ANALYSIS OF SUPPORT SERVICES IN A ROMANIAN UNIVERSITY: PROSPECTS FOR CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

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Abstract: Support services in universities represent a key factor in the successful implementation of performance and management strategies. These services are supplementary to the main purpose of a university – the educational process and research activity – being the processes that ensure institutional integrity on the one hand, and centralized services dedicated to the academic community, on the other hand. Students represent the central focus of academic activities, as they account for the largest share of the academic community. The paper aims to present a quantitative and qualitative analysis of support services in a university in Timisoara, Romania.
Key words: support services, academia, strategy, university.

1. INTRODUCTION

University management is a complex system that needs to be understood in all its complexity. The performance of the system is directly linked to the institutional decision-making process and strategic management. The importance that students play in the strategic management process is particularly high, especially when it is increasingly discussed in student-centered education.

Now, however, the literature argues that the teaching process is rather focused on the teacher and not on the student, in the sense that it is a channel through which students receive, during the educational process, the necessary notions from the university. The educational process is a channel through which students receive the necessary notions from the university to be properly trained for a specific professional field [1].

In this context, the paper aims to reflect the importance of support services for successful university management, especially from the perspective of strategic goals achievement. On a more specific note, the authors analyzed the status quo of support services at the Politehnica University of Timisoara, Romania.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Although scientific literature is available on research into students' perception of the quality of university services, most of these scientific directorates are conducted in countries such as the UK, Australia, New Zealand or the USA; there are very few such scientific approaches in developing countries [2-5].

Educational and support services analyzed play a central role in the lives of students and they need sometimes unfamiliar resources of motivation and intellectual abilities to achieve their goals [6]. A large group of satisfied students is one of the most sought-after goals that turn higher education institutions into "players" on the market with a serious competitive advantage. Universities, thus, gain a reputation sustained by students, their loyalty, and the guarantee that they will not abandon their studies and even return for another possible cycle of study programs [7, 8].

The most notable advances made by universities in improving the quality and standards of educational services were made by using various forms of student feedback, using in parallel various assessment methods to try to

understand what matters most to young people when it comes to the question of their educational experience [6], and, more importantly, whether the university achieves those ideals and expectations [9]. An important aspect is that in recent years it has become a common practice for universities to have student satisfaction surveys about the performance of teachers, the effectiveness of courses or seminars, and the overall experience on the most important aspects of the students [9]. In this context, the European Union led seven editions of a European-wide study on life and study conditions for students, entitled "EUROSTUDENT" [10]. The study provides insights on student population, socio-economic context, types of educational arrangements, time and financial budget, employment, costs, accommodation, transnational mobility, and plans of students [10].

While the majority of the research is focused on overall students' satisfaction with support services with a prominent interest in accommodation, financial situation, and meal services, a less-studied service is access to academic library services. According to a study conducted by Stvilia and Gibradze [11], undergraduate students value primarily access to the library for study and for exploration of physical and electronic resources. However, the study indicates that services such as access to hot beverages and food and spaces for student meetings provide added value to the overall quality of library services [11]. A considerable challenge for academic libraries is the dynamic character of student needs and expectations, as libraries must adapt to these with limited and slow-changing resources [11]. Because of this drawback, students' satisfaction with library services might not be as high as expected.

Nonetheless, there is no agreement on the most appropriate approach for studying students' satisfaction with support services [12]. Moreover, a significant number of studies are focused on the quality of the educational process, while only a limited share of researchers grants importance to support services [12-14].

Finally, the discussion on support services should be also approached from the perspective of inclusiveness. Access to education can be negatively impacted by factors related to social, economic and cultural disadvantages. Access to educational services can be influenced by factors such as proximity to a university, affordability, quality of education and support services, and general interest in the educational offer [15]. From this point of view, financial support services such as tax-free education (state-budgeted, in some cases) and scholarships increase student retention rates and indicate adherence to inclusiveness principles [15, 16]. Other facilitators for student retention are language training (to eliminate language barriers for foreign students) and university support programs and mentoring activities [16].

A major concern is inclusiveness for students with disabilities. In the past years, research was oriented towards the perception and specific needs of students with disabilities. Despite institutional efforts for the integration of students with various impairments, there is still a significant manifestation of discrimination, poor adaptation of educational and support services to their special needs, and resistance to fair integration of this category of students [17-20]. However, there are programs in various universities aimed at increasing the inclusiveness level, such as customized programs to adapt to the particular needs of students interested in attending the university [21], a proposed index to measure the inclusiveness of students with disabilities benefiting from Erasmus mobility programs [22], and a comprehensive program for assessment of support services and their suitability for the needs of disabled students [23]. Despite all the proposed initiatives, the path toward inclusive universities is still long and requires consistent and intensive progress considering that students with disabilities have a major chance of professional integration as compared to those not attending tertiary education [24].

