

VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING FOR TOURISM. SPECIFIC ASPECTS WHICH INFLUENCE THE STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF THE QUALITY OF THEIR LEARNING EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT. – Vocational Education and Training for Tourism. Specific Aspects which Influence the Students' Perception of the Quality of Their Learning Experience.

Quality in education has been defined in various ways, each definition representing a different approach. Karl Popper defines human rationality by the adequacy of one's action to a specific situation. Furthermore, the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu argues that the actions that people undertake are based on their previous life experiences and on their social and professional status. Vocational Education and Training (VET) addresses young people and adults whose social status can influence their level of satisfaction with the quality of the educational process. The present article seeks to present the results of a questionnaire-based survey applied to the students who have attended the *travel agent* and *tourism manager* courses at the Centre for Tourism Training of the Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca. The data illustrate the strong influence of the variable *age* and *previous educational experience* on the subjects' satisfaction regarding some aspects of the training activities.

Keywords: *VET, quality assurance, EQUARF, Pierre Bourdieu, Karl Popper, previous life-experience.*

1. INTRODUCTION

A brief history of *quality assurance* and *evaluation* in education reveals that the notion of quality has proven to be a complex one, which can be approached from multiple angles and perspectives (Harvey and Green, 1993, Nica, 2004, Ilieș, 2003).

The documents of the European Council and the European Commission define the process of quality assurance as a generic term which refers to a continuous process and comprises: evaluating, monitoring, assuring, maintaining and improving the level of quality of a system, program, or institution (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, 2005).

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Addressing young and adults, the importance of vocational education and training (VET) has been on the rise in the present dynamic social-economic society, especially starting with 2002. A proper quality assurance system for vocational education proved to be a challenging task (Șerban, 2013). The European Parliament and The European Council created a number tools for VET (Irimiea, 2011a) and established, in June 2009, a *European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocational Education and Training* (EQARF), which proposes a reference set of selected quality indicators for quality assessment in VET.

The scientist Karl Popper (1998) defines human rationality by the adequacy of one's action to a specific situation as he perceives it. Expressing another point of view, the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (2007, 1984) argues that the actions that people undertake - the *positions taken*, as the author puts it - are based on their *dispositions*, which result from the accumulation of their previous life experiences, their social and professional status.

The article presents the results of a questionnaire-based inquiry targeting the students who attended the *travel agent* and *tourism manager* courses at the Centre for Tourism Training of the Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania. The investigation seeks to evaluate the level of students' satisfaction with the quality of their learning experience, while taking into account the provision of the second quality indicator recommended by the EQARF: *Investment in training of teachers and trainers*.

The resulting data illustrate a strong influence of the variable *age* and *previous life experience* on the subjects' satisfaction regarding some aspects of their training activities.

2. APPROACHES TO QUALITY ASSURANCE IN EDUCATION

Quality is a moving target, whose content depends on the used perspective and which gives rise to a wide spectrum of concepts, definitions and approaches. Thus, quality is regarded as: exceptional or as excellence (Harvey and Green, 1993; Biggs, 2004), as perfection to consistency ("zero errors" as Harvey and Green called it), fitness to purpose (Harvey and Green, 1993, Doherty, 2008), value for money, as transformation (Harvey and Green, 1993; Clark, 2000, 2004), meeting standards (Harvey, 1999; Rocki, 2005), organisational culture (Harvey, 1999), meeting the students' expectation (Harvey, 1999; Tsinidou, Georgiannis and Fitsilis, 2010) and meeting the stakeholders' expectations (Harvey 1999, Middlehurst, 1992).

The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) asserts that providing a definition for quality assurance is a cumbersome task, on the one hand, because the term covers a number of complex elements and, on the other hand, because each national education system has adopted its own views and definitions of these elements (Standards and Guidelines..., 2005). Harmonising the systems for quality evaluation, both with the existent reality and among themselves, is a real challenge and a great opportunity for the global education system (Kohler, 2009), including VET.

