



THE MEDIATING EFFECT OF COMMITMENT ON PERCEIVED QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

We wish to study the improvement of Tunisian higher education via the concept of market orientation (Kohli and Jaworski, 1990). The objective of our research is to frame the concept of market orientation for developing countries, particularly because this trend is the subject of much interest, as reflected in numerous work developed in recent years (Caruana et al., 1998; Van Vught, 1999, Tan 2002 Young Binsardi and Ekwulugo 2003 Webster et al. 2005 Voon Boo Ho 2005 Jane and Izhar 2006 Fravian and Lozano 2006 Hammond et al., 2006 Svenson and Wood, Hadi et al., 2008, Kuster and Aviles-Valenzuela, 2010). The specificity of the Tunisian context will also make it possible to bring elements in line with what has just been cited. Consequently, all the interest of our research is based on the study of the transposition of the "market orientation" which is often considered as belonging to the private sector alone. Moreover, this research is based on the notion of "public higher education". Indeed, this concept seems to guarantee a better quality of higher education in Tunisia and with the needs of the labor market. However, the concept of organizational commitment has often played a role of intermediation between the individual and organizational structures. This is why our research will focus on the mediating role of organizational commitment related to the impact of market orientation on the perceived quality of higher education in Tunisia.

KEYWORDS: Organizational commitment, market orientation, perceived quality, public sector, higher education.

1. INTRODUCTION

Higher education in Tunisia represents an essential tool to reform and that of building a modern state. Higher education is developing at a great rate, and this can be seen by the major projects recently undertaken to "improve the quality of Tunisian higher education". The challenge is embodied by the quality of Tunisian higher education. This paper will provide an inventory and additionally present how managerial levels in Tunisia's higher education can be optimized. This paper will seek to present these ideas by applying analytical tools specific to the management science of privacy.

This paper will further discuss the concept of "market orientation". Studies on this concept demonstrate its critical significance with respect to improving the quality of higher education in Tunisia and its ability to enhance its quality of service. This paradigm, moreover, must be defined as a comprehensive and accurate measurement in the field of higher education (Caruana et al., 1998). The behavioral variable of organizational commitment has often played an intermediary role between the individual and organizational structures. This research will attempt to transpose this conceptual model to the private sector in the specific context of higher education management in Tunisia in order to enhance and improve it.

The discussion of "marketisation" in higher education creates both political and ethical controversies (Alday 1998 level; Franz, 1998; Driscoll and Wicks, 1998; Tjedvoll 2001; Kotzé and du Plessis, 2003; Halbesleben, and Juckey Becker, 2003; Vachelet, 2003, Lowe, 2004; Kiesler, Curren Courses, and Connet, 2005). In what follows, we present a theoretical framework of the various relationships between three variables: market orientation, its perceived quality, and organizational commitment. Then we discuss the relevant conceptual model at hand and discuss research perspectives based on the use of managerial tools.

2. METHODOLOGY

The methodology of the following study is comparative in nature, proceeding along the formal models developed in the literature and which are elaborated upon in the section to follow, namely, Theoretical Framework. It encompasses a review of the literature and the extraction of the relevant data points and theoretical postulates that are especially pertinent to the study of higher education in a developing country such as Tunisia. It is not to be expected, however, that secondary literature will be sufficiently illuminating for a case such as Tunisia's given its developing nature. Therefore, the current paper integrates primary work undertaken by the author in the form of semi-structured interviews with subject-matter experts and other members of the higher education sector in the country under study. The data set, to be sure, is certainly not large. The reason for this, as indicated, reflects the developing nature of higher education in Tunisia and the general dearth in relevant academic scholarship on the questions that pertain to the current study.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

✓ The effect of market orientation on the perceived quality

In order to understand why we chose to study the concept of market orientation (in the sector of Tunisian higher education in management science), we refer to the existing literature in this field and literature from universities abroad. This concept emphasizes studies demonstrating the quality of higher education, which is now a matter of size attracting outstanding interest. In recent years, a decline in the "performance" of our universities with respect to the quality of graduates in the labor market has been observed. However, the Tunisian university must keep its modernization process and must open its internal/external environment and collaborate with stakeholders in order to meet their needs. University quality cannot be improved unless the student is satisfied by the lectures on offer and the equipment offered by the institution. As far as the employer is concerned, he cannot be satisfied if the university does not provide him with qualified graduates. On the other hand, the State, which is part of the university environment, should take advantage of it in lowering unemployment rate and making room for an innovative and qualified workforce, in order to contribute to economic growth. All these elements are part of the consequences of market orientation strategies.