3. ANALYSIS OF SUPPORT SERVICES AT POLITEHNICA UNIVERSITY OF TIMISOARA

3.1 Research methodology

To reflect the principles presented in the previous chapter, the authors performed an

analysis of the support services at Politehnica University of Timisoara, Romania (UPT). Resources used for data collection were internal reports of university activity for each academic year and the Romanian national database of statistical data for tertiary education [25].

Although the majority of the UPT activity takes place in Timisoara, the university also has a subsidiary in Hunedoara County. Therefore, accommodation statistics reflect capacity and occupancy for both Timisoara and Hunedoara.

In Romania, state-owned institutions, including universities, end the financial year in December, hence they report results in January of the following year. However, some indicators are also reported at the beginning of the academic year, which starts in October. To ensure consistency in data analysis, in the present study all indicators were considered as they were reported in January of the respective year. In cases where October reporting data was used, the authors made a special mention.

3.2 Results

UPT was founded in 1920 and currently operates 10 faculties dedicated to a wide variety of engineering fields [26]. According to Figure 1, in the 2021/2022 academic year UPT witnessed a 3.34% decline in the number of students, counting 12,644 students for all three study cycles (as per the Bologna system): Bachelor's Degree, Master's Degree and Ph.D.

One of the most prominent support services is accommodation. In the 2021/2022 academic year, student dormitories had a capacity ratio of 43.80% (as compared to the total number of students in the academic year), and the occupancy rate was 88.11%.

Despite the apparently low accommodation capacity, the university covered 100% of students' requests for accommodation services. Also, UPT recorded additional accommodation capacity which was used to accommodate students from other universities in Timisoara. A notable aspect is an increasing preference for other accommodation arrangements such as rented studios.

UPT has 14 student dormitories and 2 single room dormitories, with facilities such as Wi-fi Internet, and TV cable access, laundry and

kitchen facilities on each building floor, and lecture halls. Single room dormitories are dedicated to academic personnel, Ph.D. students, university employees, athletes and university guests.

As per Figure 2, there was no significant change in accommodation capacity over a 5-years period (2018–2022). However, the Covid-19 pandemic negatively impacted the occupancy ratio, as the majority of students attended courses through online education. Therefore, a reduced number of students used accommodation facilities in Timisoara, most of them opting to attend courses from home (see Figure 3). Students who used accommodation services during the pandemic restrictions were those employed in Timisoara.
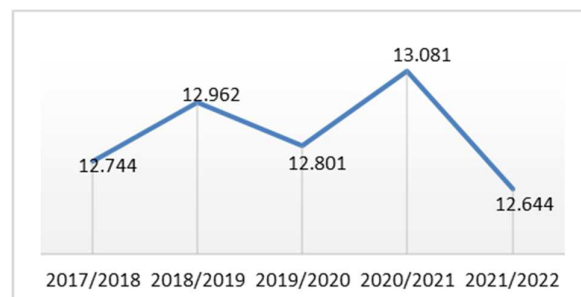

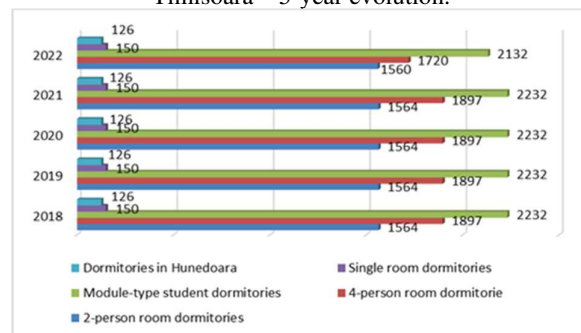**Fig. 1.** Number of students at Politehnica University of Timisoara – 5-year evolution.

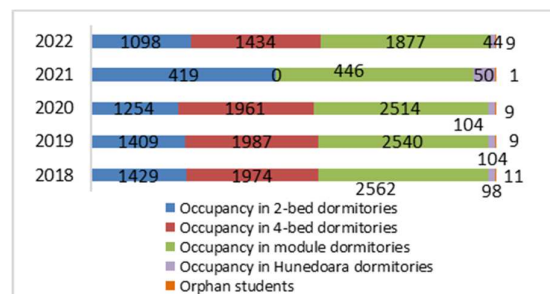**Fig. 2.** Distribution of accommodation capacity, 2018–2022.

Fig. 3. Distribution of student dormitories occupancy, 2018–2022.

