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STUDY REGARDING THE STUDENTS' PERCEPTION ON THE ACCOMMODATION FACILITIES PROVIDED BY UNIVERSITIES

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Abstract: *In the context of globalization as an overall phenomenon and of the high standards in the field of academic education at the Community level, the universities are forced to adopt strategies in order to meet new challenges and to maintain a competitive level of the activities which they carry on. Starting from the premise that a university which assumes its success is developing permanently its ability to meet the needs of the different stakeholders, the main purpose of this paper is to highlight the critical perspectives of the students regarding the public services offered in the student dormitories, thus providing to the university management an honest feedback in order to enable the adoption of measures to improve and to attract or maintain the students. To achieve this, in terms of methodology, we have elaborated and we have used an online questionnaire, which we disseminated to the students accommodated in university campuses. The results obtained from this investigative approach reflect the shortcomings of the system, providing also the students' testimonials and recommendations for improvement.*

Key words: University, Student dormitories, Students' perception, Accommodation, Public services.

JEL Classification Codes: I23, I29.

1. INTRODUCTION

Currently, the increasing competition between universities encourages a more than selective attitude of the students, augmenting their claims in choosing a certain public institution of academic education. Therefore, we consider that it becomes imperative for the universities to know the expectations and the opinions of their current and prospective students, in order to focus the strategies on increasing their satisfaction by increasing the quality of the provided services.

In this context, this paper addresses a sensitive subject, having as an overall objective, capturing the students' perception of the services of which they benefit within the dormitories located on the university campuses.

Moreover, the public services represent a controversial debate issue, reason for why we decided to use the questionnaire as a research tool. Besides, given that questions were quite

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delicate, in order to increase the chances of getting an honest feedback from the students, we preferred to use an online questionnaire. From the perspective of the specialists in the field, the greatest strength of this type of research is the on-line questionnaire form as it ensures the confidentiality of the respondents and, in this way, they are not afraid to say what they really think (Puiu, 2014, p. 248).

University of Craiova, on which this study is focused, offers student housing in 12 dormitories, located in 5 university campuses. As general facilities, all the student dormitories are equipped with reading rooms, are connected to the cable television network and internet, and are served by care and maintenance staff. In 6 of the 12 dormitories, there are laundry washing machines, fitted with rechargeable cards and tokens, and food preparation tables equipped at European standards. All the student dormitories in Dolj county are served by a single cafeteria with ultramodern facilities where students can eat in very good conditions and at advantageous prices. The residence located in Mehedinți county has no cafeteria.

Under the Regulation regarding the organization and functioning of the student dormitories and canteens, in the residences of the University of Craiova are accommodated students and persons who have their permanent residence outside the university center, in the following priority order: students financed from the state budget, in the first year of studies, admitted in the summer session, who have applied for accommodation in time; students financed from the state budget, who lived in the residence in the previous year and who have applied for accommodation within the deadline, in the decreasing order of the averages obtained in the summer session; students who have a rich activity in the student organizations and those who are members in the decision-making structures of the university and faculties; students financed from the state budget, in the first year of studies, admitted in the autumn session, who have applied for accommodation in time; Romanian students orphaned by both parents and those from orphanages; foreign students with scholarships from the Romanian state and those who came to study in Romania through European programs; PhD students; students whose parents are teachers; students financed from the state budget, from higher years, who haven't lived in the dormitories and who have applied for accommodation within the deadline; tuition paying students who lived in the residence in the past year and who have applied for accommodation within the deadline; families of students. In the limit of the available places left, tuition-paying students and teachers who have not solved the housing problem can also be accommodated, at the rate established by the Board of Directors.

2. THE SPECIALISTS' OPINIONS

The present paper fits into the category of those about the students' perspective and preferences regarding the public services provided by the dormitories located on the university campuses. Papers on this subject have been written by authors such as: Douglas and Barnes (2006), Moore (2009), La Roche, Flanigan and Copeland (2010), Khozaei, Hassan and Ramayah (2011), Najib, Yusof and Osman (2011), Lawrence (2013).