With respect to "market orientation" and "perceived quality", we refer to four fundamental basic research papers, which are: Chang and Chen (1998), Tsai (2003), Castro et al. (2005), and Voon (2006). For Chang and Chen (1998), the importance of market orientation in the development and implementation of a program of total quality management aims to improve offered services. Efforts focused on the market are an important means to improve the quality of service. Managers should avoid judging the effectiveness of any effort focused on the market as the unique company profitability. Market-oriented changes have a direct and immediate effect on the quality of services offered. Therefore, service providers are encouraged to work harder to improve the quality of service as a guarantee to stand for the effectiveness of their efforts. Obviously, market orientation works by ensuring that the company is more responsive to the specific market changes. Authors Chang and Chen (1998) defend the influence of market orientation on the quality of service.

Raju and Lonial (2002) (Tsai, 2003) have recently conducted a study dealing with hospitals' subjects. For them, the concept of market orientation may affect the results in terms of quality, which in turn may affect market development. This can subsequently improve the financial budgets of a hospital. Castro et al. (2005), in their recent approaches suggest that as much as market orientation includes and involves customer's orientation, a company must be regarded as market-oriented only when customers perceive it as such. Thus, the appropriate level of market orientation of a company ought to be perceived by customer opinions (Krepapa et al., 2003; Steinman et al, 2000).

Contingency theory can also help to clarify the relationship between market orientation and its quality of service. According to this theory, if an organization wants to survive in the market and be profitable, it must make congruent results with both the internal and external elements of the company (Galbraith, 1977; Zeithaml et al., 1988; Caruana et al., 1999;

Lings, 2002). In any case, it seems difficult for a service company to be able to offer an adequate level of service quality if it is not market-oriented (Caruana et al., 1999).

According to Voon and Kueh (2004), the voices of customers should not be underestimated because they are the beneficiary of services being sold. Yet there exists little empirical research on the relationship between market orientation and service quality –particularly in higher education. In his study on the effect of market orientation on service quality in higher education in Malaysia, Voon (2006) states that the assessment of market orientation from the customer’s perspective of the company is not only necessary, but also useful (Esteban et al., 2002). Empirical studies of Deshpande et al. (1993) stress the need for customer oriented markets. A client moreover that defines the direction of the market is also considered necessary for the management of service quality (Krepapa et al, 2003, Webb et al, 2000).

Thus, the assessment of market orientation for higher education services is essential. In Voon’s report (2006), he proposes market oriented research that can contribute to the improvement of management with respect to the quality of services in higher education. Voon further examines the consequences concerning quality service in higher education. The author continues in the same line of thought, and states that students are the main participants in quality service in higher education institutions. However, the literature contains very little research about students' opinions (Chapman and Pyvis, 2005). Indeed, the core business of higher education institutions should be providing services for students. According to Rowley (1997), students can be agents in the service process and it is important to examine their roles in the service environment.

Researchers specialized in quality management agree that the evaluation of marketing practices from the customer’s perspective is crucial to developing a market oriented organization (Drucker, 1954, Deshpande et al, 1993, Webb et al. 2000). According to Voon (2006), higher education institutions must focus and ensure that services are high quality. This is because the improved quality of service may be a prerequisite for market orientation services. This could then generate significant and positive effects on student satisfaction. An institution of higher education that is geared towards the client will try to understand the needs of current and future students and manage these needs between different functional units to respond competitively. We suppose that a relationship exists between market orientation and the service quality perceived in the sector of the Tunisian higher education:

H₁: Market orientation in higher education is a means of performance for the improvement of the quality perceived by the students.