Table 1
Analysis of scholarships awarded at UPT, 2018–2022.

| Indicator	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
No. of scholarships/no. of students (%)	27.3	28.6	29.1	28.9	29.7
Bachelor's and Master's degree scholarships/ No. of scholarships (%)	93.0	91.7	94.2	93.1	91.4
Ph.D. scholarships/ No. of scholarships (%)	7.0	8.3	5.8	6.9	8.6
Budgeted scholarships/ Total (%)	98.2	97.6	96.1	93.8	91.0
Own income scholarships/ Total (%)	1.6	2.2	3.8	5.1	4.8
Own income scholarships value (mil. lei)	0.4	0.6	1.0	1.4	1.4
Total scholarships value (mil. lei)	21.8	25.9	26.3	26.6	27.7
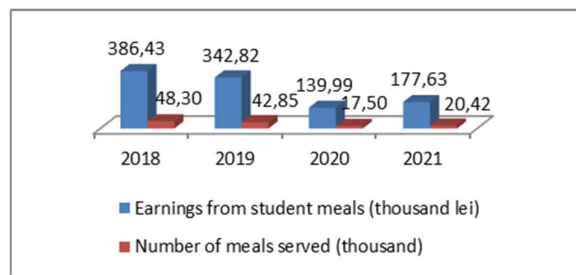
Fig. 4. Distribution of meal services by volume and value, 2018–2021.
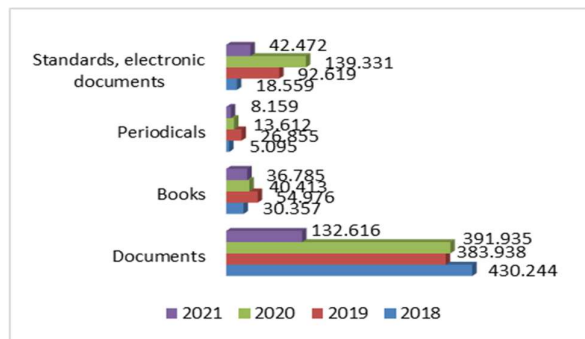

Fig. 5. Distribution of library acquisitions during 2018–2021.

In 2022, accommodation capacity declined as Covid-19 restrictions imposed a reduction in the number of students accommodated in a room. However, starting with April 2022, restrictions related to the Covid-19 pandemic were canceled and students returned to face-to-face courses. This led to a significant increase in dormitories occupancy rate. Another parameter analyzed was scholarships awarded to UPT students. A high share of the scholarships is awarded to state budget sources, but UPT also contributes by awarding scholarships from its own income (although this represents a small share of the total value, as reflected in Table 1).

During 2018–2022, the value of scholarships awarded from UPT's own incomes increased 3.8 times, while state-budgeted scholarships increased only 17.5% in the 2018–2022 period. This reflects that the university allocated an increasingly higher amount of money for the provision of financial support to as many students as possible.

Nevertheless, meal services for students play a major role in their well-being and satisfaction with support services. Figure 4 indicates the value and volume of meals served at the university canteen. The dramatic decline in 2020 and 2021 is driven by the shift to online education, with a similar impact as in the case of accommodation services.

Library services are also an important component of support services at UPT, as these comprise both access to study spaces and access to educational resources. The library has an online catalog and a dedicated electronic system for borrowing and returning books. Figure 5 reflects the distribution of acquisitions made by the library in the 2018–2021 period. The library invested primarily in physical and electronic documents and, in a minor share, in books. However, in 2021, the library counted a total of 702,692 bibliographic units, out of which 451,416 were books (a 6% increase during 2018–2021).

Other support services offered by the university are a dedicated TV channel, the Virtual Campus for access to online education, sports facilities, and medical services. Unfortunately, the absence of an integrated resource planning system led to the impossibility of synthesizing relevant data for these support services. Therefore, the authors recommend the conception and implementation of an ERP system to facilitate optimization of operational management activities and enable proper data management and analysis for optimization and improvement of support services.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Discussion on support services should encompass various perspectives on this matter. While the majority of scientific literature focuses on students' satisfaction with educational services, support services have been proved to have a significant impact on overall satisfaction and successful adaptation to student life. From this point of view, UPT provides diverse services. For example, accommodation capacity is not 100% covered, as the occupancy rate reflects capacity surplus. However, there is limited data available on inclusiveness strategies. An important observation is the difficulty of accessing data on support services at UPT and inconsistencies in data reporting. This reflects both absence of an integrated IT system for all categories of services and the necessity for a comprehensive study on student satisfaction with support services. The optimal approach to identify improvement areas is by inquiring service users (students and academic staff), as they are the ones to provide accurate feedback and even suggest specific improvement initiatives.

In conclusion, this paper is a pilot study that opens the path for further research on the means of studying students' satisfaction with support services, along with the development of strategies for optimization and development of these services.

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Analiza serviciilor suport într-o universitate din România: perspective pentru îmbunătățirea continuă

Serviciile suport din universitate reprezintă un factor-cheie pentru implementarea cu succes a strategiilor de management și performanță. Aceste servicii sunt suplimentare scopului principal al unei universități – procesul educațional și activitatea de cercetare științifică – reprezentând procesele care asigură, pe de o parte, integritate instituțională, și servicii centralizate dedicate comunității academice, pe de altă parte. Studenții reprezintă elementul central al activităților academice, întrucât ei reprezintă cea mai mare parte din comunitatea academică. Lucrarea își propune să prezinte o analiză cantitativă și calitativă a serviciilor suport dintr-o universitate din Timișoara, România.

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