

EXPLORATORY RESEARCH INTO WHAT STUDENTS DEMAND FROM PORTUGUESE PUBLIC UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

Given both the extent of changes taking place within the university sector, it would seem correspondingly necessary for such organisations to respond with alterations to their traditional management structures. Stakeholder theory would seem to provide a contribution towards this end given how it identifies and prioritises the problems susceptible to resolution. The objective of this study was to identify the expectations of one the most important groups of university stakeholders, students. To that, an exploratory-qualitative research approach was adopted based upon a case study with students from a Portuguese university. The results obtained demonstrate that students perceive the purpose of universities as incorporating the training of citizens and that the decisions taken by universities have different impact on students, according to their characteristics as gender, age, ethnicity or socioeconomic status. Hence, the university could not exclusively concentrate on rendering services within the scope of student expectations but rather provide a broader reach that includes not only the central service, in this case teaching, but also peripheral services. Thus, the theory of stakeholders proves to be a model that can guide the management of universities to recognize and meet the demands of different types of students of Portuguese public universities.

Keywords: student demands; stakeholders management; university; higher education; Portugal.

1 INTRODUÇÃO

The university, one of the oldest and most resistant organizations in society, plays an increasingly prominent role in the modern societies of most countries. Correspondingly, universities are required to become an organisation that effectively achieves its purpose: teaching, research and services to society (MEEK, 2006a). Similarly, the university is attributed responsibility for the production of knowledge and spreading such learning throughout society via the education of individuals, the transfer of technologies, among others (GANSEMER-TOPF; SCHUH, 2006; TRAKMAN, 2008).

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In this context, new proposals could be emerging about the management of universities (RHODES; BRUNDRETT, 2009). One management field that has begun to mobilise researchers as a means of overcoming this shortcoming focuses on the relationships between university stakeholders in accordance with the concepts making up stakeholder theory (JONGBLOED; ENDERS; SALERNO, 2008). Various authors working within this theoretical field have argued that analyses of stakeholders are the key to identifying and prioritising the problems susceptible to resolution (for example, FREEMAN, 1984; FROOMAN, 1999; BRYSON, 2004; FRIEDMAN; MILES, 2006), particularly in situations where nobody is totally responsible and there are many interested parties, either affected or holding some partial responsibility for acting (BEACH, 2008, 2009).

According to Polonsky (1995), stakeholder management involves: (1) identifying the groups relevant to managing the organisation, (2) determining the participation and importance of each stakeholder group, (3) determining how the needs and expectations of each group are being met, and (4) modifying the corporate policies and priorities to be taken into consideration in accordance with stakeholder interests.

Hence, one key aspect to stakeholder management is conceiving just what they expect and need from the organisation (FROOMAN, 1999). For example, in university, students are understood as important stakeholders given the very existence of the university is broadly due to their presence (MAITLES, 2010). However, in Portugal not many universities actively seek to discover and then meet the demands of their students. In practice, the student has proven a rather passive subject in this relationship, bowing before decisions taken by the university (NEAVE, 2000; ASTIN; LEE, 2003; BARRETT; BARRETT, 2010; DIZ-COMESAÑA; RODRÍGUEZ-LÓPEZ, 2011). Observing other higher education systems, such as in Brazil, Spain, among others, it is noticed that, with some exceptions in countries like UK and USA, opinions and student participation still receive little attention in the universities, like the Portuguese reality (PORTELA et al. 2008; SELLERS-RUBIO; MAS-RUIZ; CASADO-DÍAZ, 2010; CUTAJAR; BEZZINA; JAMES, 2013). Furthermore, modernising university management may inherently involve identifying and understanding the expectations of this key stakeholder.

In addition, according to Jongbloed, Enders and Salerno (2008), the identification of such expectations and the active participation of students, in accordance with the principles of stakeholder theory, as well as student perception as to the relevance of university, have received little research attention and only rare studies have approached these questions. Despite student satisfaction being a theme with a significant weighting in the academic

literature, the justification of such studies commonly stems from marketing perspectives and not organisational or strategic theories. Furthermore, student expectations and needs are normally approached from the perspective of university managers and not the students themselves (JONGBLOED; ENDERS; SALERNO, 2008).

Although the Stakeholder Theory stresses the need to ask for stakeholders' expectations before acting (FROOMAN, 1999), it is observed in the existing literature that the researches do not directly ask students what they want from the university. Thus, the objective of this research was to identify, based upon a case study, the expectations held by the students themselves at a Portuguese state university. The specific objectives included: (a) evaluating student perceptions regarding the university's purpose, (b) evaluating student perceptions about the relevance of university both to society and to the students themselves, and (c) verifying how students participate in the development of the university.

This study is justified by the lack of literature able to sustain more confirmatory research. Despite students being the most researched stakeholder in university focused research, there are only rare examples of studies actually gathering the student's own respective expectations supported by the Stakeholders Theory that advises identifying the expectations, desires and needs of the stakeholder before acting (MAYHEW; VANDERLINDEN; KIM, 2010). Therefore, we seek to contribute both to university management practices and to the actual scientific literature by empirically identifying the actual expectations held by higher education students. Given this is introductory research, with few previously established references, the results, while not definitive, do set out a path for future research projects on students' expectations.

