

Student Satisfaction in Higher Education: a Turkish Case

by

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The aim of this paper is to determine the level and the factors for university students' satisfaction with the institutions they are attending. Firstly, the concept of satisfaction will be defined. Secondly, a conceptual framework to demonstrate the relationship between the factors which lie behind university student satisfaction will be presented. Thirdly, the results and implications of a survey with which the authors tried to test the presupposed relationships within the boundaries of the conceptual framework will be given and discussed. The limitations of the research are also given. The results of the research show that, at least for some Turkish university students, the quality of education, instructors, textbooks and being female and informed before attending university can be considered important factors of satisfaction.

Although there is a significant amount of research on student satisfaction, Harvey (2001), Lee *et al.* (2000), Benjamin and Hollings (1997, 1995) argue that student satisfaction is an important issue that has not yet been fully explored. Satisfaction or dissatisfaction with a university or faculty does not only affect student performance (Pike, 1991; Bean and Bradley, 1986) and the competitive advantage of universities in an ever-increasing competitive environment (Lee *et al.*, 2000). More significantly, it also affects both the physical and psychological health of students. Dissatisfaction causes stress and this in turn provokes psychological and psychosomatic disorders (Öngider and Yüksel, 2002).

For a detailed report on the nature and impact of psychological and psychosomatic disorders on students, one should refer to Stirling University's *Mental Health Guidelines* which were updated in March 2003. The guidelines refer to research conducted among university students both in the United States and in the United Kingdom. The results of this research consistently suggest that students are at particular risk of mental health problems. Öngider and Yüksel (2002) find similar results for Turkish university students studying at the institution where this research was conducted. Thus, an attempt to determine the sources of satisfaction becomes a very important endeavour in itself.

The aim of this article is to determine the level and the factors for university students' satisfaction with the institutions they are attending. Firstly, the concept of satisfaction will be defined. Secondly, a conceptual framework to demonstrate the relationship between the factors which lie behind university student satisfaction will be presented. Thirdly, the results and implications of a survey with which the authors tried to test the presupposed relationships within the boundaries of the conceptual framework will be given and discussed.

"Satisfaction is a person's attitude toward an object. It represents a complex assemblage of cognitions (beliefs or knowledge), emotions (feelings, sentiments or evaluations) and behavioural tendencies" (Hamner and Organ, 1978, p. 216). The object of satisfaction may be anything. When a person states that he/she is satisfied with something, he/she is regarded as having a positive

attitude toward that specific object. Conversely, a person may be dissatisfied with something. In that case he is regarded as having negative attitudes toward that very object.

Probably, the simplest, most straightforward method to measure satisfaction is to ask individuals questions as to what extent they are satisfied with a given object (Hamner and Organ, 1978:217). Thus, accuracy can be enhanced by defining the “object” of satisfaction very carefully.

In this article, the object is university students’ satisfaction and it is defined as the positive and negative attitudes developed by the students with regard to their institutions.

Conceptual framework

Before proceeding into the details of the conceptual framework, it seems necessary to designate the level of analysis at which the following research was conducted. According to Harvey (2001), the predominant satisfaction surveys cover five areas: 1) institutions (university level), 2) faculties, 3) departments, 4) courses and 5) teacher-appraisal by students. In this study, we have collected information regarding the faculties and unless otherwise stated, our analysis, results, comments and conclusions must be interpreted at this level.

Taking previous research (Harvey, 2001, 1997; Lee et al., 2000; Donald and Denison, 1996; Morrison, 1999; Marsh, 1991; Rich et al., 1988; Guolla, 1982; Feldman and Theiss, 1982) and the authors’ personal observations as a basis, it is assumed that there are four major groups of factors which seem to affect student satisfaction: 1) institutional factors 2) extracurricular factors, 3) student expectations and 4) student demographics (Figure 1).

Some of these factors are similar to Harvey’s 2001 study. According to Harvey, most universities around the world conduct satisfaction surveys among the students regarding the services they provide. These services include: 1) learning and teaching, 2) learning supports facilities, 3) support facilities, 4) external aspects of being a student, 5) the learning environment. In this study, services one and two are classified under the heading “academic factors”, services three, four and five are classified under “extracurricular activities”. In addition to these, institutional, expectational and demographic factors are also included in order to come up with a more comprehensive framework.