As Najib, Yusof and Osman (2011, p. 52) appreciate, the residents' satisfaction is lately used as an important indicator in assessing the student dormitories quality and the services provided within them, by the universities. Equally, La Roche, Flanigan and Copeland (2010, p. 45) emphasize the students of the millennial generation higher expectations regarding the student dormitories and housing facilities. Douglas and Barnes (2006, p. 264) believe that improving the students' satisfaction can be achieved only if all the services that contribute to the "academic life" are delivered to an appropriate standard, students being the only ones through which this issue can be assessed. As such, the researches on their satisfaction must be conducted regularly and the public services provided by the universities adapted accordingly.

Nevertheless, as Lawrence (2013, p. 1) shows, the accommodation on student campuses has been often a powerful source of conflict between the university authority and students' representatives. In this regard, Moore (2009, p. 5) highlights that students' and parents' expectations include: new facilities and a full range of amenities, sophisticated and wide spaces, the latest technologies and, of course, all of these at a price as low as possible. On the other hand, the universities invoke insufficient financial, human and material resources, as well as the number of students' evolution uncertainty.

The results of the study conducted by Khozaei, Hassan and Ramayah (2011, p. 7335) have shown that the facilities most preferred by the students in the residences are: free access to the internet, lockable storage space, mirror in the room, water machine and also a variety of food snacks at the vending machines.

3. METHODOLOGY

Procedurally and methodological, we used a questionnaire designed as a set of 11 coherent and relevant questions, which helped us to get a current radiography of the students' perspective on the services provided by the student residences from Dolj and Mehedinți counties and which can be generalized at a national level.

Structurally, the questionnaire was composed of:

- *7 scale questions* regarding the gender of the respondent, the cycle and the year of study, the room type in which the student is accommodated, how he/she found out about the possibility of accommodation in the student dormitories, what determined the decision to accommodate in the student dormitories and not elsewhere and, also, if he/she would recommend to a friend to live in the same residence, all these questions with the possibility to select only one answer;
- *a hierarchical question* asking the respondents to assign the first place for the most important alternative and the last place for least important, in order to identify the value system of students accommodated in dormitories; practically, this question was meant to assess the students' perception on the following: the internet operation and speed, the proximity to the faculty in which they study, the connection with the city center, the cleanliness, the amenities, the flexibility of the entrance/exit in/from the residence, the security and the indoor order, the employees' kindness and politeness;
- *a matrix question*, enabling the measurement, in relation to the criteria very well - good - enough - insufficient, several issues such as: the internet operation and speed, the proximity to the faculty where they study, the connection with the city center, the cleanliness, the amenities, the flexibility of the entrance/exit in/from the residence, the security and the indoor order, the employees' kindness and politeness, the meal services offered by the cafeteria, the laundry room and the reading room;
- *2 open questions* to which the respondents could answer freely as text, offering their recommendations to improve the services and the comfort in the student dormitories and stating explicitly what they lack in there, what is needless and what would they like in this regard.

All the questions were simply and to the point formulated so as to be understood by all the respondents, avoiding the words with vague or ambiguous meaning.

The investigative approach was carried out between 1st March and 16th November 2015, the questionnaire was disseminated online to the potential respondents through the social platforms and via email. The online form was designed using Google Forms, because the online questionnaire allows respondents to remain anonymous and to answer the questions with utmost sincerity, compared to the situation of the questionnaires printed and addressed "face to face".

The primary processing of data obtained as a result of research based on the survey was conducted between 20th November 2015 and 10th January 2016.