This article begins with a brief review of university stakeholder management theory before proceeding with discussion of the relationships between the respective parties. We then present the research methodology adopted and analyse the data collected before closing with conclusions, recommendations and the limitations to this study.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

It was perceived a vast literature on Stakeholder Theory, but higher education is still poorly investigated under this theoretical approach. It was sought to the existing literature, and what is presented in the following section tries to reflect what is the most current and relevant information on the topic studied.

2.1 UNIVERSITY STAKEHOLDER MANAGEMENT

Even though a complex task, university stakeholder management proves necessary to guarantee the institution's role in modern, knowledge based economies (DEVLIN, 2007). This inherently requires that universities rethink their approach and relationships with diverse actors and communities. This involves the identification of relational participants, classifying them in accordance with their relative importance and nurturing relationships with these stakeholders in accordance with their relevance and respective expectations (CARRIGAN, 1995). In a university, the capacity to identify, prioritise and participate in communities reflects the extent of organisational evolution (OLIVA, 2009).

To this end, identifying institutional participants is a significant initial step even though doing little in itself to aid in understanding and prioritising the expectations of interested parties (DOYLE, 1992). To achieve this, Burrows (1999) maintains mechanisms are needed to explore and discover patterns of differences and similarities between stakeholder groups. Burrows (1999) proposes four dimensions for distinguishing between stakeholders based upon location, state of participation, potential for cooperation and threat and their participation and influence over the organisation. This provides a means for universities to define purposes and goals reflecting the needs of their internal and external stakeholders. The proposed by Burrows (1999) was based on the study of Wolff (1999), which divided universities into four types, and the distinction between them was the purpose of the institution:

- University as a sanctuary of knowledge: knowledge development, knowledge and capacity of reflection among students;
- University as a training ground for liberal professions: institution that studies the occupations requiring higher education (with professional focus) and specialized training;
- University as a service agency: focuses on providing knowledge to society in the form of services (sale of technologies, studies, training, advice, among others);
- University as assembly line for the man of the system: as venture capitalist institution, forming men needed to market and responding to the logic of the market in terms of training and knowledge development process.

Considering this classification, about managing duly identified and categorised stakeholders, the institutional purpose and objectives could provide a framework for

determining the allocation of the appropriate level of resources (AMONINI et al., 2010; SELLERS-RUBIO; MAS-RUIZ; CASADO-DÍAZ, 2010). The future path for universities involves recognition of the demands placed upon them by the multiple actors connected to higher education (BUSH, 2009; ENGBERG; WOLNIAK, 2010; AUSTEN; SWEPSON; MARCHANT, 2012; WILKINS; HUISMAN, 2015). The institutions, through their declared purposes, have already explicitly accepted the obligation to satisfy the needs of a vast range of stakeholders. However, diverse interests generate conflicts whenever encountering competing needs and expectations (MACFARLANE; LOMAS, 1999; BACHAN, 2014).

Therefore, Jongbloed, Enders and Salerno (2007) state that the legitimacy of higher education in society will increasingly depend on the evaluation made as to the level of quality and commitment that such institutions establish with their stakeholders. Institutions earn and retain their social legitimacy through forms and means of guaranteeing quality and demonstrating their responsibility towards their clients. Academic research and study programmes need to be sensitive to the expectations of various stakeholders. This means higher education institutions need to find forms of drawing in and involving their stakeholders with the objective of perceiving the value of the services rendered and how they might be improved (CRAGG, 2009).

A stakeholder management model would seem to better fit with collegial and representative management, especially when such management must contend with a broad range of stakeholders and including, among others, students, teaching staff, corporate partners, the government and the public in general (BALDRIDGE, 1983; HILL; GREEN; ECKEL, 2001; LONGIN, 2002). Common stakeholder management practices include university board representation of community groups that, while not formally associated with the university, reflect environmental, ethnic and gender concerns or other public interests of pertinence to the university. The obstacle to stakeholder management comes in determining just which interests could gain such representation, the means this is carried out by and the extent of their authority.

Despite such challenges, universities commonly adopt some form of stakeholder management through the nomination or election of academic staff, students and representatives of the government or other stakeholders. Nevertheless, they diverge significantly in the composition of councils as well as the level of authority attributed to different stakeholders (BALDRIDGE, 1983; WOLVIN, 1991; LEATHERMAN, 1998; MCCORMACK; BRENNEN, 1999; BALDWIN; LESLIE, 2001; GERBER, 2001; TIERNEY, 2001; GAYLE; TEWARIE; WHITE JR., 2003).

Finally, higher education institutions could build up their capacities for managing the pressures applied by different stakeholder groups in addition to the tensions raised by the coexistence of competition in conjunction with collaborative regimes (TEIXEIRA; AMARAL, 2007). The importance of identifying and orienting stakeholders in accordance with strategic institutional objectives therefore emerges as a key phase in the development of a stakeholder management strategy. With the objective of boosting the progress and implementation of this strategy, universities could create specific structures for dealing with stakeholders taking into consideration the importance of both analysing and managing stakeholder expectations and their respective values.

2.2 UNIVERSITY AND STAKEHOLDER RELATIONSHIPS

There was a point in time, and not very distant, when it might be argued that university external relations were the responsibility of the institutional leader (PRICE, 1994). This notion, somewhat bound up with the ideal of the “ivory tower”, has now been replaced by the concepts of regional partnerships and learning in the development of the respective host region. It is necessary and more fruitful to conceive of a university, and indeed higher education as an open system, with porous borders and with wide reaching and ongoing interactions. This means practically all academics, as well as their support structures, engage in relationships with the relevant partners, the stakeholders (DUKE, 2001).