According to Cedefop (European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training), quality in VET has become a key priority at EU level to 'promote mutual trust, transparency and recognition of competences and qualifications, thereby establishing a basis for increasing mobility and facilitating access to lifelong learning' (www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/about-cedefop/projects/quality-assurance-in-vet, visited 21.04.2014).

The concerns about quality at EU level go back to the year 2001 when the European forum on quality in VET (jointly set up by the Commission and Cedefop) was organised and the technical working group on quality in VET (TWG) which functioned until mid 2005 was established. Subsequent to these achievements, the European cooperation sought to define the common principles, guidelines and tools for quality development. In 2004, these resulted in 'the establishment of a *common quality assurance framework for VET (CQAF)*'. Following this, 'In October 2005, the TWG was replaced by ENQA VET, the European platform financed through the Leonardo da Vinci programme to ease exchange of experiences, common learning, consensus building and support to further developing the CQAF model in 2008 and 2009'. (www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/about-cedefop/projects/quality-assurance-in-vet, visited 21.04.2014). In April 2008, the European Commission presented a draft recommendation on the establishment of a European quality assurance reference framework for VET (EQARF) adopted by the European Parliament and the Council in June 2009.

The Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 June 2009 on the establishment of a *European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocational Education and Training (EQUARF)* proposes a comprehensive set of 10 selected quality indicators which can be used to support the evaluation and quality improvement of VET systems and/or VET providers. The document also specifies the type of the indicator in terms of context, input, process, output, or outcome indicator and the purpose of the educational policy to which the indicator is responding.

The second indicator is focused on *investment in training of teachers and trainers: (a) share of teachers and trainers participating in further training, (b) amount of funds invested* which can be used both as an *input indicator* and also as a *process indicator*, depending on the level type and aim of the analysis. The purposes of the educational policy to which this indicator responds are:

- Promote ownership of teachers and trainers in the process of quality development in VET
- Improve the responsiveness of VET to changing demands of labour market
- Increase individual learning capacity building
- Improve learners' achievement.

Students play an active part in the educational process holding various key-roles (Popescu and Brătianu, 2004) simultaneously: both as internal and external clients, both as inputs and outputs of the educational process, both as former and future stakeholders.

Furthermore, since the strong connection between theory and practice represents a major priority (Bradea, 2011) in VET, the trainers need to be trained accordingly (Irimiea, 2011b).

Given these learners' prerequisites, their opinion on the quality of their learning experience is very important and therefore necessary for meeting the four objectives mentioned above.

The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, a representative of critical structuralism, uses the term *capital* in close relation to the that used by Karl Marx. He states that the *positions* occupied by various social agents (groups, individuals, or institutions) in a social field are determined by the characteristics of the *capital* which they possess and by the

actions that they undertake –both those overtly manifested and the ones only thought of or intentional - (*position taken*, as Bourdieu calls them). The author identified three forms of capital a social agent can possess: economic capital (the material goods that he possesses), cultural capital (all his knowledge and all his own cultural goods), social capital (all the relationships that bring or can bring mutual recognition). According to Bourdieu, *position taking* (1984, 2007) is based on the agents' *dispositions*, i.e. the accumulation of their previous life experiences, the social and professional status. From another perspective, the physicist and sociologist Karl Popper (1998) defines human rationality as consisting in the individuals' appropriate reaction to a problem situation, as they perceive it. This further means that the rational actions taken are based on the individuals' dispositions.

According to the above mentioned assumption, the *positions* of the students in an educational environment (class, faculty, university, or training centre) are determined by their economic, cultural and social assets and their opinion regarding the quality of the learning process – so, their *positions* - become rational reactions based on their *dispositions*. Since this seems to be the case, it follows that socio-demographic variables such as *gender* or *age*, intersecting the previous educational experience of the learners, could influence their level of satisfaction regarding the quality of the training process.

The results of the research we present are gathered through an opinion survey based on questionnaires applied to students who have attended the *travel agent* and *tourism manager* training programmes at the Centre for Tourism Training of the Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania.