Institutional factors break down into two major components: academic factors and university administrators’ management philosophy and style. Academic factors include: a) quality of education, b) communication with instructors both in and outside the classroom, c) curriculum, d) textbooks and other teaching materials and e) student evaluations of instructors (Guolla, 1999; Cashin, 1992; Marsh, 1991, 1987; Abrami, 1989). Administrative factors

include the philosophy and practices of university administrators (Donald and Denison, 1996; Porter and McKibbin, 1988; Ames and Ames, 1984; Rigby, 1984; Cameron, 1981).

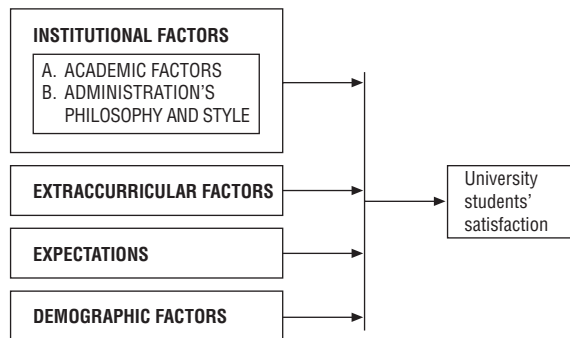
Extracurricular activities consist of all social, health, cultural and sportive activities plus transportation and boarding services (i.e. campus life) that a university may provide to its students (Harvey, 2001; Harju et al., 1998; Donald and Denison, 1996; Prieto, 1995; Cameron, 1981).

Another important factor that determines university students' satisfaction includes their preferences and **expectations** regarding their faculty. From the process point of view, satisfaction is the difference between expectations and achieved performance (Wanous et al., 1992; Feldman and Theiss, 1982). When expectations and performance match, satisfaction occurs. A mismatch will end up with dissatisfaction. Expectations do not only relate to the students' faculty choice and probability of finding a job after graduation but also to what he/she expects from higher education. In this study expectations include: a) participation in faculty or university administration, b) the sectors in which students expect to find jobs after graduation in Turkey, c) pursuing further education abroad, d) finding a job abroad, e) whether they would send children to the same faculty, f) whether the faculty prepares students for the labour market or not.

Demographic factors are factors such as age, sex, class attendance, cumulative average, etc. Figure 1 shows the relationship between the satisfaction of university students and the factors mentioned above .

It can easily be claimed that there may be several other factors that can determine the formation of satisfaction, which is indeed a highly complex socio-psychological phenomena. Thus, the conceptual framework presented in Figure 1 may be criticized from several points of view. For example, one can

Figure 1. **A conceptual framework of factors relating to university student satisfaction**



Source: Authors.

easily suggest that there might be numerous other factors that may determine the formation of satisfaction. It may quite convincingly be argued that this framework does not show likely interactions between the independent variables. Furthermore the causal relationship invoked may turn out in fact to be the reverse. That is, instead of a demographic factor such as success in class (Grade Point Average) creating satisfaction, satisfaction may increase success (Grade Point Average) (Donald and Denison, 1996; Pike, 1991; Bean and Bradley, 1986). However, this type of endeavour surpasses the researchers limits and explains why the authors have chosen the factors which have been most used in previous literature. One further reservation regarding the research, and which is explained below, is that the authors had to omit administrative style and philosophy from the research design due to an inadequate sample. Quantitative analysis of this factor could not be given, yet some qualitative interpretations will be provided through inference. After all, it is assumed that the areas where students are dissatisfied are the points which both academics and administrators pay attention to.

Method and sample

The Faculty of Business from which we have drawn the sample is a young faculty which was established in 1992 at Dokuz Eylül University, Izmir, Turkey. It has 4 departments and a total of 872 students, of which 182 students are first year students. The language of instruction is English in all the departments. Dokuz Eylül University is one of the largest state universities in Turkey. It has 36 000 students and ranks fifth among 52 state and 23 private (foundation) universities. All 52 state universities are run, financed and controlled by a constitutionally established body, the Higher Education Council. Foundation universities are semi-private in the sense that they are controlled, but not run and financed, by the Higher Education Council. There are laws, rules and regulations which every state and foundation university has to observe.

Thus, almost all universities operate within the same legal framework. The legal entity of universities is therefore not considered as a separate variable and hence, not included in the institutional factors group.