This resulted in new relationships between higher education institutions (especially, universities) and their external communities or stakeholders (PAYNE; HOLT; FROW, 2001; SAN ANTONIO; GAMAGE, 2007; RIVERA-CAMINO; AYALA, 2010). These relationships contain local, regional, national and international ingredients (see, for example, DILL; SPORN, 1995; CASTELLS, 1996; CLARK, 1998; ENDERS, 2004; OECD, 2007; CUTAJAR; BEZZINA; JAMES, 2013). Universities today undertake deeper and more complex relationships with the communities they operate in, seeking strategies able to secure community involvement and partnerships with both the private sector and governmental entities.

Considering the current context, universities could pay attention to their various stakeholders, whether internal or external, so as to be able to fully understand a full range of needs and expectations. Far too commonly, university managers assume that they know what stakeholders need and expect of them and on an equally frequent basis, this results in poorly

focused efforts and wasted resources. An astute organisation turns an understanding of the needs of all stakeholders into the motor of change centred on the highest priority expectations (MEHRALIZADEH, 2005; NICHOLSON et al., 2013).

3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research objectives consisted of identifying, in an exploratory form, the demands of students as stakeholders at a Portuguese state university as well as their perceptions regarding participation and the relevance of university both to society and to the students themselves. To achieve these objectives, an exploratory-qualitative research approach (HAIR JR et al., 2003) was adopted based upon a case study (YIN, 2003).

The need to engage in exploratory research derived from the sheer lack of existing research focusing on student demands, participation and the relevance of university. Where there is little or no existing body of research, a researcher needs to tentatively discover the realities in the field (SELLTIZ; WRIGHTSMAN; COOK, 1976). Hence, a qualitative approach, with a non-representative (but significant) sample of the target population proved most appropriate to generating our initial findings on these stakeholders as well as the relevance the institution represents to them personally and to society.

3.1 POPULATION AND SAMPLE DEFINITION

A Portuguese state university was selected for this case study. The choice was based upon these universities facing multifaceted contexts, with the presence of public and private universities and polytechnics and without either sector prevailing in the overall mix (PORTELA et al., 2008). This diversity enabled the utilisation of results sourced from diverse realities. Portuguese state universities are dealing with competitive environments, undergoing a series of different changes and are generally impacted by the effects of profound change experienced by the higher education sector worldwide (LEVY, 2008). Therefore, this is a context now increasingly demanding effective university management with stakeholder analysis as one means of attaining efficient management in complex organisations.

The target population is made up of thirteen traditional institutions, one virtual university and one independent institute. In choosing the actual university (the case to be studied), the decision went in favour of an intermediate ranked entity in the overall

classification of Portuguese public universities, a ranking to be found in Portela et al. (2008). This criterion sought to avoid distortions that might emerge were the choice in favour of one of the best or worst ranked institutions. Among the mid-positioned universities, we sought out an entity displaying the greatest diversity possible, that is providing programmes across all fields of knowledge. Subsequently, we contacted a university, mid-ranked, and meeting the other research criteria. After initial contact, this university granted authorisation for the project to go ahead and therefore no other university had to be contacted. Correspondingly, the sample is defined as non-probabilistic. The intentional character of the sample is adopted when the research is focused on the opinion (actions, intentions, perceptions) of specific segments of the population while not necessarily representative overall. Hence, the research exclusively approaches representative members of the target population according to his/her understanding that, due to the role played, the position occupied, and social prestige, they take on the function of opinion makers in the community under analysis (HAIR JR. et al., 2003).

As regards the choice of the students themselves, we selected two samples of key respondents: (a) one made up of the five presidents of academic associations (student representatives), each corresponding to one of the five faculties making up the university (in total, the university hosted 33 different academic associations): science, healthcare sciences, engineering, social and human sciences, arts and literature, (b) another containing five students chosen at random (approached directly in the canteen of each of the five faculties). Each of these students belonged to different degrees than the association president and had no connection with their respective academic association. In total, the sample contained ten individuals. It is noteworthy to highlight that participants were guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality on the data provided by each interviewee, guarantying the ethical issues related to this research.

The decision to survey the academic association presidents is explained by their role as student representatives to the university. Therefore, many of the expectations of students on the respective degrees would be known to them thus enabling them to collate a greater diversity in student attitudes. About the randomly chosen students, the justification stems from an option to attempt to avoid the potential bias arising out of the information obtained from academic association presidents. The randomly chosen students were not part of the politicised ambiance of student associations enabling the opportunity for more spontaneous answers as those expressed by these five students reflected their own expectations and not necessarily the interests of a group that might be politically influenced. Similarly, in this sense, this represented a control sample.

About the dispersion of the sample around the faculties (with the selection of one president and one student from each faculty but from different degrees within that faculty), the objective was to expand the horizon of perceptions as, otherwise, were students and presidents be questioned from a single degree, a single department or a single faculty, the data obtained might be tainted by bias or a tendency towards specific and localised demands. This ensures the reliability and validity of the data collected, because it reduced the possibility of data skew. Therefore, with this type of strategy, we preserved the randomness of the data as well as obtaining a diversified sample of the students at the university under study. Finally, respondents underwent the extended interviews that generated our data.