3. THE CENTER FOR TOURISM TRAINING

The Center for Tourism Training operates as a Vocational Education and Training (VET) centre of the Faculty of Geography, the Babeș-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca. It was established in 2004 and since then it has released to the labour market an impressive number of qualified tourism professionals. The curricula of the courses have been set up within the framework of a European Leonardo da Vinci pilot project (LdV/2004-2006/175050) and have been harmonised with the occupational standards provided by the National Authority for Qualifications (previously called the *National Council for Adult Vocational Education*). The latter works under the Ministry of Education and performs the following roles: it establishes the national professional profiles/jobs available in the *Romanian Occupational Code*, identifies and recommends national learning and performance standards as *learning outcomes* for all professional profiles, which build the skeleton for curriculum design, suggests teaching methods, establishes forms of assessment/evaluation- thereby creating a relatively unitary vocational education and training system.

The teaching and the research activity carried out at the CTT has been informed by the strategies and policies outlined in the Copenhagen process as well as by the project partner institutions' teaching traditions and practices in the area of Vocational Education and Training (VET) for tourism. The paradigms that the CTT training programme is based on are: *adult education, continuing education and learning outcomes-oriented teaching*, all associated with the European VET tools, particularly with the *European Qualifications*

Framework (EQF) and EQARF(European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for VET). The management of the CTT is sustained by a strong leadership, a traditional culture and a rigorous system which generates high expectations of both staff and learners and provides a supportive teaching and learning environment. The focus of the CTT management on pedagogical leadership is aimed at the improvement of student outcomes and relies on four elements:

- 1) remodelling/reforming the curriculum –the main instrument of educational policy used by authorities- in terms of: time allotment (no of hours/ discipline), ensuring an adequate balance between theory and practice, teacher recruitment and appointment, assigning teaching responsibilities to teachers;
- 2) expanding curriculum opportunities
- 3) improving teaching and learning
- 4) harnessing learners voice.

Given the present global recession, the economic and labour market pressures which affect the Romanian VET providers (decreased interest in education and fewer young people capable of paying for their professional qualification), less interest on the behalf of organisations to support further training of their staff- the nature of the CTT management and its focus –is subject to both moderate and considerable changes since education planning must be anchored in a market or opportunity-driven management.

The Centre hosts six training modules accredited by the former National Council of Vocational Adult Education of the Ministry of Education(NCVAE) which include the following profiles: *tourism manager, travel agent-guide, national tourism guide, receptionist-concierge, guest house administrator and trainer.* The awarded diplomas and certificates are issued by 2 ministries: the Ministry Education and the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. The Centre for Tourism Training awards qualification diplomas, which, due to the Hague Apostille, are recognized in Europe.

The centre targets all those who want to obtain a qualification in the field of tourism and those who already work in this field. It also offers practical placements at training institutions in the country and abroad. In this respect the CTT collaborates with 30 local hotels and travel agencies on the basis of contracts which offer tuition-based practical placement opportunities.

4. METHODOLOGY

The research was conducted as part of the European Lifelong Learning Programme Leonardo da Vinci (RO/2012/PAR/103) whose aim is to establish a common framework for quality assurance for VET in tourism.

The target population was composed by the 57 participants in tourism training (32 in *travel agent* training and 25 in tourism manager training) at CTT, all having finished or pursuing higher education studies. The reduced number of the subjects led us to the adoption of an exhaustive sampling technique. The questionnaires were applied in June 2013, immediately after the final exams.

The number of completed questionnaires was 39 (27 by participants taking travel agent courses and 12 by participants taking tourism manager courses), whereby all respondents were aged between 20 and 48 years, with an age average of 28 years. For the travel agent students, the average age was 25 years and 10 month, the median 24 and the mode 23, with a distribution between 20 years (two persons) and 47 years (one person); 5 subjects did not communicate their age. For the tourism manager students, the age average was 32 years and 3 month, both the median and the mode being 31, with a distribution between 23 years (one person) and 48 years (one person).