In order to test the previously mentioned relationship in the conceptual framework, a survey was conducted among the sophomore, junior and senior students of the Faculty of Business in December 2001. First year students are not included in the sample because information such as cumulative average could not be obtained at the time of the survey. Another reason for omitting first year classes was the presupposition that they were very new to the Faculty and had not been able to develop realistic expectations and acquire meaningful experiences. They were therefore not in a position to compare their experiences with their expectations. The entire population of the students in

sophomore, junior and senior classes at the Faculty of Business at the time of the survey was 690. The authors tried to reach the entire population, however only 419 students responded. The rate of response was 60.7%. Detailed information about the sample is given in Table 1.

Table 1. **Research sample**

	Gender N = 419		Age N = 389				Previous Residence (Regions) N = 419			
	Female	Male	17-18	19-20	21-22	23-	Aegean- Thracia	Mediterranean	Central Anatolia	Other
Frequency	223	196	6	157	186	40	339	37	17	26
Percentage (%)	53.2	46.8	1.5	40.4	47.8	10.3	80.9	8.8	4.1	6.1

Source: Authors.

Survey and measures

A questionnaire of 63 questions was prepared by the authors and addressed to students during December 2001. The authors tried to choose a relatively less stressful period for the students (i.e. away from the stress of examinations or presentations). Questions are grouped under four subheadings: 1) demographic (28 items), 2) institutional (18 items), 3) extracurricular (5 items), 4) expectations (12 items). The questions were designed to address the presupposed relationships in the conceptual framework.

The questions were prepared at nominal, ordinal and interval levels of measurement. The variable “satisfaction” on the other hand was measured at nominal level. Possible answers to this question were “Yes”, “No” or “I have no idea”. Although literature is replete with Likert type measurements of satisfaction, which allow for ordinal level of measurement and statistics, the authors opted for nominal measurement. The reasons behind this choice were firstly, that the authors were not interested in individual but rather the general level of satisfaction of a large group; secondly, that by using such a method, it became possible to see the net strength of student satisfaction (i.e. to what extent this attitude is strong). Because the dependent variable was measured on a nominal level, the statistics used were frequencies, ratios and chi square tests. The test of significance level is determined to be at 0.05.

Results and discussion

The results concerning the satisfaction of students with this Faculty in general are: 60.3% satisfied; 15.4% dissatisfied; 24% have no clear opinion. This percentage of satisfaction can be considered quite high for a young Faculty.

A summary of the factors and sub-factors which seemed to be associated with satisfaction are shown in Table 2. The results concerning factors of

satisfaction clearly show that academic factors, especially satisfaction with the faculty, explain student satisfaction more than the others. Guolla (1999), Cashin and Downey (1992), Marsh (1991), Conant (1985) also pointed to the importance of the instructor's performance. Highly performing instructors' students are more satisfied not only with their instructors but also with their institutions. Thus, even if a Faculty administration performs poorly, their students remain satisfied as long as they have highly performing instructors. However, if administrative problems keep piling up, this may cause competent, high-quality instructors to withdraw or leave their organizations. Thus, we should expect a decrease in students' satisfaction if this were the case and an indirect decrease in the satisfaction of students from the Faculty.

Table 2. **Statistically significant factors relating to student satisfaction**

	Chi square (X^2)	Sample size
1. Academic factors		
Faculty performance	50.38 (p < 0.00)	322
Communication with the instructor in the classroom	24.11 (p < 0.00)	315
Communication with the instructor outside the classroom	42.26 (p < 0.00)	314
Quality of education	73.89 (p < 0.00)	314
Textbook quality	8.02 (p < 0.04)	
2. Extracurricular factors		
No significant relation has been found		
3. Expectations		
Those who wish to send their children to the same Faculty	84.42 (p < 0.00)	233
4. Demographic factors		
Gender	15.25 (p < 0.00)	315
Age	6.55 (p < 0.00)	314
Previous information about the Faculty	4.83 (p < 0.03)	314

Source: Authors.

Other academic factors such as communication with the instructor in and outside the classroom (Hong, 2002; Fredericksen et al., 2000), the quality of education that professors provide and the textbooks that they choose, all relate to students' satisfaction. Rich et al. (1988) found that appropriately chosen textbooks increase student satisfaction. According to our personal observations, most of the highly performing instructors also have satisfactory communication in and outside the class with their students. Because they are open to two-way communication and hence feedback, they usually come up with the best choices concerning textbooks. Thus, from the student's satisfaction point of view, it becomes crucial for university administrations to recruit, motivate and retain highly performing instructors. News of the mismanagement of instructors by the university administration or destructive conflicts with them immediately starts circulating not only among faculty staff and students but also in the home environment (Guolla, 1999). This type

of experience will not only lead to a decrease in the prestige of the university but will also harm its competitive edge.

