

Assessment of University Study Programs from a Customers' Satisfaction Point of View

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Assessing a university study program consists in comparing its results with its purposes and its ultimate aim. However, the definition of the aim of a cultural and formative service such as the university is, looks far from simple, since the expected products are mainly culture and job competences, in one word human capital. The assessment of university programs, then, will change according to which we consider as the main target of academic formation, that is, transmitting knowledge and culture, or supplying a tool to enter the job market more easily. Both of these approaches have their Achilles' heel, since the university as a place for mere knowledge transmission becomes estranged from the real needs of a society, while the ideal of the university as the breeding ground where high level labour forces are formed risks to give a too pragmatic and utilitarian point of view.

This contribution attempts to apply an alternative measure of evaluation of university programs, based on the customers' satisfaction. This approach lies in a fidelity measure, that rests on the idea that a study program is successful if its graduates would be willing to confirm their choice, could they go back to their enrolment. The data are drawn from a survey conducted at the university of Padua, which involves a sample of 2818 students who graduated between autumn 2000 and spring 2002 (Fabbris, 2003). The survey is longitudinal, and graduates are contacted for the first time at the completion of their study career with a self-administered questionnaire, and then for 6 waves at 6 months intervals by CATI interviews. The respondents were asked about their hypothetical will to repeat their study program in each wave. This study aims at investigating what are the components which influence and determine the graduates' fidelity in three temporal situations: (a) at the end of the university program, when the academic experience is still vivid; (b) six months after graduation, when they are experimenting the first contacts with the labour market; (c) eighteen months after graduation, when their working position is becoming more and more stable.

In order to take into account the two-level hierarchical structure of these data (first-level units, graduates, are nested in second-level units, e.g. faculties) and the dichotomous nature of the dependent variable, the analyses are performed by applying multilevel logistic models (Snijders and Bosker, 1999). The adopted software is the procedure PROC NL MIXED of the statistical package SAS® (SAS Institute Inc., 1999, 2000).

The model fit and the parameter estimates for the three situations here considered show clear differences as the time reference changes:

- At the end of the university studies the fidelity level only depends on the academic experience, in particular the opinion on teachers, colleagues and facilities, the achieved grade, the time spent to complete the program, and the participation in projects for international students' exchange. The difference in the fidelity level between faculties is strong, and it is mainly due to the distinction between short-term and long-term study programs, to the existence of faculties with a compulsory *post-lauream* specialization program, and to the differences between faculties in the mean final grade;
- Six months after graduation the fidelity level is still influenced by the same factors, but these become less important, and a group of predictors related to the working situation enter the model. In detail, those who still study are more satisfied, as far as those who have a stable position, work in small or medium size firms and/or in the non-profit sector,

and have jobs that allow them to use what they learnt in their specialistic courses at the university. On the other side, low fidelity levels apply to those who already worked before graduation, work in the state holdings, have job that are inconsistent with their studies, feel some gaps in their academic preparation, or feel it as too specialistic or not enough specialistic. Differences between faculties are still conspicuous, even if less than at the end of the university studies. Again, these differences depend on the existence of faculties with a compulsory *post-lauream* specialization program, but also on the rate of graduates who attended courses, and on the number of students enrolled in each faculty;

- Eighteen months after graduation differences between faculties are not statistically significant, and the model that is fitted is a logistic regression model (Hosmer and Lemeshow, 1989). The opinion on colleagues and facilities do not influence the fidelity level anymore, and the other factors related to the studying career have a weaker influence. Conversely, factors referring to the working situation become more and more important, and new aspects enter the model: e.g., unemployment, income, low-level working positions, use of *forma mentis*.

In general, this fidelity-based assessment measure lies between the judgment on the university as a cultural experience and a more pragmatic opinion on the graduation as a tool to penetrate the job market. In fact, right after graduation this evaluation largely coincides with the academic experience, while, as time goes on, considerations on the problems which are encountered in finding a job, as far as the kind and quality of the found job and its opportunities in terms of use of the acquired competencies and adherence to the studied topics, enter the determination of the assessment; this makes the proposed evaluation measure a sort of weighted average of different aspects, where the weights are decided each time by each graduate.

Moreover, this measure is highly affected by faculty differences only at the end of the studies, when individual expectations and ambitions are strongly dependent on the academic experience, but the first contacts with the labour market smooth these differences and make the faculties comparable with respect to the index of customers' satisfaction.

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RESUMÉ

Cette communication propose une mesure pour l'évaluation des parcours formatifs universitaires fondés sur la satisfaction des usagers, c'est-à-dire des licenciés. A la fin des études cette mesure est déterminée par les jugements sur l'expérience universitaire et par ses caractéristiques, mais après quelque mois l'évaluation dépende pour la plupart de les premiers contacts avec le marché du travail. De plus, les différences entre les facultés vont faiblir et dix-huit mois après la licence ils sont déjà absorbés par les différentes expériences de travail.