The gender distribution was: 26 female students (16 attending travel agent courses) and 10 male students (8 attending tourism manager courses); 3 non-answers in the travel agent sample.

The questionnaire contained 8 issues concerning the satisfaction of the subjects with the experience of the learning process. The considered dimensions were: (1) the contents of the courses; (2) their usefulness; (3) the trainers' performance; (4) the evaluation of the students' performances; (5) the educational support material used by the trainers/instructors; (6) the teacher-student relationship; (7) the students' general satisfaction with the entire learning experience.

The data were gathered with a Lickert scale in five steps: 5 - absolutely satisfied; 4 - very satisfied; 3 - moderately satisfied; 2 - slightly satisfied; 1 - not at all satisfied.

The items for the first dimension - the contents of the courses - were:

- Coverage rate for the *students' learning needs* on the completion of the theoretical course
- Adequacy of time allotment for individual topics
- Completeness of scientific coverage for the objectives of the programme
- Progressive succession of the topics
- Presentation of new knowledge, methods, views, approaches
- Keeping to the original design of the scientific programme content
- Improvements made to the proposals
- Responsiveness of the programme content to the students' expectations
- Contribution of the accompanying services during the implementation of the programme.

5. RESEARCH RESULTS

The results show that about 80% of the students were absolutely satisfied or very satisfied with all the issues, except one. The obtained averages were between 3.82 (for the contribution of the accompanying services during the implementation of the programme) and 4.37 (for the presentation of new knowledge, methods, views and approaches). The subjects were moderately satisfied with the improvements made to the proposals put forward (average 3.32). Comparing the data of the two samples, the results show that the students of the tourism manager training programme are more satisfied with the mentioned issues, given that the resulting values of their average are higher with 0.38 - 1.03 than those of the attendees of the travel agent training programme. This aspect is confirmed by the values of the Pearson coefficient (r).

The *r* values also reveal a low and medium direct association between the age of students and their declared *appreciation* degree. For the entire sample, the highest *r* value was obtained for the relation between variable *age* and *presentation of new knowledge, methods, views and approaches* ($r = 0.40$). It follows that this was the most valued issue by the older persons as compared with the younger ones. This situation is similar for each of the two subpopulations.

To convey more reliability to the entire experience, besides the Lickert scale, a closed question with multiple answer options was introduced:

Do you think this experience will be useful to:

- find a job
- learn new things
- acquire and develop new personal skills
- acquire autonomy and responsibility
- other, specify _____

The great majority of the students (77%) declared that pursuing this training module was very useful (average 4.58), and 46% indicated that the acquired knowledge and skills are very much or more prone to transference to other work situations (sample average 3.84, 'agents' – 3.55; 'managers' – 4.50). The most important aspect for which training proved helpful was the acquisition and development of new personal skills (67%, with no difference between 'agents' and 'managers'). In addition, the respondents declared that the experience has also been useful for the acquisition of new knowledge (58% of the 'tourism managers' and 48% of the 'travel agents') and for finding a new job (42% of the 'managers' and 56% of the 'agents').

The items used for the evaluation of the *trainers' performance* during the teaching-learning process were: (1) the level of academic expertise/competence; (2) the level of technical preparation / expertise in the field; (3) the method(s) used by the trainer; (4) the efficiency in transmitting knowledge; (5) the attention given to the individual needs of training or information.

The data gathered for these five items and for other three issues - the educational material used by the instructor, the teacher-student relationship and evaluation - show a high level of the students' satisfaction (average over 4.00), except for the teachers' attention devoted to the students' information needs (average 3.51) and the forms of evaluation of the students' activity (average 3.68). The most valued aspects were the relationship between trainers and trainees (average 4.46 for the travel agent profile and 4.75 for the manager profile) and the level of the trainers' technical expertise in the field (4.35 for the travel agent profile and 4.67 for the manager profile).

