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ARTICLE

Stakeholder orientation in public universities: A conceptual discussion and a scale development



J. Llonch*, C. Casablanca-Segura, M.C. Alarcón-del-Amo

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Business Department, 08193 Bellaterra, Barcelona, Spain

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Abstract This study, based on stakeholder theory, extends current research on the use of the market orientation construct in non-profit organisations, seeking to develop a new multidimensional scale that better fits the higher education context. More specifically, the main purpose of this research is to develop a stakeholder orientation (SO) scale for public universities. A mail survey was sent to all Spanish public university managers, which resulted in 1420 usable questionnaires. Data were analysed using structural equation modelling to develop the multidimensional construct. The findings confirm the applicability to higher education of this SO scale for focusing public universities towards their stakeholders. This SO scale is a multidimensional construct with five components, namely beneficiary orientation, resource acquisition orientation, peer orientation, environment orientation, and inter-functional coordination. This scale has more meaning for assessing the implementation of the marketing concept in public universities than the traditional market orientation construct.

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PALABRAS CLAVE

Orientación a los stakeholders;
Educación superior;
Orientación al mercado;
Universidades públicas;
Stakeholders de las universidades

Orientación a los stakeholders en las universidades públicas: una discusión conceptual y el desarrollo de una escala de medición

Resumen Este estudio, basado en la teoría de los stakeholders, amplía la investigación actual sobre el constructo de la orientación al mercado en las organizaciones sin ánimo de lucro, tratando de desarrollar una nueva escala multidimensional que se ajuste mejor al contexto de la educación superior. Más específicamente, el objetivo principal de esta investigación es elaborar una escala de orientación a los stakeholders (OS) para las universidades públicas. Para ello se llevó a cabo una encuesta por correo electrónico enviada a los gestores de todas las universidades públicas españolas, que dio lugar a 1.420 cuestionarios utilizables. Para desarrollar

* Corresponding author at: Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Business Department, 08193 Bellaterra, Barcelona, Spain.
E-mail address: Joan.Llonch@uab.cat (J. Llonch).

el constructo multidimensional se analizaron los datos mediante modelos de ecuaciones estructurales. Los resultados obtenidos confirman la aplicabilidad a la educación superior de esta escala de OS para orientar a las universidades públicas hacia sus stakeholders. Dicha escala es un constructo multidimensional con cinco dimensiones, orientación a los beneficiarios, a la adquisición de recursos, a otras universidades, al entorno y coordinación entre funciones. Esta escala tiene más sentido para la medición del grado de adopción del concepto de marketing en las universidades públicas que el constructo tradicional de orientación al mercado.

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Introduction

The extant literature on university stakeholders indicates that a wide range of individuals, organisations, and government-sponsored agencies are involved in higher education institutions (HEIs), generating conceptual confusion about who exactly the HEI stakeholders are (Mainardes, Raposo, & Alves, 2014). Thus, HEIs are oriented towards a variety of stakeholders (Björkquist, 2008; Ferrell, Gonzalez-Padron, Hult, & Maignan, 2010). Along these lines, Lovelock and Rothschild (1980) were pioneers highlighting the need for a broad concept of market orientation (MO) that takes into account more than one university stakeholder.

In for-profit firms, MO is deemed a very suitable strategy for improving performance and is seen as a way to create value by generating loyalty and satisfaction in their customers (Kohli & Jaworski, 1990; Narver & Slater, 1990). However, in a recent definition of marketing, the American Marketing Association (2013) emphasises that an organisation should fulfil the expectations of society at large, instead of just satisfying its customers' needs and wants. This alternative view has been called stakeholder orientation (SO), and it is defined as a behaviour that consists of focusing the organisation towards the different stakeholders in society as a whole (Laczniak & Murphy, 2012; Maignan, Ferrell, & Ferrell, 2005; Parmar et al., 2010). On other words, it is better to think in a multi-orientational way regarding stakeholders, instead of thinking only in terms of customers, as the traditional MO view recommends (Ferrell et al., 2010).

Several authors (Álvarez, Santos, & Vázquez, 2002; Flavián & Lozano, 2003; Greenley, Hooley, & Rudd, 2005; Modi & Mishra, 2010) support the idea that MO is not easily applicable to all kinds of organisations, especially in the context of non-profit organisations (NPOs). They suggest the need to extend the orientation of these organisations to more than one stakeholder, the customer, because the main mission of these organisations is to identify and satisfy the different needs of society (Duque-Zuluaga & Schneider, 2008; Mainardes et al., 2014).

Public universities are no longer an exception to the processes of change common to most other non-profit organisations NPOs (Caruana, Ramaseshan, & Ewing, 1998). Those changes have forced universities to assume responsibility towards society and both maintain and improve their leadership in the development and dissemination of knowledge, all while paying special attention to the aspirations and needs of their key stakeholders (Akonkwa,

2009; Benneworth & Jongbloed, 2010; Björkquist, 2008; Jongbloed, Enders, & Salerno, 2008).

For instance, in the case of Spain, public universities, which in their early days operated in an equitable and uncompetitive environment, are now being subjected to higher levels of competitiveness and strong social pressures, leading them into new environments to which they must adapt (Cervera, Schlesinger, Iniesta, & Sánchez, 2011; Mora, 2001; Peña, 2010). Thus, they are now required to improve their ability to transform their institution globally and to modernise their operations (Álvarez et al., 2002; Navarro & Gallardo, 2003). Hence, as a response to these challenges, universities are shifting their objective function from a traditionally oriented focus on teaching and research towards a more complex one (Berbegal-Mirabent, Lafuente, & Solé, 2013).

Based on the idea that stakeholder orientation is a construct to measure the organisation degree towards stakeholders, our main purpose is to develop a SO scale for managers of HEIs and to analyse its applicability in the context of public universities. Hence, we conduct a study using a survey instrument administered to a national sample of university managers in Spanish public universities. The study investigates the dimensionality, reliability and validity of the multidimensional construct's scales by checking the psychometric properties of SO. In doing so, we achieve another important research purpose, that is, to provide empirical support to the existing theoretical arguments about the appropriateness of SO within the public university context.

Literature review

Theoretical framework

Stakeholder theory was first explained in the seminal work of Freeman (1984) and underwent extensive development in the 1990s through the work of Clarkson (1995), Donaldson and Preston (1995), Freeman (1994), and Mitchell, Agle, and Wood (1997), among others. This theory emerged in the field of strategy and is grounded in the belief that the final performance of an organisation should consider not just the returns to its shareholders, but also the returns that involve stakeholders.

After Clarkson's (1995) affirmation that for survival and success organisations depend on the ability of their managers to provide their stakeholders with wealth, value, and

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