4. THE RESPONDENTS' PROFILE

After applying the questionnaire, we managed to obtain answers from 354 students randomly selected from a reference population of 2507 students accommodated in 2015 in the residences from the campuses of the University of Craiova. The sample structure, according to the respondents' characteristics, can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. The sample structure

Variables	The respondents' characteristics	Number of respondents	Percentage
Gender	Female	231	65.25%
	Male	123	34.75%
The study cycle	BSc	282	79.66%
	MSc	65	18.36%
	PhD	7	1.98%
The year of study	Year I	117	33.05%
	Year II	123	34.75%
	Year III	93	26.27%
	Year IV	21	5.93%
The room type	Protocol apartment	9	2.54%
	Room with 2 beds and own bathroom	69	19.49%
	Room with 3 beds and own bathroom	12	3.39%
	Room with 3 beds and shared bathroom	6	1.69%
	Room with 4 beds and own bathroom	51	14.41%
	Room with 4 beds and shared bathroom	90	25.43%
	Room with 5 beds and own bathroom	72	20.34%
	Room with 5 beds and shared bathroom	45	12.71%

Source: Own Projection

As it can be seen, the questionnaire was filled in a proportion of 65.25% by women and in a proportion of 34.75% by men. Also, as expected, the largest share of respondents was held by

the students enrolled in the bachelor cycle (79.66%), followed by the percentage of the students enrolled in the master cycle (18.36%) and the share of the PhD students (1.98%).

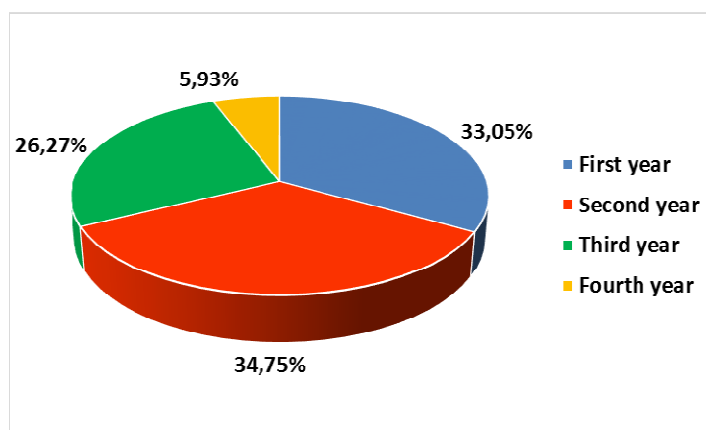


Figure 1. The graphical representation of the respondents' structure according to the year of study

Source: Own Projection

The respondents' structure in relation to the year of study can be seen in Figure 1 and reveals a quasi-parity distribution between the percentage of the students enrolled in the second year (34.75%) and the percentage of the students enrolled in the first year (33.05%), followed by the percentage of the students enrolled in the third year (26.27 %) and the low percentage of the respondents in the fourth year (5.93%).

If we refer to another variable, respectively the room type, the respondents' structure is presented according to Figure 2.

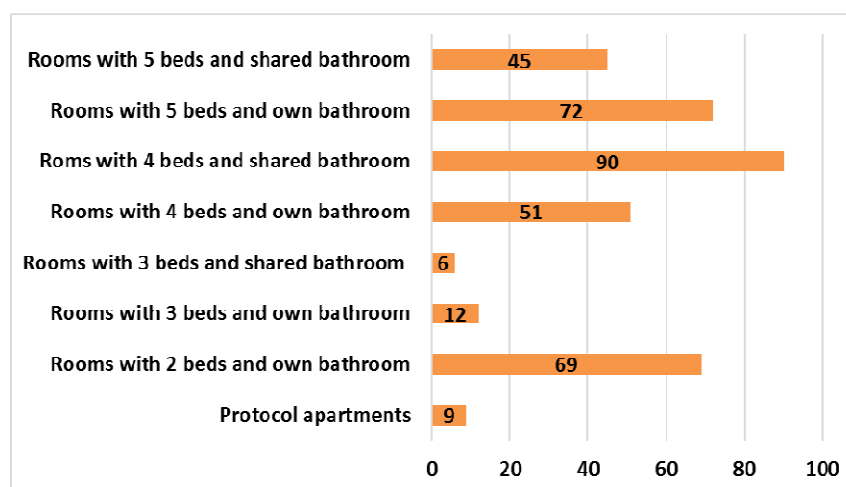


Figure 2. The graphical representation of the respondents' structure according to the room type

