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Graduates' satisfaction as a measure of quality: Evidence from two programs in three Chilean universities

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ABSTRACT

In Chile as elsewhere, there are no direct measures of a university's impact on learning, that is, the quality of education provided. Parents and prospective students, and university administrators, rely on various indirect measures, including student satisfaction. This paper assesses the satisfaction levels of graduates from two degree programs offered in three universities in Chile, focusing principally on the graduates' perceptions of the quality of their training programs. Data were collected using a survey questionnaire of a sample of three cohorts of graduates in Psychology and in Teaching. Levels of satisfaction varied according to particular aspects of their degree program as influenced by prior education and later by employment. Global judgments of the quality of one's degree program are influenced by work experience after graduation; judgments of curriculum and teaching practices pertain to what was experienced as a student or before.

1. Introduction

The democratic governments that came into power in Chile after 1990 had promised that expansion of education would not only increase economic growth, but also contribute to a more egalitarian society. The economy did grow and enrollments in Chilean universities have more than doubled in 20 years (Rolwing & Clark, 2013). Expansion was made possible by removing restrictions to the opening of new private universities resulting in massive enrollment of “first-generation” students from low-income families (Espinoza & González, 2013; Soto Hernandez, 2016).

Early euphoria morphed into bitter complaints, however, when expectations of radical improvements outstripped actual changes in the economy. Beginning in 2011 national student demonstrations resulted in violent confrontations with police and closure of several universities. Complaints included the high failure rate and family indebtedness of those not graduating (Cummings, 2015). Specific criticisms were made about the quality of teaching and learning (Espinoza & González, 2013). Some argued that current admission policies reproduce income inequality: test scores are correlated with family socio-economic status (SES); government-financed scholarships apply only to traditional universities which are selective; employers tend to assign higher salaries to graduates of these institutions (Bordón & Braga, 2013; Chacón, 2015).

Would improvement of the quality of universities' programs restore peace on their campuses? Perhaps not. At least three recent studies in various Chilean universities reported moderately high levels of student satisfaction (de la Fuente Mella, Marzo Navarro, & Reyes Riquelme, 2010; Inzunza Melo et al., 2008; Palominos, Quezada, Osorio, Torres, & Lippi, 2016), but these covered only 6 of 60

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universities, and students from all faculties in only one of those. Who is best qualified to comment on university quality, current students or graduates in the labor force? This complex question is not yet fully explored in the Chilean context. At present most “measures” of university quality are based on fixed inputs to the formation process but not on the process of teaching and learning (Dill & Soo, 2005; Wachter et al., 2015) or on outcomes such as employability. This paper reports on a modest effort to examine the relationships between various aspects of graduates’ satisfaction with the formation they received in university, and their initial experiences once employed.

Satisfaction and quality are multi-dimensional constructs. If quality has different dimensions, satisfaction may be high for one aspect of a program but not for others. Corrective actions may improve what is already satisfactory. Employers’ salary decisions based on the general reputation of the university also may be mistaken. Our objective is to explore these possibilities, understanding that while this study may help to illustrate the issue, more research will be required to develop a strategy that takes all dimensions of quality into account. To that end, we defined satisfaction as occurring when the perceived quality in each experience matches or exceeds expectations. Quality may be judged in terms of inputs, process or outputs. Our main purpose in this paper is to demonstrate, for Chile, the usefulness of measuring satisfaction (and hence quality) as multidimensional constructs.

2. Research on student satisfaction

2.1. Satisfaction with the university experience

Early interest in “student satisfaction” was motivated by administrators eager to attract students as a source of finance for the institution. Universities were defined as service industries, and students as consumers whom, if satisfied, would continue to demand the product. Consistent with this approach, satisfaction was defined as a positive reaction to perceived quality. The “term” quality had been used in higher education in at least five different ways: 1) Most loosely, to refer to a phenomenon or thing that is considered to be exceptional, out of the ordinary; 2) As an example of perfection, or of consistency with a predetermined set of standards; 3) As an ability to achieve a particular objective; the likelihood that a particular process will achieve its goal; 4) More precisely, the “value added” by a process; and 5) As engendering a qualitative change or transformation (González & Espinoza, 2008; Harvey & Asklings, 2003).

One of the first instruments using this approach to satisfaction was based on research with customer relations in service enterprises (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988). The scheme proposed five distinct categories of objects of satisfaction: tangibles, with material aspects of the institution; responsiveness, the speed with which consumers’ demands are met; empathy, reflected in the care with which consumers are treated; assurance, or confidence in skill of employees; and reliability, or capacity to deliver the service. Sets of Likert Scale type items were used to measure each of these dimensions. The instrument, known as SERVQUAL, has been applied in many countries (e.g., Candelas, Gurruchaga, Mejías, & Flores, 2013; Stephens, 2014) including Chile (de la Fuente Mella et al., 2010).

A review of research on satisfaction (from a consumer’s perspective) in higher education, concludes that satisfaction judgments are influenced by multiple factors and that the salience of each depends on the student’s stage of development with respect to the particular objective that identifies that factor. Initially satisfaction judgments are based principally on inputs to the student. The more developed the student’s goals are, the more his/her judgments are influenced by the outcomes, first by the institution’s performance, but then by the student’s achievements (Hartman & Schmidt, 1995; Sears, Boyce, & Boon, 2017). Success generates satisfaction which tends to reinforce students’ expectations of future success (Lent & Brown, 2013).

A number of studies have equated “satisfaction” with positive student perceptions of the quality of the “services” offered by the university. For example, a study in Pakistan adapted SERVQUAL to assess student satisfaction in business schools (Ijaz, Irfan, Shahbaz, Awan, & Sabir, 2011). The study reviewed 19 other service quality models and isolated five dimensions of perceived quality: tangibles; reputation; cooperation and support; reliability; and responsiveness. All the quality items correlated highly with satisfaction. Candelas et al. (2013) identified six dimensions of satisfaction referring to: academic aspects; administrative aspects; complementary aspects; academic content; environment; and relationships. Studies in Mexico and Spain measured student satisfaction with curriculum content; teaching methods; infrastructure and facilities; professors’ skills; and student’s performance. Levels of satisfaction were most highly correlated with student’s performance, and secondarily with professors’ skills (Medrano & Pérez, 2010; Fernández, Fernández, Álvarez, & Martínez, 2007). In another study, however, the critical determinant of level of satisfaction was not the professors’ skill but their relationship with the students (Salinas, Juan, & Pablo, 2008). An American study related students’ satisfaction with different aspects of university life as well as to satisfaction with the curriculum of their degree program. Eleven distinct factors were identified as having moderate to high correlations with curriculum satisfaction (Tessema & Ready, 2012).

A few studies have assessed graduates’ overall satisfaction with their academic programs (e.g., Garcia-Aracil, 2016). Graduates who were most satisfied with their course of study rated course content and non-academic social aspects (e.g., relationships with other students) very highly. Limited opportunities to participate in research projects and limited teaching materials and facilities (e.g. textbooks and labs) were major determinants of dissatisfaction.

Little research has been done to compare the satisfaction of students or graduates in different disciplines or fields of study. A study in Europe reported satisfaction scores for graduates from 11 countries and 8 fields of study, but not discuss variations in ratings of particular dimensions of satisfaction (Garcia-Aracil, 2016). We found one study that studied satisfaction of Psychology graduates in Griffith University, Queensland, Australia (Green, Hood, & Neumann, 2015) but none specifically for teachers.

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