✓ **The effect of market orientation on organizational commitment**

We will examine the relationship between market orientation and organizational commitment according to the model presented by Baron and Kenny (1988). In this paper, we will base our research on two studies: Castro et al. (2005) and Voon (2006). The scientific literature on service has sufficiently demonstrated that the perception of the final users of the “quality” service delivered by the company is conditioned by the behavior and attitudes of its staff (Lings, 2004; Hartline and Jones, 1996 Bitner, 1990; Avkiran 1999).

As for the literature in marketing services, it stresses the need for employees to develop both appropriate behaviors and additional discretion, in order to achieve high levels of service. In addition, employees who display certain attitudes defined by citizen organizational behavior are able to promote high levels of service quality, and can subsequently help customers make better decisions. Socialization theory also contributes to explain this relationship (Netemeyer et al., 1997). Thus, market orientation acts as a socialization source (Kelley 1990).

The results of Voon (2006) reveal the importance of coordinating activities inside the company when you want to give value to the customer. In other words, it is necessary to develop internal and external guidelines for starting a true market orientation philosophy. Managers should encourage a supportive organizational climate and ensure the behavior of employees to move towards the market. An appropriate climate must be created to support the development of market orientation through the socialization of employees and the non- existence of divergence between the company and the employee. To achieve customer satisfaction, we must develop a positive attitude vis-à-vis labor.

Schneider and Bowen (1993), Lings (2004), and Voon (2006) consider that the employees or internal consumers play an important role if an organization is willing to continuously meet market and customer needs. Grönroos (1978) argues that employees should be considered as one of the components of market orientation (Shapiro, 1988; Greenly and Foxall, 1997;

Siu and Wilson, 1998; Lings, 2004). As the service is intangible, employees are responsible for turning the service and being its real holders. Organizations that are oriented towards employees tend to accommodate motivated employees, which is an essential element in the provision of a quality service. In this view, it appears that the organizational commitment is greatly influenced by market orientation. In this respect, we propose our second hypothesis.

H₂: The organizational commitment is greatly influenced by market orientation.

✓ **The effect of organizational commitment on the perceived quality.**

Sim and Idrus (2004); Jusoh et al. (2004); and Sahney et al. (2008) consider that the commitment of academic staff in the education sector in relation to the overall objective of organization such as the provision of high quality service, is a worthwhile strategy to keep and sustain customer satisfaction.

In their study of the relationship between organizational commitment and perceived service quality in Malaysian higher education (specifically the state of commitment to quality of service among academic staff in universities in Malaysia), Abdullah Hashim Raemah and Rosli Mahmoud (2011), shed light on the “commitment to quality service” (CQS) in higher education. They state that the CQS has the same definition as the effective commitment, which is defined as an emotional attachment and an identification of an employee to the organization (Meyer and Allen, 1991). The commitment to service quality is defined and understood as conforming to the specifications (Martin, 1986; Witt and Steward, 1996; O’Neil and Palmer, 2004). It also deals with the realization of excellence (Peter and Waterman, 1982), and is concerned with the commitment to meet students’ needs and expectations (Witt and Steward, 1996). It contributes to the construction of organization- client relationship as well (Kandampully, 2002).

In addition, the most important basis of assessing the quality of individual experience of a service is based on the quality of internal service and internal customer (all employees of the organization). Their commitment and willingness to serve the customer exist in the best interest of clients, which is a prerequisite to achieve quality of service (Kandampully, 2002). Clark et al. (2008) define the quality of service commitment as a dedication to employees in order to acquire quality service and the willingness to go beyond what is expected from them.

It has been established that the university lectures remain committed to its vocation and thereby demonstrates its continued commitment to its students despite the workload, administrative tasks, and research (Houston et al., 2006) Furthermore, academic staff are considered with the quality of education, but not also with its primary role which is teacher-researcher role. In Hence, Terpstra, and Honoree’s (2009) study of 1400 colleges and universities in the United States, it was noted that academic staff have equal priority for all three activities, despite their degree of priority depending on the size of the institution’s organization. In his study of higher education, O’Neil (2000) has given importance to the commitment of internal customers for quality service as a means to gain competitive advantage.