Among the second group of factors, namely expectations, only one variable seemed to be associated with student satisfaction. Although the expectation about whether the Faculty prepares students for the job market seemed to be associated with satisfaction, it was not included because the test of significance level was slightly above the 0.05 level (0.08). The only variable that seemed to be associated with satisfaction is the students' desire to send their children to the same Faculty in the future. Those who answered "yes" to this question showed and stated greater satisfaction with the Faculty in general than those who replied "no".

Due to the deep economic crisis and political instability in Turkey, the authors of this paper expected students' expectations about the contribution of the Faculty to finding jobs after graduation to be highly associated with student satisfaction. But the results of this research did not support this view. In an attempt to explain this phenomenon, a rank-ordered question was put to the students "In your opinion what is the purpose of higher education?" 43.6% of students stated that the purpose of university education is to improve one's intellectual skills (similar non-materialistic values were also reported in İmamoğlu and Aygen (1999), Başaran (1991). Only 11.5% regarded university education as a means to finding jobs. Thus, creating job opportunities for the students does not greatly enhance student satisfaction. However, the improvement and accumulation of knowledge is very much related to the quality of education and hence directly and indirectly contributes significantly to students' satisfaction. This argument is in line with van den Bosch's (2003) argument. Bosch states that "The labour market for graduates is constantly shrinking. Even five years after graduation, individuals have difficulty in finding jobs which are appropriate to their specializations. The value of higher education does not lie in its content anymore but rather in its capacity to help students acquire the skills of a) proper and disciplined thinking, b) methodical research and analysis, c) applying knowledge and d) with others". It is almost common knowledge in Turkey that a great many graduates work in jobs which are totally different from their field of study. Students applying to the Faculty of Business seem to be aware of this and they value the development of intellectual skills more than anything else, just as van der Bosch stated. This trend seems to be universal (Toulmin [2000], Emery [1994], Griffiths and Murry [1985]).

Table 3. The purpose of higher education

In your opinion what is the purpose of higher education?	Number of students N = 419	Percentage %
To receive a diploma	23	6.0
To meet the demands of my parents	4	1.0
To develop my intellectual skills	166	43.6
To become a sociable person	12	3.1
To specialize and have a profession	78	20.5
To find a job	44	11.5
To reach a more prestigious and high-status position in society	54	14.2

Source: Authors.

As stated earlier, of 28 demographic factors, only 3 seem to be significantly associated with student satisfaction. Of these 3, the first 2, i.e. gender and age are current characteristics of the respondents. However, the variable being informed before joining the Faculty belongs to their past. A great majority of female students (88.1 %) expressed satisfaction with the Faculty, against 70% of male students. Thus, being female increases the likelihood of being satisfied with this Faculty. However, both parties seemed to be more satisfied with the Faculty in their first years. A slight decrease has been noticed in the satisfaction of juniors and especially seniors.

The reason male students are less satisfied than female students can be explained by making use of the expectation-performance theory of satisfaction. University education is a long-term process. Students who join a university or faculty with predetermined expectations start comparing their expectations with the performances of their respective educational institutions, during this rather long period. If expectations are not met, i.e. if the performance level is below the level of expectations, dissatisfaction occurs. Vice-versa, if performance is equal or above what is expected, individuals experience satisfaction. The results of this research seem to support this view. New students (18-19 age group) seemed to be more satisfied than older students (22-23 age group). In the Faculty of Business at Dokuz Eylül University, it seems that with age, some of the students do experience slight dissatisfaction, due to the increase in pressure, the stress of graduation and anxieties about what is expected from them after school. This is especially true for male students. The satisfaction of male and female students starts differing in and after junior class. Male students, due to enormous social conditioning (Kağıtçıbaşı, 1981) feel trapped between finding a job and the restrictions of the economic crisis. Recent research by Yetim (2003) confirms this view. Yetim, who conducted research among Turkish male university students, found that male students have a deeper feeling of mastery than female students and that this feeling of mastery is deeply rooted in their social conditioning. The feeling of mastery is defined as the extent to which people feel to be in control of the important

circumstances in life (Pearlin and Radabaugh, 1976) and close to choosing between fields of work, organizations and jobs. It stimulates traditional social male conditioning (i.e. you have to master your life) and is the source of enormous tension among male students.