Source: Own Projection

Certainly, the structure in Figure 2 can be different from one university to another, but for our study the collected information is relevant. As can be seen, students from all the accommodation structures of the University of Craiova answered, the respondents' number being relatively proportional with the accommodation alternatives provided.

5. THE RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

We have set two research hypotheses that might be or might not be confirmed by the analysis of the collected responses, namely:

- **hypothesis 1** - the information regarding the accommodation possibilities in the students' dormitories is relatively detailed and promoted via the universities' websites.
- **hypothesis 2** - although the students accept the accommodation in the dormitories from financial reasons, they are not yet satisfied with the public services that they receive.

6. THE RESULTS OF THE CONDUCTED RESEARCH

The first hypothesis was analyzed using a question about the way in which the respondents have found out about the possibility of accommodation in the student dormitories.

As we can notice from the information provided by Table 2, most of the respondents (48.31%) have decided to accommodate in the students' dormitories based on recommendations from acquaintances/parties. Instead, 33.90% of the respondents found out about this possibility of accommodation through the website of the university, 15.25% via the Internet and 2.54% from other sources. These percentages show that the information about the accommodation opportunities in the students' dormitories is relatively detailed and promoted through the websites of the universities.

Table 2. The answers' synthesis regarding the information sources for the student's decision making to accommodate in the students' dormitories

<i>How did you find out about the possibility of accommodation in the student dormitories?</i>		
Answer options	Number of answers	Percentage
Through the website of the university	120	33.90%
Via Internet	54	15.25%
Recommendations from acquaintances/others	171	48.31%
Other sources	9	2.54%

Source: Own Projection

We consider that *these results should lead to valuable conclusions for the university governance, in the sense of taking informed decisions to intensify the marketing approaches in the online environment, regarding the accommodation possibilities in the students' dormitories*, on the assumption that these actions will result in useful tools to raise the extra-budgetary revenues, with a favorable impact on the universities' funding. In this regard, we propose taking pictures that should reflect the amenities of each dormitory and upload them to the universities' websites, concomitant with updating and publishing, in real-time, the occupancy of each student residence and specifying the number of available rooms per category.

The second hypothesis was analyzed using questions concerning the determinants in deciding the accommodation in students' dormitories, the degree of satisfaction and the importance attributed by the respondents to several factors regarding the public services of which they benefit.

Concerning the determinants in deciding the accommodation in dormitories, as can be seen in Figure 3, 73.73% of the interviewed students responded that they have chosen this option for

financial reasons, as a cheaper option compared to other alternatives. Instead, in 11.86% of cases, making the decision of accommodation in the students' dormitories was achieved on the reason of the proximity to the faculty in which the respondents study and in only 5.93% of cases based on the recommendations received from acquaintances/parties. On the other hand, in just 4.24% of cases, the decision was the parents' option.