On the one hand, the data lead again to the conclusion that the manager profile students are more satisfied with the quality of their teaching-learning experience (their averages are constantly higher, with values between 0.23 – 0.47). On the other hand, the values of the Pearson coefficient reveal a low and medium association (0.25 – 0.49) between variable *age* and all eight variables (not only for the entire sample but also for both the travel agent profile and the manager profile samples) with no or low association between the attended courses and these variables (0.10 – 0.28). The highest values of the Pearson coefficient are 0.49 for the exposure manner, 0.46 for the forms of evaluation and

0.44 for the efficiency of the knowledge transfer. The declared general level of the participants' satisfaction with the quality of the courses has been: absolutely satisfied for 18%, very satisfied for 38%, moderately satisfied for 28% and slightly satisfied for 13% (Figure 1). The data indicate that the trainees who attended the tourism manager training module were more satisfied with the quality of the courses (average 4.09) than those of the travel agent training profile (average 3.44).

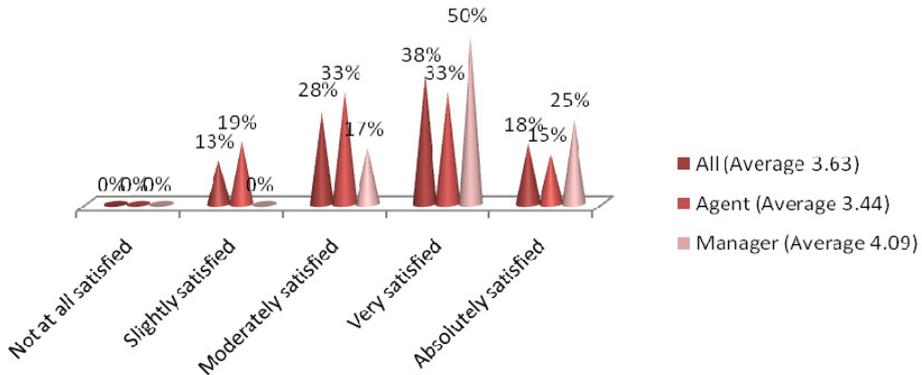


Fig. 1. The level of the general satisfaction of the participants with the entire learning experience

The value of $r = 0.32$ shows a medium association between variable *courses* and variable *quality*. Also, there is a medium to strong association between variables *age* and *quality* for all the participants ($r = 0.43$) and for both samples - travel agent profile ($r = 0.32$) and managers profile ($r = 0.48$).

The presented results prompted us the decision to conduct a *focus group*, whose main issues were the relationship between the students' age and their declared *satisfaction* with the quality of the training module they had attended. The sample of eight participants was designed according to two variables: (1) the *attended module* (both for the travel agent and for the tourism manager profiles) and (2) the *age* of participants. The sample was composed of four students of the travel agent profile aged 22, 23, 34, and 36 years, and four students of the tourism manager profile aged 24, 26, 44 and 47.

It goes without saying that the contents of the 11 travel agent courses and the 14 tourism manager courses were different because their goals were different as a result of the differences in the training needs, i.e. each profile targets the acquisition of different knowledge and competences. However, given that 10 of the subjects are taught separately but by common instructors, the teaching methods, the forms of evaluation and the trainer-trainees relationship were not at all different.

All subjects agreed that they were pleasantly surprised by many aspects of the teaching-learning experience, mainly by those concerning the following issues: (1) the presentation of new knowledge, teaching methods, perspectives and approaches; (2) the way in which the information was presented; (3) the form(s) of evaluation; (4) the efficiency regarding the transmittal of knowledge.

The discussions showed that the ‘managers’ were slightly more satisfied than the ‘agents’. The older subjects (aged 34 and over) were more impressed than their younger colleges especially by the *interactive nature* of both the exposure/presentation of information and the *forms of evaluation*. In addition, they were very pleased by the *teaching support materials*.

The discussions led to the idea that the participants’ previous experiences with various study programmes they had attended were different because the training process has changed over time. The participants who have completed their studies over ten years ago appreciated that their past learning experiences were very theoretical, the evaluation was memory-based, and the teacher-student relationship was more rigid. Referring to the training module attended at CTT, the subjects declared that they were very satisfied with both the teaching-learning methods and the forms of evaluation, which were more interactive and focused on the theory–practice relationship. Furthermore, they underlined that the more modern technical equipment and the updated teaching support materials were very helpful.