3.2 DATA COLLECTION TECHNIQUES

For data collection, the ten respondents were subject to extended personal interviews, based upon semi-structured scripts. The interviews with academic association presidents were previously scheduled and took place between 14th and 23rd April 2010. The first five presidents contacted agreed to take part and there was thus no need to make recourse to other presidents.

About the randomly selected students, following the interview with the academic association president at one of the faculties, the approach strategy was direct through contact in the canteen in the same faculty. We first verified that the degree did not coincide with the already interviewed president. Where this was the case, the researcher thanked the student and moved along. Where the degree differed, the researcher inquired whether the student participated in their respective academic association. Where there was participation, once again, the research expressed thanks and sought out another subject. Where the individual did not study for the same degree as the association president and did not participate in any academic association, he/she was invited to take part in the research. On acceptance, the interview was immediately carried out. Where negative, the researcher proceeded to seek out another alternative student. The process proved coherent and the search for volunteers did not prove difficult to complete.

The interview itself was based upon the following script:

- Respondent details: age, degree of study, professional experience,
- Perception of the university's purpose,
- Perception of the relevance of university to society,

- Perception of the relevance and influence of university specifically to students,
- Expectations prior to university and current expectations about the university (including the degree, institutional structure, services offered, personal perspectives, among others),
- Previous and current needs to be met by graduating from university,
- Previous, current and future university related wishes,
- Perception on the current reality of the university attended.
- Opinion on what an ideal university would represent,
- Perception on the participation, contribution and influence of students in university development.

The interviews lasted an average length of 55 minutes. All of them were recorded and then later transcribed for analysis. At this stage, it is preserved participants' anonymity, confidentiality, and data content.

3.3 DATA ANALYSIS TECHNIQUES

Following completion of the data collection process, the analysis of interview transcriptions deployed the technique known as content analysis (DENSCOMBE, 2003). For our purposes, here, this analysis focused upon identifying the expectations of student stakeholders as well as their perceptions regarding the purpose, relevance and influence of the university, comparing the current reality and the ideal as well as student participation in and influence over the university. Through recourse to Atlas/ti software (MUHR, 1995), we sought first to code and tag responses before grouping them by incidence and variation in terms of repetition in the responses obtained.

The codes were initially established for the key words contained in each question: purpose, relevance, influence, expectations, needs, desires, current situation, ideal model, participation, contribution. With the data uploaded into the Atlas/ti software, the codes were created by the system and the interview responses grouped by regularities and similarities in accordance with the coding system. Correspondingly, all interviews were analysed to pool the set of information related to the aforementioned codes. This process enabled student stakeholder expectations to be extracted along with the factors characterising their perceptions as to the relevance and influence of university in society and for students, the variables differentiating between the current and ideal university and the forms of participation, contribution and influence of students over the university.

4 DATA ANALYSIS

Following the collection and processing of the data, analysis work looking at the characterisation provided by interviewees could be begun. While nine respondents were in their twenties, one student, who was studying for his degree on an evening schedule, was already 57 years of age. This student had already notched up over thirty years of professional experience in contrast to the other respondents who had not spent any sustained length of time in working environments (two years or less). Furthermore, it was found that eight students were in the first higher education cycle and two in the second cycle. Taking into consideration that all ten respondents were studying for different degrees, in various fields of knowledge (as explained above), the conclusion reached was that the sample was indeed as diverse as feasibly possible.

4.1 STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF THE UNIVERSITY'S PURPOSE

We may now focus upon the first topic in the script: student perceptions of the university's purpose. In general terms, it became clear that students see university as a teaching focused organisation as testified to by the comments of one respondent: "... it's where people acquire knowledge in areas they like, that they want go onto do...". Other students highlighted the professional training dimension: "... training persons to specialise in a field of activity...", and "... it's the place where people gain their professional training...".

Nevertheless, a significant proportion of the students expanded the university purpose concept beyond the field of professional training to also include the intellectual training of people: "... the university prepares people both professionally and personally. It is in the university that young people see the reality that they did not see at high school...", "... I think that, in university, you get academic training but also human and social training, which marks the end of adolescence and the beginning of adulthood...", "... it was at university that I began to find answers about my future. I believe that this is the university's purpose...". Other responses tended to be similar and across all interviewee's answers, we found four different approaches to the teaching purpose of universities:

- University provides professional training for citizens. This is the most common response among respondents and which establishes linkage between teaching and employment with

university thus resembling a production line of professionals geared up for the marketplace, in accordance with Wolff (1999),

- University prepares people for society. This was the second most frequent response broadening the perception of learning as not only for a professional future but also for the benefit of society as a whole similar to what Wolff (1999) referred to as a service provision entity,
- University is where people develop intellectually. Such answers see the purpose of universities as raising individual levels of knowledge and boosting their intellectual levels and hence perceiving the university as a sanctuary of wisdom (WOLFF, 1999),
- University prepares people to do what they like. In this case, the purpose also interrelates with one's professional future but across a far broader range with the university's impact as an organisation able to awaken and nurture individual vocations and hence representing a training ground for the professions (WOLFF, 1999).

In overall terms, the university purpose boils down to the dissemination of knowledge, as was indeed expected, given students tend to focus solely on the teaching dimension. We furthermore found that students are still not able to relate to the production of knowledge dimension to universities (the research purpose). In summary, it is evident that the student understands the various purposes of the university.