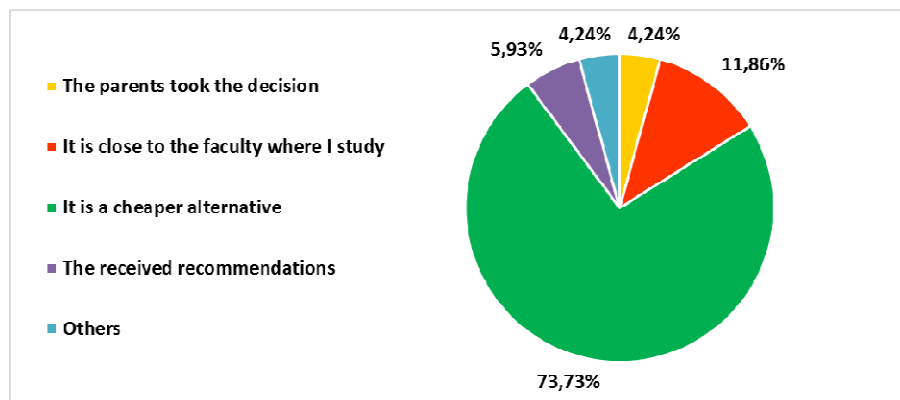


Figure 3. The graphical representation of the results regarding the determining factors in deciding the accommodation in the students' dormitories

Source: Own Projection

Although many difficulties in financing the accommodation services are encountered, the universities management should increase the funds use efficiency in this area. In another train of thoughts, as the price-performance ratio will be better in the accommodation field, the more will increase the attractiveness of the university center.

Regarding the degree of students' satisfaction concerning the public services of which they benefit in the dormitories, our study shows that the **factor with the greatest degree of satisfaction from students** is the flexibility of the entrance/exit in/from the residence, followed by the proximity to the faculty in which they study, as can be seen in Figure 4.

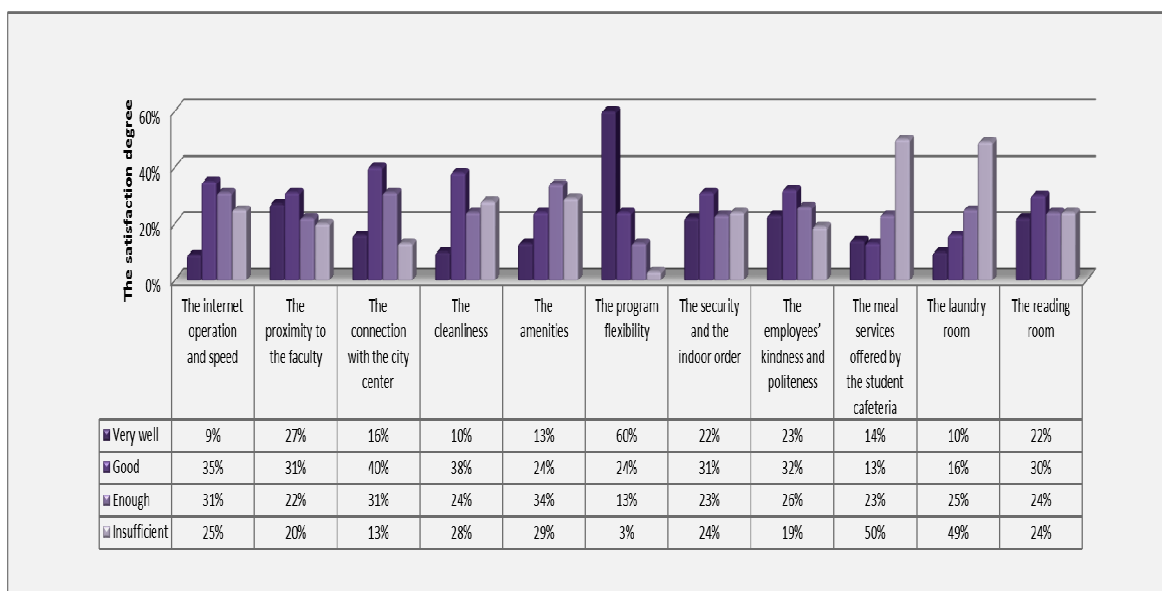


Figure 4. The graphical representation of the results on the students' degree of satisfaction regarding the services of which they benefit in the dormitories

Source: Own Projection

Instead, **the factors with the greatest degree of dissatisfaction from students** proved to be: the meal services offered by the student cafeteria, the laundry, the amenities and the cleanliness.

