
Physical space_Factor	L1	141.521	129	1.097	2.965	0.031
	L2	217.150	129	1.683	1.023	0.534
Campus facilities_Factor	L1	37.732	35	1.078	1.043	0.421
	L2	46.026	35	1.315	0.729	0.856
Career prospects_Factor	L1	118.388	92	1.287	2.254	0.001
	L2	177.211	92	1.926	1.605	0.038

The students' experience with the courses content, together with their experience with the provided medical services and career prospects have a significant influence on students' loyalty, both on their willingness to recommend the university to their friends and on their decision to choose the same university ( $p = 0.007$  and  $0.002$ ;  $p = 0.004$  and  $0.022$ ;  $p = 0.001$  and  $0.038$ ).

## 5. Conclusions

Earlier studies (Cronin and Taylor, 1992, 1994; Sweeney and Soutar, 2001 cited in Ijaz et al., 2011) have shown that students' satisfaction has a positive and significant impact on their loyalty. Our study aimed to measure the students' attitude towards their experience with the university and also to test the impact of the students' experience with various aspects of their student life, on their loyalty towards the university.

The research revealed that there are significant differences in students' attitudes regarding their attitude towards every aspect of their academic and non-academic experience, depending on the study programme they are enrolled in. These results prove that the educational institution must implement a heterogeneous set of measures in order to improve the students' experience.

The study of the experience's impact on students' loyalty has revealed the significant effect the teachers' professional expertise and teaching competence, the courses content, the provided medical services and career prospects have, both on students' willingness to recommend the university and on their decision to choose the same university. The research also revealed that students' experience with the teachers' personal qualities, the university's library and with the university's space has a significant influence on their recommendations, but it has no influence on the decision to choose the same university and that the administrative services, accommodation facilities, eating spaces and

campus's facilities has no impact on their loyalty towards the university. The course content and the academic staff's teaching competences have the most significant influence on student's loyalty.

In the public universities' present context, it is necessary to develop and implement effective marketing strategies, in order to gain a competitive edge. One of the measures that could help achieve this goal is the development of a monitoring system of students' total experience, not only the students' experience with the academic staff and with the courses' content, given the circumstance that the current study outlined that there are also other aspects that influence students' experience such as the provided medical services or the career prospects.

## 6. Limitations and directions for future researches

In the current study we focused on evaluating the students' experience and its impact on their loyalty. Hence, our field study was the marketing experience in the higher education context.

Two of the most significant limitations are the sample's dimension, only 140 respondents and the use of the convenience sampling, in order to choose the respondent students.

Firstly, in the future researches we aim to run a national survey on students' experience with their universities, in the Romania's present educational context and so provide a sustainable basis for the higher education system's improvement, followed by a longitudinal study on Romanian students' experience. We also pursue to measure the students' engagement in order to get a picture even clearer of the students' experience with a higher education institution.

Secondly, we are pursuing the development of an experiential marketing strategy for a higher education institution and then, study its impact on student loyalty and the effects it provides on the institution's marketing differentiation. Although the marketing experience and experiential marketing are concepts widely debated, the aim of the future researches will be to provide a clear view on the differences between these two concepts in the higher education context.

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