4.2 RELEVANCE OF UNIVERSITY

The next issue in the script dealt with the relevance of university across two factors: to society in general and to students. In both cases, all participating students expressed how university was relevant. Regarding society, this relevance was verbalised through sentences such as "... if we had more people with education, more literate, with more knowledge, our country would grow...", "... university is relevant to levels of individual qualifications as primary schooling is not enough for the people in general...", "... the level of schooling influences society as a whole...", "... it is in university that we find the future political and business leaders of our country...", "... university creates intellectual elites that are important to society in diverse ways...", "... higher education distinguishes people as they add up to another five years of education..."

Generally speaking, the relevance of universities to society was perceived as follows: it makes people develop themselves and evolve, people with better knowledge facilitate social

and national growth and development, creates important intellectual elites, connects a nation's young people with its employment market, and prepares future professionals, politicians, and business persons. Correspondingly, as already emphasised by Stehr (1994), Neave (2000), Teichler (2000) and Tam (2007), universities increasingly play a key role in national development, especially in relation to the facets raised by the interviewees. In this sense it is clear that the student recognizes the role of the university in society.

Focusing upon the relevance of university specifically to students, as already commented upon, all respondents deemed university of importance to participants. Nevertheless, the justifications for this shared position differed, for example: "...university enabled me to gain new personal and professional knowledge, especially on a specific reality...", "... university is relevant to students as it prepares them for the job market...", "... university is the link between young persons and the job market... ", "... a person who has only done primary or secondary school does not have much knowledge...", "... university has helped me to understand the world and prepare me for the future...", "... people benefit from the knowledge that they acquire...", "... academic life is a lesson in life...", "... knowledge does not take up any space and is gratifying to students...", "...university has provided me with things that I did not think about. I had to leave home and my life got tougher. I had to pay bills and be more independent. It is incredible how I was forced to grow up and mature through this experience...".

Taking these considerations into account, we may conclude that university is relevant to students because:

- It provides new notions about the world,
- Fosters professional and personal knowledge,
- Prepares students for the future, demands independence, the capacity to run risks, among others,
- Prepares students for the realities of the job market,
- Provides students with contact with the specific realities of a profession.

Therefore, universities hold relevance in the student perspective as organisations able to change individuals, bringing about their personal and professional evolution. Correspondingly, the university teaching purpose proves to be far broader than preparing its students for the job market rather ensuring such preparation extends to life and the future in general (JONGBLOED; ENDERS; SALERNO, 2008), which seems to make sense to students.

Following this evaluation of the relevance of universities, the interview script approached the issue of the mutual influence between a university and its students. To gain an understanding of this influence, interviewees were questioned about the influence of the university over its students and vice-versa. This served to build up a picture on what happens in the relationship built up between the two parties. About the influence of the university over students, respondents highlighted that “... the university and the degree influence the opportunities for both the professional and the personal growth of students...”, “... university policies determine the route the student is going to take, as is the case with students who choose, as their future professional career, research...”, “... university shapes the behaviour of its students...”, “... the university makes the student...”. Thus, according to interviewees, the influence that a university wields over students incorporates: the path that the student goes onto follow in his/her professional life, the importance university holds in certain fields (such as scientific research, intellectual over professional training and vice-versa, among others), the ways in which universities moulds its students (demands and freedoms, among others). The student recognizes and appreciates that.

However, when it was attempted to identify the relationship of influence between the student and the university, all respondents, without exception, said the university influences them, but they cannot influence the university. Hence, interviewees stated that the student encountered difficulties in influencing the course of university affairs. According to one respondent, “...the student is a passive subject in a university...”. Another stated that “... the university does not listen to students and that’s why changes don’t take place...”. One association president declared “... the university is highly resistant. We are forced to put in a great deal of effort to change simple things and even then, the rate of change is very slow...”. Nevertheless, student respondents were able to put forward some ways in which students do influence the university: those who participate more actively suggest changes and encourage others to demand changes, the expectations, needs and desires of students end up forcing the university to change, when a university is concerned about its image in society, it seeks to listen and respond to students, whenever there is a drop in student demand for the university, the institution turns round and focuses on the demands of its current students in the expectation that they themselves will recommend the university to potential student applicants. At this point, there seems to be a need for reflection in the University. Does it give voice to their students? By the students’ answers, it seems not.

Despite researchers such as Macfarlane and Lomas (1999) and Williams (2002) maintaining that students strongly influence the university, this did not appear in this study.

On the contrary, the students themselves feel that while the university may wield great influence over them, the inverse was not the case. Given the student is a temporary member of the university organisation, the latter sets out the paths and ensures that students follow that stipulated by the university. When students attempt to change the university, so that their needs are taken into consideration, such efforts prove to be difficult and slow resulting in many students giving up on attempting influencing the universe as any resulting change will only impact after the students have already completed their respective degrees. In addition, student influence seems most closely centred around the choice of university, that is prior to joining, and in the opinions and indications made to potential students (when either still in the university or when already an ex-student).

4.3 STUDENT EXPECTATIONS, NEEDS AND DESIRES

After questioning the interviewees about the purpose and relevance of university and the mutual influence between such institutions and their students, the script moved onto themes corresponding to the main objective of this research: student expectations, needs and desires (collectively referred to above as demands). As a strategy for approaching these issues, the interviewees were questioned about their current expectations and those they held prior to beginning their graduate studies. About desires, students were asked about what they think (and thought) about their future after finishing university. About needs, this theme took into consideration student decision making about the degree programmes and the university. Finally, the student was requested to describe a perfect university. As the objective of this study was to find the demands of students, it was not divided by expectations, desires or needs, since this can be done later in a confirmatory study. Thus, all the evidence raised were considered students' demands. The separation of the questions (one for expectations, one for desires and another for needs) was only made to facilitate the identification of demands for coding.