The *focus group* allowed us to interpret the data collected through the questionnaire and draw up a picture of the two conjugated and overlapping aspects. The 12 manager-trainees (age average: 32 years and 3 month) were slightly more satisfied with the content of the courses than the 27 agent-trainees (age average: 25 years and 10 month), especially with the presentation of new knowledge, the training methods used and the approaches to tourism. At the same time, for the entire sample and also for both the travel agent profile and the manager profile samples, the older participants were more content with the interactive nature of the teaching-learning methods and the forms of evaluation, with the efficiency of knowledge transmittal, the teaching support materials and the trainer – trainee relationship.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Quality is a very complex notion, its content depending on the perspective from which it is approached. Furthermore, even according to the same perspective, the perception of quality depends on many variables and characteristics of the evaluator as a social agent (an institution, group or individual).

Karl Popper (1998) argues that human rationality consists in one’s adequate action undertaken as a response to a specific situation, as he perceives it. Furthermore, according to the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (2007, 1984), the manifest actions or those not manifest that people undertake, i.e. *positions taken*, according to Bourdieu, are based on their *dispositions*, which are resulting from the accumulation of their previous life experiences, their social and professional status. Therefrom it follows that the socio-demographic variable *age*, which necessarily involves the learners’ prior educational experience, could influence their rational level of satisfaction with the quality of the experienced training. In the educational process, the students play multiple key-roles and their opinion on the teaching-learning activity becomes very important.

The article presents the results of a questionnaire-based inquiry applied to students who attended two different training modules at the Centre for Tourism Training of the Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania: the travel agent training module (11 courses) and the tourism manager training module (14 courses). The investigation sought to evaluate the level of the students' satisfaction with the quality of their learning experience in line with the provision of the second quality indicator recommended by the EQARF: *Investment in training of teachers and trainers*.

The survey revealed that the majority of the participants declared that they were very satisfied with the quality of the training not only as a complete experience but also with specific issues referring to the contents of their training and the teachers' input. The vast majority of the courses (10) were conducted, separately, by common trainers.

At first sight, the data gathered through the questionnaire show that the 12 'managers' (age average: 32 years and 3 month) were constantly more content with their entire learning experience than the 27 'agents' (age average: 25 years and 10 month). However, the values of the Pearson coefficient reveal a medium association between variable *courses* and variable *quality* and a medium to strong association between variables *age* and *quality*, both sample-wide ($r = 0.43$) and within each of the two subgroups – 'agents' ($r = 0.32$) and 'managers' ($r = 0.48$).

We can admit that it is possible that the superposition of the two variables - the learning module and the distribution of the subjects' age – may create an appearance of uncertainty. We decided to use a *focus group* because it is the proper sociological instrument for providing information generated in a peculiar social environment and context characterized by specific relations, which leads to excesses which in sociology is called the "atomist perspective" induced by the questionnaire-based investigation (Rotariu and Iluț, 2006, Iluț, 1997)

The results of the questionnaire and the *focus group* based inquiry show a conjugation of two overlapping aspects: the 'managers' were slightly more satisfied with the content of the courses than the 'agents', especially with the presentation of new knowledge, training methods, perspectives and approaches. At the same time, mainly due to their previous learning experience, the older participants (both sample-wide and within each subgroup) were more content with the teaching-learning methods, the forms of evaluation, the efficiency of the transmittal of knowledge, the teaching support materials and the trainer – trainee relationship.

At the end of the questionnaire, three open questions asking for further comments were introduced. They referred to the weak and strong points of the training programme. Many students pointed out the need for more practical work in travel agencies or other tourism-related institutions. Given the present results, in the future, we intend to initiate an investigation concerning the students' opinion regarding the practical activities, the theory-practice relationship and the employers' expectations.

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