Determinants of Student Satisfaction in Higher Education: A Case of the UAE University

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ABSTRACT

Promoting and measuring student satisfaction and happiness is a primary focus of the United Arab Emirates University (UAEU) during the last few years. The aim of this research is to introduce and test a conceptual model of students’ satisfaction in the (UAEU). A survey instrument designed and used for this purpose. Data (n = 498) were gathered on students from nine colleges of the UAEU. Exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses were implemented using structural equation modelling to test the proposed research model and hypothesis, which were based on a modified Parasuraman’s SERVQUAL measurement tool. The results indicated that quality (service/program) has significant impact on students’ satisfaction and consequently on their happiness. Correlations between the quality constructs and the students’ satisfaction were statistically significant. The study has shown that program quality, in terms of the university reputation, has the most influence, among quality constructs, towards confirming students’ satisfaction. Moreover, results indicated, in general, that UAEU was successful in gaining student’s satisfaction. These findings should encourage the academic authorities to support service and program quality more, in order to enhance students’ satisfaction and ensure their happiness.

KEYWORDS

Higher Education, Servqual, Structural Equation Model (SEM), Student’s Satisfaction

INTRODUCTION

UAE higher education works to achieve qualitative and quantitative developments that take place through the expansion of the founding of private and public higher educational institutions. In 1976, the Ministry of Higher Education opened the parent university; UAE University (UAEU). Today, the UAE has over 100 higher education institutions, hosting approximately 140,000 students.

Education is a priority at both the national level and the individual Emirates, this created an increasing demand on education sector, consequently, the education environment has become increasingly competitive, and many universities have begun to adopt new quality-oriented strategies as a result. In this environment, the UAEU is implementing broad strategies for advancing the university interests related to teaching, research and services to make it a center for excellence and innovation and enhance its international ranking.

The UAEU regards flourishing happiness of its students as a final goal alongside with students ‘satisfaction. Student satisfaction has become an important factor by which institutions are judged as proxy not only for happiness but also for quality, (Elwick and Cannizzaro, 2017). In fact, the two
terms happiness and satisfaction are often, used interchangeably. Many studies aimed to investigate happiness in university education, while focusing entirely on factors, which affect satisfaction.

In the last few decades, extensive research has been carried out studying the essence of quality of higher education. Many academics have linked the factors of quality to the concepts of satisfaction and happiness, and a great deal of satisfaction surveys have been developed to determine factors, which can affect the satisfaction of students.

(Dean and Gibbs, 2015) addressed the issue of the conflation of happiness and satisfaction. The authors, empirically, indicated that a line should be drawn between the two concepts. Generally speaking: measuring whether or not students state that they are satisfied with an aspect at a certain moment in time is easier than assessing whether or not they have had an edifying experience leading in the long term to happiness.

In this research, we focus on measuring students’ satisfaction based on the quality of service and programs, which is much more straightforward than judging the students’ happiness.

We aim to evaluate the student perceptions about the service/program quality of the UAEU. Moreover, to investigate interrelationships between service quality and student satisfaction using structural equations modelling (SEM).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Empirical Studies

This research is conducted on students’ satisfaction, which is based on the quality of higher education. Quality that focuses on the individual level that is on the student experience, specifically, student learning and engagement.

Many academics highlighted that the factors of quality are essentially linked to satisfaction, hence education becomes ‘being satisfied’ (Tsinidou et al., 2010). A great deal of students’ satisfaction surveys has been developed by governmental bodies and universities to determine student satisfaction as an educational goal and many empirical studies confirm the influence of the two aspects of quality in higher education, namely service quality and program quality, towards students’ satisfaction. (Dean and Gibbs, 2015) dealt with quality and satisfaction in a causal relationship. A research conducted by (Osman et al., 2017) revealed that the significant exploratory variables that increase students’ satisfaction at the universities are related to satisfaction with academic work and resources provided by the university. In a study, on measuring students’ satisfaction at faculty of business and law in Liverpool John Mores University Malaysia, (Douglas et al., 2006), found that physical facilities of university are not significantly important with respect to students’ satisfaction, but it represents an important factor of student choice in selecting universities. A study conducted by (Garcl a–Aracil, 2009) in eleven European countries, found that students’ satisfaction across these countries was relatively stable despite the differences in education systems. Moreover, the study realized certain factors such as course content, learning equipment and libraries have significant impact on students’ satisfaction. A study by (Ijaz et al., 2011), investigated the service quality of Business schools in public sector in Pakistan and how these institutions are successful in gaining students’ satisfaction. The findings of the study showed that the business schools in the public sector provided better quality of educational services and were successful in gaining student satisfaction. A major reason, according to the study, of students’ satisfaction in these institutions was due their reputation, availability of scholarships and low fees as compared to private institutions.

(Wilkins & Balakrishnan, 2013), in a study on students’ satisfaction in transnational higher education in United Arab Emirates, found that quality and availability of resources and use of technology have significant influence on student satisfaction. The study also revealed that there are significant differences of satisfaction at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. (Karna & Julin, 2015) in their study on student satisfaction about university facilities in Finland, found core university facilities such as teaching and research facilities have greater impact on students’ satisfaction than supportive facilities, and in general, the study found academic facilities are more important than