Based upon these questions, which, according to one respondent, "... are not easy to answer as there are so many demands...", a set of 36 demands were returned and duly summarised in table 1.

Table 1 – Summary of student demands as expressed in interview.

Student demands (expectations, desires, needs)	
1	Degree with a high level of demand
2	Making new friends and a lively academic life
3	Achieving a good job on graduation
4	Degree with more practical than theoretical classes
5	Up to date degree subjects, interesting and relevant to social and professional realities
6	Lectured only by professors from that specific field
7	University financial support for students
8	Finding good opportunities for personal and professional growth and development in the degree and in the university
9	University and study environment equipped with good physical infrastructures
10	University services able to meet student needs (libraries, academic services, halls of residence, canteen facilities, among others)
11	University and degree programme able to motivate the student to study
12	Good relationships with teachers
13	Teaching staff available to students
14	Carrying out scientific research
15	Enjoyable and interesting classes
16	University openly available to listen to students
17	University with sufficient agility and adaptability to meet student needs
18	Clear and well defined university bureaucratic processes
19	Good university IT infrastructures
20	University runs the latest generation of technologies (both within the contexts of study and in general)
21	The university holds strong ties with the employment market
22	Freedom of thought and expression
23	Opportunities to share knowledge with professors and colleagues
24	New experiences in life
25	Relationships with students at other universities (national and international)
26	Completing the study programme enables you to become a competent professional
27	Carrying out voluntary and charitable work in the local environment around the university
28	Personal self-fulfilment
29	On graduation, rapidly obtain financial stability
30	Do what you like doing after graduation
31	Learn to manage one's own time (with the support of the university)
32	Get a good job
33	Broaden one's personal capacities with the new knowledge in the meanwhile acquired
34	Finding the university to be a pleasant environment and favourable to fostering good learning
35	On graduation, to obtain value in the job market
36	University stages degree related events

Source: Authors.

These results were obtained through questioning respondents about their expectations, desires and needs, which facilitated the extraction of these items from interview content. For example, one interviewee stated: "... my **expectations** prior to beginning the degree could be summarised as meeting **new people** and **getting a profession**. I may also say that I thought the **degree would be highly demanding**. Another expectation was that I would be able to access **financial support** at the university. As I am from a family with only limited means, I was concerned about how I would be able to fund it all. However, it all went very well..." (our emphasis in bold).

The rendering explicit of these wishes was facilitated by the codification applied. Given one of the codes was expectations, the conversations of all interviewees on this issue were grouped together by the software, speeding up the analytical process. All respondents separated their answers up into expectations, needs and desires, with the respective content then ending up pooled back together by the data processing. Another good example came from another student: “... I **desire**, on graduation, to get a **good job**, have **good opportunities** and be able to **rapidly gain financial stability**...” (our emphasis in bold). This, thus, explains the process undertaken to produce table 1.

Analysis of table 1 reveals that the perceptions held by students incorporate a significant majority of the aspects making up the relationship between the university and its students. They may be categorised into the following interrelated facets:

- With the degree: level of demand, teaching methods, course content, teaching staff (from the field, availability to students, relations with lecturers), infrastructures and technologies, motivation, scientific research, sharing of knowledge, relationships with colleagues from other universities, events,
- With the university structure: infrastructures in general, information technologies, other technologies,
- With university services: level of adaptation to student realities, openness to listening to students, agility and adaptability, bureaucratic processes,
- With university related personal and professional questions: making new friends, academic life, financial support, growth and personal and professional development, motivations for taking the course, links with the job market, freedom of thought and expression, new experiences of life, voluntary work, time management, institutional ambience,
- With the future: a good job, professional competence, personal self-fulfilment, liking what you do, financial stability, enhanced personal capacities, job market value.

These demands, evidenced in an exploratory mode, may, in future research, be confirmed with a representative sample of students. Hence, across the range of interviewee responses, it became clear that practically the entire university organisation is considered by students and that they create expectations regarding the institution (and not only the faculty they attend). Given they know students are one of their most important stakeholders, universities could pay full attention to these demands. A university organisation in tune with

the current reality perceives and understands these needs and deploys them as a motor for change (MEHRALIZADEH, 2005).

This university focus on student stakeholder demands will also contribute towards maintaining current students and attracting students into the future thereby bringing in more resources to the institution as current restrictions on government resources may be compensated by higher student numbers and a corresponding increase in university staff (CHANANA, 2006, TESSEMA, 2009). However, we also need to remember that a university is a complex organisation and the deployment of tools imported directly from the business world tends not to result effectively in this type of organisation (BOK, 2003), as is the case with relationship marketing. The tools put forward by this field of marketing contribute only to university environments when the entire organisation is involved in the process, from the bottom to the top.

According to Mintzberg and Quinn (1991), the development of a stakeholder focused organisational culture boosts the probability of management tools and policies successfully contribute towards the performance of complex organisations, in this case, universities. Thus, to develop a culture that considers the expectations of one of the key university stakeholders is precisely the identifying and understanding of these demands (SZAWAJKOWSKI, 2000). Only then, with the expectations identified, can a university proceed with relationship strategies targeting the student stakeholder, something not done by current Portuguese universities.