Despite evidence showing that the commitment to high quality service is a key way to ensure excellence (Hartline and al., 2000; Babakus and al., 2003; Elmadag et al., 2008; Clark et al., 2008). Studies concerning service marketing in higher education in Malaysia had emerged in the 1960s (Sherif Hassen, 2006). Numerous studies have also sought to assess student perception of the performance of service quality in Malaysian universities (ex. Jusoh et al. 2004; Idrus and Sim, 2004; Firdaus, 2006, Hassan et al., 2008; Ismail and Abiddin, 2009).

A plethora of research on the perception of service quality in education also swarm in other parts of the world (LE Blanc and Nguyen, 1997, Ford and al. 1999. Sallis, 2002; Sahney et al., 2004. Anderson 2007; Yeo, 2008). However, these studies demonstrate various opinions, which were shared in various contexts and frameworks. None of them explored the state of commitment academic staff had with respect to the quality of service. Such a commitment, however, is needed to ensure the sustainability of the university and its students (Ismail and Abiddin, 2009; Firdaus, 2006).

Consumers perceive the quality of service as being deeply influenced by their interaction with staff internal contact which were also driven by their generosity to provide good quality service (Bowen et al., 1989; Peccei and Rosenthal, 1996; Clark et al., 2008). Thus in order to open up career opportunities for students and measure the quality of service, relying solely on student advice is not sufficient. Research does not stop at student level; it must also focus on the state of engagement of academic staff in relation to service quality. This commitment in particular deserves our attention. As stated by Sahney et al. (2004), “the commitment to quality of service by domestic customers is a pre-customer orientation and customer satisfaction external condition”. Therefore, the main objective of this section is to determine the state of

engagement of academic staff in ensuring that they provide a high quality of service in each institution. Our third hypothesis takes shape in the following way:

H₃: A university staff (academic and administrative) involved in its establishment is a prerequisite for improving the quality of education.

✓ **The mediating role of organizational commitment:**

Morgan and Hunt 1994 (in mark A Farrel, 2003), estimates that engagement is central to all relational exchanges between the company and its partners. Other authors such as Gundlach et al. (1995) argue that the concept of commitment can become a focal point in marketing explanations, given the paradigm shift from a system based only on transaction and perspective relationship marketing.

According to the conceptualization of Narver et al. (1998), commitment is based on market orientation that shares the value and commitment of all members of the organization. The results of Jaworski and Kholi (1993) show that without clear signals of top managers on the importance of being sensitive to the needs of customers, the organization is not likely to be market oriented. Farrel (2003) believes that employees’ engagement towards customer orientation is positively related to market orientation.

According to the author, employees must internalize the philosophy of market orientation and keep in mind that the responsibility of every employee can continually contribute skills and knowledge to create greater value to customers (Narver et al., 1998). This argument is based on recent research showing a strong correlation between market orientation and the underlying belief in any customer orientation (Piercy and al. 2002). The results of Morgan and Hunt (1994) argue that the highest level of employee engagement in a customer orientation is consisted with the level of market direction. In addition, they argue that the organizational commitment is a key concept of mediation.

H₄: Organizational commitment of academic staff is a mediator of perceived market orientation, relationship quality variable.

All of these relationships allow us to propose the following theoretical model:

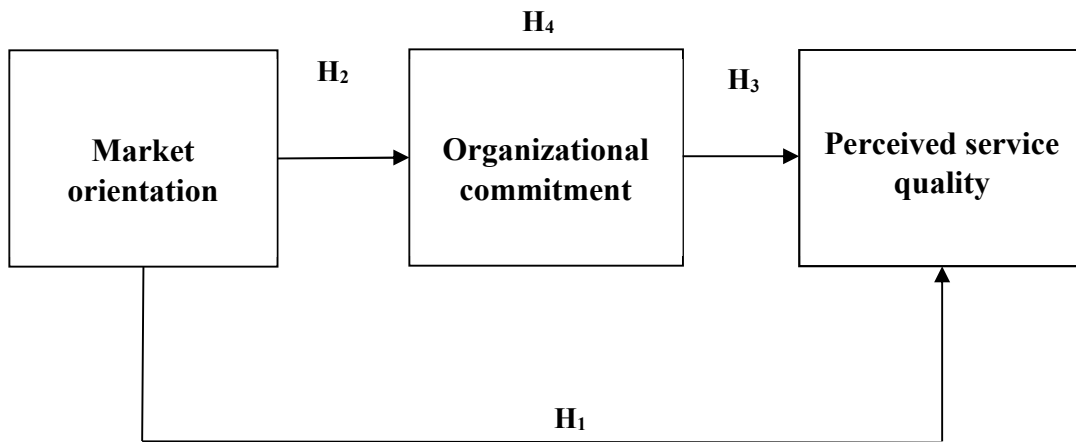


Figure 01: Conceptual Model Search

4. RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES

This research is part of a hypothetic-deductive approach. The synthesis of the scientific literature on the subject has highlighted the theoretical contribution of each variable in our model. In the future, the quantitative phase will aim to build an administration to students from eleven universities offering courses in Tunisian management questionnaire. The higher education sector has been chosen as field research for two reasons: it is a vital sector for the development of knowledge and it is also an essential tool for developing countries, particularly countries like Tunisia. This study will be completed in the future by working on other concepts that play an important role in the proper functioning of market orientation in academic institutions. Thus, internal marketing appears to be a key concept in market orientation and a strategic element for the appropriation of this concept. An important element in discussions concerning the quality of higher education is that of employability. It is in perfect harmony with the issue of quality and may be a prospective subject for our future work.

4.1 Justifying Market Orientation in Tunisian Higher Education

A recurring argument throughout this study has been that Tunisian higher education would benefit significantly from further market orientation. A principal objection in this regard is doubtless going to be: Why should we apply to the prism of market orientation to higher education when we know that it has caused so much harm? It is certainly a trend (market orientation / privatization), and many academics and students complain about the encroachment of, for example, corporations into campuses; they also complain about viewing education and the university as a factory ground for the economy—as a place to prepare workers. According to the standard ethos, the university is a place to advance human knowledge; not a place to create workers for companies and states.

The objection is certainly reasonable but fails to duly grapple with the particular realities of higher education in Tunisia. As a rapidly developing state with a concerning rate of unemployment, couched in an environment of threatening extremism and political uncertainty, it is to be observed that an economy with good and meaningful forms of employment can function as important features of stability. The assumption, therefore, ought to be made explicit: namely, that the marketization—or the market orientation—of higher education can serve to facilitate the kind of economic stability and development that are generally observed to thwart the kinds of political and extremist devolutions that have gripped Middle East and North Africa for the past decade and a half. The assumption, therefore, is unapologetically political. It is undoubtedly the case that many will disagree but, indeed, many from within the region will see the wisdom of fine-tuning a higher education sector that can maximize employment in a developing market. This assumption is so intuitive for scholars familiar with the region that it will not be defended any further in the current work.

5. CONCLUSION

The concept of organizational commitment has grown in recent years with unprecedented interest in a variety of fields. These include human resources management and in our study of marketing services. Its multidisciplinary theoretical enrichment has allowed us to find our application in the analysis of this concept. As a result of market orientation, for example, this concept plays an important role in the behavior of organizations. The research conducted so far on the mediator of organizational commitment in the public sector role, particularly in higher education management in developing countries, is scarce. The researchers of this paper could not determine the definition of organizational commitment or the limitations of this concept. The majority of studies, moreover, emphasized the empirical value of the affective dimensions and normative commitments of organizational commitment.

The aim of this article was to bring together theory and personal experience in the field of higher education on our position in relation to the concept of organizational commitment mediation. We keep our basic proposals and we remain confident for the confirmation phase.

To conclude, this research may be useful in higher education in Tunisia, while recent political upheavals ended a context that has for far too long been taboo up until the Tunisian revolution. Directors, deans, and politicians will find a new lighting mechanisms of their institution, allowing them to enhance the quality of higher education they provide to Tunisian students. We hope that this work will initiate and stimulate further discussion with respect to quality in higher institutions.

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