These results are somehow explainable since the majority of the residences analyzed do not enjoy meal services or they are served by only one cafeteria, located relatively far from the central building of the university and from the other campuses. Also, only 6 of the 12 residences benefit of laundries services, the rest not having washing machines. In these circumstances, some students are forced to rely on alternatives, somehow unpleasant, such as weekly bringing home laundry to wash or buying a washing machine. We believe that, at the moment, the laundry and the drying facilities are indispensable to students who live in residences, a reason for why we support the immediate investment in these.

In order to confirm or deny the second hypothesis, we asked the respondents, through an open question, to provide **recommendations for the improvement of the public services and the comfort in the student dormitories**. After centralizing the information collected through the questionnaire, the main such recommendations aim: the renovation and modernization of the students dormitories according to the European standards, but especially the toilets; repainting the rooms and equipping them with parquet; replacing the existing window frames with double glazing glass; changing furniture; equipping the rooms with refrigerators and TV; renewing the linen and the facilities from kitchens and laundries, where they exist; imputing the damages exerted on the facilities in rooms and in the common areas, in the task of the students who caused them; establishing permanent security in each residence, the students considering the panic buttons insufficient to guarantee their personal security and safety; penalizing the students who do not keep the silence in the dormitory; improve the cleaning services; ensuring the cleanliness control at check-out; applying sanctions for the students who do not keep the cleanliness; ensuring the supply of hot water throughout the day and not just at particular times, by installing central heating in each residence; removing the stray dogs from the university campuses; expanding the access to laundry and reading room; the elevators' repair; creating green spaces near the residences for leisure time; equipping the residences with coffee vending machines and snack machines; a greater attention of the dormitories' administrators regarding the problems faced by the accommodated students; arranging special places for smokers; enabling students to make subscription at the cafeteria; ensuring a faster Internet connection.

Through another open question, we asked respondents to identify **what they lack in the dormitories where they are accommodated**. Analyzing the received responses, we can enumerate: the cleanliness, the silence, the security, the internal order, the high-speed internet, bathrooms in each room, adequate bathrooms, sufficient heat in winter and air conditioning in summer, new furniture, equipping rooms with TVs and refrigerators, laundry in each residence, a canteen near the residence and hot water at any time.

7. CONCLUSIONS

The research conducted based on questionnaire made possible knowing the students' perception on the public services provided by the student dormitories. We consider that the feedback received through the student opinion barometer, using the satisfaction survey administered, provides to the university governance extremely valuable information that can guide proactive the future actions, in the sense of integrating them into the processes and policies to improve the quality of the academic education institution activity.

We believe that, in order to ensure competitiveness and to provide quality services for students, evaluating the satisfaction degree regarding the public services provided to them, should become a common practice in all public institutions of academic education in our

country. Starting from the premise that a pleased student, will continue to require public services, knowing the students' needs and identifying the strategies for augmenting their satisfaction reflects the chance that they remain accommodated in university campuses, bringing extra - budgetary revenues for the higher education institutions, under the current conditions of the Romanian academic education underfunding. Also, maybe, externalizing these services based on principles and well-defined performance criteria, supplemented by their independent monitoring, should not be neglected.

In relation to the initially formulated hypotheses, the results of this study are as follows:

- the information regarding the possibilities for accommodation in the students' residences are relatively detailed and promoted via websites of the institutions of academic education;
- the students are not satisfied enough with the public services they receive in the residences, but most often, they are forced to accept this alternative accommodation for financial reasons.

In the light of the received responses, we can conclude that both hypotheses were confirmed, the results being in accordance with our expectations and leading us to achieve the proposed objectives for the undertaken study. Certainly, the study has its limits, between which the core is the sample representativeness, but also other elements can be taken into account for the analysis, such as: the economic and social state of the student, the environment from which the student comes, which are the reasons of the students who do not live in the city of the university center and still do not choose for accommodation in the dormitories, the classification of the university and the area in which it operates in different hierarchies. All these are many challenges for continuing and deepening the study, up to an integrated approach regarding the social function of the higher education institutions.

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