4.4 STUDENT PARTICIPATION

Finally, the interview script requested information regarding student participation and contributions made towards the development of the university. Practically all respondents affirmed that they had experienced difficulties in both participating and contributing towards the institutions. Various respondents maintained that this was not due to any lack of will: "... I would like to contribute to the university, however, I don't know how I can help..."; "... I want to contribute but I think there's a lack of will on behalf of the university..."; "... I don't make much of a contribution. Not that I don't want to but how do I do it? ..."; "... well, I must recognise it, and I admit it, I am very passive. I do little to make the university change...".

When respondents were requested to provide suggestions as to how greater student participation might be brought about, various ideas were proposed:

- Import and promote knowledge external to the university within both the degree programme and the actual institution,
- Participate in degree related scientific research projects,
- Collect suggestions for improving levels of participation in core degree structures,
- Students take on responsibility for promoting the university at external events,
- Recommend the university to potential applicants,
- Contact degree and/or university directors and deliver one's own or one's colleagues suggestions and requests,
- Take the degree study programme seriously and responsibly,
- Help in the organisation and actively participate in degree or even university wide events,
- Get involved in degree and university related issues and seek to make some sort of contribution.

These were among the suggestions provided by interviewees as means of broadening student participation in universities. Active stakeholder participation in conjunction with the organisation contributes towards cooperation and the relationships between parties, strengthening them and building up the organisational image among stakeholders and society in general (NAYYAR, 1995, THOMSON; BEBBINGTON, 2005). In this way, the more the university facilitates student participation in institutional related affairs, the stronger will be the respective relationship between the parties (ARNETT; GERMAN; HUNT, 2003). This seems like a good way for the Portuguese universities, which now live in a highly competitive environment.

5 CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND LIMITATIONS TO THE RESEARCH

The management of an organisation's stakeholders requires not only their identification and respective ranking in terms of importance but also the identification of just what each stakeholder wants and expects (FROOMAN, 1999). This was the objective of this study because before making decisions, it demonstrates to be important the manager meet the demands of its stakeholders, in this case, the student stakeholder. After all, knowing what stakeholders are seeking or want ensures the organisation's management focuses upon meeting the demands of stakeholders important to the organisation. Indeed, this represents the

foundation stone for a long-lasting relationship between the two parties (SVENDSEN et al., 2001).

Correspondingly, this reveals the sheer importance of understanding what a stakeholder, as crucial and traditional as the student, thinks about the Portuguese university organisation. This is the first step towards developing optimal relationships between a university and its students. To begin to grasp student perceptions and expectations, this exploratory case study focused upon students at a Portuguese state university. The choice of this case study is explained by the overall lack of existing research directly looking at student demands. The clear majority of research carried out in this area has been either theoretical (such as ROBERTS, 2004, and WATSON, 2007) or has looked at the perceptions of university managers about student expectations (as undertaken by MACFARLANE; LOMAS, 1999). The option to directly approach students represents one major contribution of this study.

To achieve this objective and identify student expectations according to their own perspectives, a semi-structured script, based on the Stakeholder Theory, was drafted and implemented across the selected sample of interviewees. Importantly, this study is exploratory, based on a small and heterogeneous sample, without predominance of gender, age, ethnicity or socioeconomic status, because the objective was to identify the general demands of the group of students without specific characteristics of one or another group of students. The in-depth interviews brought initial evidence that can later be confirmed in a large study with students of Portuguese universities. But this does not diminish the importance of this study because such evidence does not appear in the literature.

Following the characterisation of interviewees, we sought to grasp just how students perceived the university purpose. They all placed teaching as the main purpose. However, the emphasis was not exclusively professional related but also dealt with the student's own future. This demonstrated students did not simply expect the university to hand them a profession but rather to contribute towards their overall intellectual development in more general terms (BOK, 2003), broadening the responsibilities of the university about the teaching currently carried out.

About the relevance of university, this research considered both the broader social dimension as well as that specifically to the students themselves. The relevance perceived demonstrated the level of stakeholder interest in the organisation. Furthermore, all respondents agreed that universities were organisations relevant to both society and to students. In the case of society, according to interviewees, universities bring about national

growth and development and mould future generations. For students, the university fosters the acquisition of the knowledge necessary for a better future. Thus, the findings pointed to the university being perceived as an organisation central to society, which influences a significant section of individuals belonging to any particular nation, as Martin and Etzkowitz (2000) had already highlighted.

In terms of mutual influences between universities and their students, according to our respondents, it is clear that university does wield power over its students. The decision making by university managers directly impacts on students even while the inverse seems not to occur. Despite various universities stating intentions to approximate and listen to their students as among their objectives (ROSA; AMARAL, 2007), at the university selected for this case study, the student feeling is that they have very little say and influence over changes taking place. This result would point to change at some universities occurring at very slow rates as the opening of space for students to express their demands directly to the university would be the equal of academics losing power (MEEK, 2006b). Therefore, this point particularly deserves further attention from university managers to endow a leading stakeholder with the openness and opportunity to express their expectations and hence advancing the quality of the relationship between the two parties.