Another expectational factor that seem to predict student satisfaction is the information about the Faculty which students gathered before choosing to apply. Those who are pre-informed are more satisfied than the ones who are not. Naturally pre-informed students form sound and realistic expectations. Thus they experience less disappointment and dissatisfaction. In the light of this result, university administrators should pay serious attention to informing new entrants about what to expect. As Morrison (1999, p. 10) states, "Specific institutions of higher learning utilize tools available for identifying student needs and ascertaining ways their programs might enable students to be more successful in meeting their personal academic goals".

Although several studies found a correlation between extracurricular activities, such as campus life, and student satisfaction, no significant relationship has been found in this research. Out of the five sub-factors, such as the presence of student clubs, medical services, accommodation services, transportation, sports and cultural activities only medical services have a relationship with satisfaction at 0.08 level of significance which is above the accepted 0.05 level.

The interpretation of this factor presents difficulties and is open to speculation. The only rational explanation may lie in the answer to the rank order question: "In your opinion what is the purpose of higher education"? Almost none of the students mentioned or included in their rank ordering the attractiveness and quality of extracurricular activities. Their major concern seemed to be to develop both intellectually and professionally.

Thus, at least for some Turkish university students, the quality of education, instructors, textbooks, and being a female and informed before attending the university can be considered important factors of satisfaction. Based upon the above results, some suggestions are being made to university administrators. After all, as Watson (2003) states, "For student satisfaction surveys, providing feedback also encourages the university management to explain how they deal with the shortcomings that emerge from the survey"

Informing high school students who intend to pursue higher education is very important. Students informed beforehand establish realistic expectations.

- Special attention should be given to the recruitment, motivation and retention of high quality instructors.
- Instructors must be trained to establish healthy communication with students.

- In order to recruit the best students, financial help must be provided prior to their entry (such as scholarships, funds etc.). In view of the deep and serious Turkish economic crisis, many students and families would appreciate this.
- The reasons behind male students' relatively low level of satisfaction requires further investigation.
- Although, social services seem to be unrelated to satisfaction, there is still adequate evidence that especially low cost medical services are indispensable for students.

Limitations of the research

One significant limitation of this study is that its sample size may not be representative of all Turkish university students. Thus, care should be shown if generalizations are going to be made.

The second limitation is the probability of having missed significant factors in the conceptual framework which might have explained the satisfaction phenomenon more thoroughly. Obviously, the topic covers a highly complex social situation. There may not only be important independent but also situation specific or moderator type variables which have not been included in the framework.

The third limitation is the author's difficulty collating information from university administrators (presidents, deans, chairpersons, etc.). Thus, administrative philosophy and style has not been analysed.

Despite these limitations, the authors would consider the study to be a significant contribution were it to provoke some interest among the researchers in the field.

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Articles are selected for publication by the Editor of the Journal and submitted to independent referees for review.

The Journal is primarily devoted to the needs of those involved with the administration and study of institutional management and policy in higher education. Articles should be concerned, therefore, with issues bearing on the practical working and policy direction of higher education. Contributions should, however, go beyond mere description of what is, or prescription of what ought to be, although both descriptive and prescriptive accounts are acceptable if they offer generalisations of use in contexts beyond those being described. Whilst articles devoted to the development of theory for its own sake will normally find a place in other and more academically based journals, theoretical treatments of direct use to practitioners will be considered.

Other criteria include clarity of expression and thought. *Titles of articles should be as brief as possible.*

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**** Electronic submission is preferred. *Three copies* of each article should be sent if the article is submitted on paper only.**

Length: should not exceed 15 pages (single spaced) including figures and references.

The first page: before the text itself should appear centred on the page in this order the title of the article and the name(s), affiliation(s) and country/countries of the author(s).

Abstract: the main text should be preceded by an abstract of 100 to 200 words summarising the article.

Quotations: long quotations should be single-spaced and each line should be indented 7 spaces.

Footnotes: authors should avoid using footnotes and incorporate any explanatory material in the text itself. If notes cannot be avoided, they should be endnotes typed at the end of the article.

Tables and illustrations: tabular material should bear a centred heading "Table". Presentations of non-tabular material should bear a centred heading "Figure". The source should always be cited.

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