About student expectations, we found that those relating to the degree, the university structure and services, personal and professional questions deriving from university study and the future of the student had already been identified in the literature (as shown by the work of MAINARDES; ALVES; DOMINGUES, 2009), even if these expectations were not actually gleaned directly from the students themselves. Hence, the contribution of this research (and its main objective) was the identification of these expectations, as set out in table 1. Indeed, we may correspondingly conclude that in this case the university could not concentrate exclusively on providing services within the scope of student expectations but rather conceive of a broad reaching service incorporating the central service (in this case, teaching) in conjunction with peripheral services (KOTLER; FOX, 1995) and concern themselves with student expectations. This represents one of the core premises of stakeholder theory (SAVAGE; DUNKIN; FORD, 2004).

Finally, student participation in the development of the university was also a factor taken into consideration. Despite all student respondents not knowing exactly how they might contribute towards the institution, which leads them to consider that they do not contribute substantially to the university, they did put forward alternatives to be able to broaden student participation in the institution. The active participation of organisational stakeholders expands

and deepens the relationship between the respective parties (ARNETT; GERMAN; HUNT, 2003). Therefore, it is the responsibility of university managers to conceive of ways to boost student participation in institutional development as this active contribution would benefit both sides.

Given the results obtained, we may state the advance made by this research is the empirical identification of the expectations of a key stakeholder, the student. Taking into consideration how the student perceives the university purpose to be about the training and preparation of persons and as such is a relevant institution to broader society (and not only to students) and that university decisions affect students (while the inverse does not necessarily hold true), identifying the demands and expectations of students proves of relevance not only to university managers but also to the academic literature, especially for the field of complex university management.

To conclude this research, it is worth mentioning that the identified demands, as well as the perceptions of students about the various aspects of the university (the purpose, relevance, participation), can guide the managers of universities. In this respect, the Stakeholder Theory can be the theoretical model to guide the managers' actions. According to the precepts of this theory, the next step to the identification of stakeholder is the identification of their demands, what was done here. Then the managers make relationship strategies to meet the identified demands, following the guidelines of the proposed theoretical model (stakeholder theory). The conclusion, therefore, that meet of the expectations of students is to know exactly what they are seeking at the university. Thus, the university can achieve its purposes.

It is important to emphasize that the sample of students was deliberately heterogeneous, precisely to avoid specific demands of groups of students. In this case, it was careful for the sample not to present predominance in terms of gender, age, among others. The result of this research presents general demands, which can meet the students in general. Such demands, after being identified, require in-depth studies to understand the origin and content of each demand. Also, subsequently, it shows important to identify specific demands of groups of students, such as different ethnic origin, different socioeconomic status, gender differences, which can be investigated in future studies.

The methodology deployed might contribute towards other types of complex organisations (such as hospitals, for example) identifying the needs and wishes of their own stakeholders, an essential first step to establishing relationships with them. Furthermore, another contribution derives from empirically identifying how the broadening of stakeholder

participation, in this case the student, may serve to deepen and strengthen the relationship with the organisation.

Finally, in terms of research limitations, there are certainly the consequences of choosing but a single university, despite the efforts undertaken to ensure its representativeness, which may not reflect the reality of universities nationally or especially internationally. Furthermore, as a state university, other higher education institutional types may attract students with very different agendas as might be the case with small public universities, specialist institutes such as armed forces or healthcare focused learning bodies as well as private and virtual institutions. Another limitation stems from the small number of students interviewed and hence we are not able to say that the responses obtained represent the opinion of the broader body of students at the university hosting our case study.

Therefore, as a recommendation for future research projects, we would unquestionably opt for further quantitative research, based upon these findings, at other Portuguese state universities and incorporating a statistically representative sample of students to be able to confirm (or otherwise) the findings of this exploratory research. In addition, future research might replicate this approach at other higher education institutional types or focus their research on other realities. The broadening of our knowledge and understanding of higher education student expectations and needs can only serve to provide significant contributions to the overall development of universities.

PESQUISA EXPLORATÓRIA SOBRE O QUE OS ALUNOS DEMANDAM DAS UNIVERSIDADES PÚBLICAS PORTUGUESAS

RESUMO

Dada a quantidade de mudanças que vem ocorrendo dentro do setor universitário, parece ser necessário que essas organizações ajustem as suas tradicionais estruturas de gestão. A teoria dos stakeholders parece fornecer uma contribuição para esse fim, uma vez que identifica e prioriza os problemas a serem resolvidos. O objetivo deste estudo foi identificar as expectativas de um dos mais importantes grupos de atores universitários, os alunos. Para isso, adotou-se uma abordagem de pesquisa exploratória-qualitativa com base em um estudo de caso com alunos de uma universidade portuguesa. Os resultados demonstram que os alunos percebem o propósito das universidades como sendo a formação dos cidadãos e que as decisões tomadas pelas universidades têm diferentes impactos nos alunos, de acordo com suas características como gênero, idade, etnia ou status socioeconômico. Assim, a universidade não poderia concentrar-se exclusivamente na prestação de serviços no âmbito das expectativas dos alunos, mas sim proporcionar um alcance mais amplo que inclui não apenas o serviço central, neste caso o ensino, mas também os serviços periféricos. Assim, a teoria dos stakeholders mostra-se como um modelo que pode orientar a gestão das universidades para reconhecer e satisfazer as demandas dos diferentes tipos de alunos das universidades públicas portuguesas.

Palavras-chave: demandas dos alunos; gestão de stakeholders; universidade; ensino superior; Portugal.

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