

# THE STUDENT DECISION MAKING PROCESS

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**Abstract:** *This paper aims to improve the understanding of the process used by students when they are faced with a decision regarding their academic future. In order to achieve this objective a survey was conducted and the student goals and expectations were analysed. The conclusions show that an important number of students are interested in a master programme and their decision to choose a specific program is based on several important factors.*

**Key words:** *educational marketing, student behaviour, student decision making process.*

## 1. Introduction

In Romania, as worldwide, the educational market is facing more and more challenges. The stakeholders involved in this sector are increasingly severe when it comes to their interests and resources.

A recent study points out that there are important gaps in stakeholders' perceptions in relation to the scope and the role of higher education. In Romania, the students', academics' and employees' perceptions are different and the trend is worsening. [12]

Worldwide the disruptions regarding higher education cover a huge amount of subjects. From the education bubble [11] and its impact on different industries [8], to education as competitive advantage [2] or a place where price discrimination is starting to emerge [10], the topics describe a complex and dynamic set of perceptions.

Due to a fall in higher education demand, the recent years have proven to be even more challenging for the educational

sector. After a 56% increase from 2001 to 2008, the higher education sector has faced a 14% decrease in only two years. Other levels of education have also experienced mixed trends. Only the pre-primary education has had positive indicators for the last nine years. On the other hand, primary education has decreased nine years in a row. Regardless of the strong loss in the last two years' enrolments, the higher education sector still has the strongest growth with more than 35%. Figure 1 shows the evolution of the most important institutions: preschool, primary, lower-secondary, upper-secondary, university.

Regarding the situation in Europe, according to Eurostat data, the enrolments in higher education had an increase of 22% from 2000 to 2009. Also the pre-primary education sector and the post-secondary non-tertiary education sector had an increasing number of enrolments during the same period. All the other sectors decreased, the biggest loss being reported by the upper secondary education (-11%).

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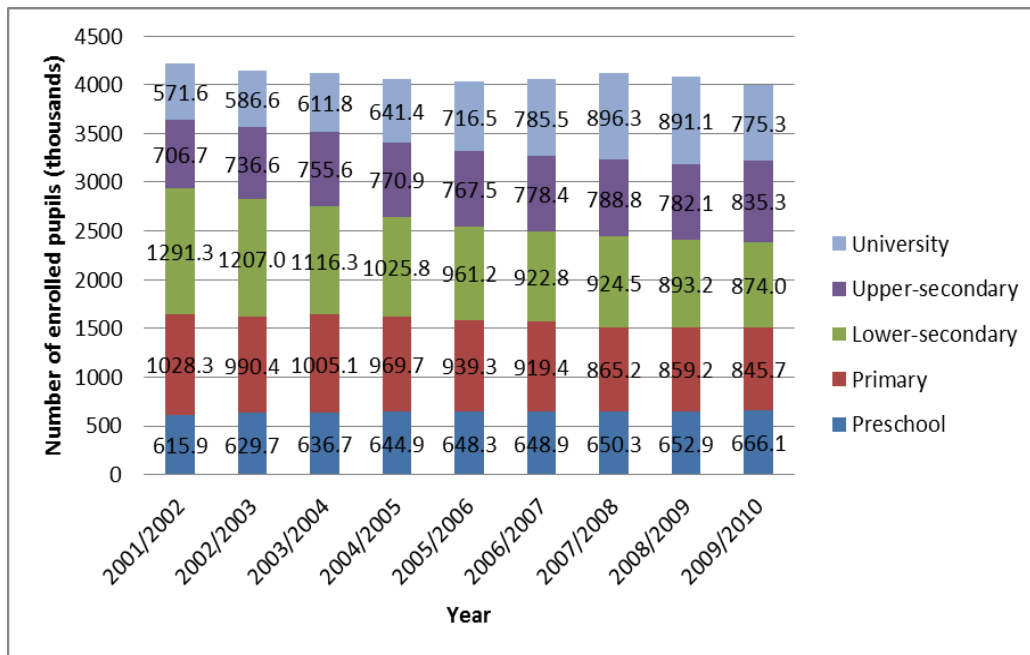


Fig. 1. The structure of enrolled pupils for 2001/2002 - 2009/2010 period

The marketing approach to these issues is wide [5]. Starting with the definition of the students' role [3], [7], the literature review provides insights on student satisfaction [4], [6] and how it can be improved by using customer compatibility management [9], the behavioural drivers approach or by analysing the service satisfaction [1].

Given all these changes in numbers and topics, the understanding of student behaviour can offer ways to improve the institutions reactions to their market demands. An important part of student behaviour focuses on decision making processes.

## 2. Objectives and methodology

This paper focuses only on some of the six objectives of a larger study. That is to identify the number of students who are interested in choosing a master's degree program and the students' attitude towards several characteristics of the master's programme.

In order to achieve this goal, a survey was developed and 386 students were selected to participate in the study. The study is representative for the 13972 students of Transilvania University of Brasov enrolled in 1<sup>st</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> years, full time education. The sample was validated for gender, year of study and tuition. With these characteristics, the results of this study have an error of 4.98%, given a confidence interval of 95%.

## 3. Results

The first step in analysing students' attitude towards a master's degree was designed to measure the ratio of students interested in such a degree. The results show that 91.8% are willing to continue their studies with a master's degree.

The next step was to check if the student characteristics influence student behaviour. Seven characteristics were considered: year of study, parents' studies, grades, tuition, gender, employment status, and residence. Only four of them proved to be

important when it comes to choosing a master's degree.

In order to understand the relation between the master's program characteristics and the students' perceptions, the respondents were asked to

rate the importance of several factors, on a scale from 1 to 5, where 5 describes a very important characteristic and 1 an unimportant characteristic. The results are presented in Table 1.

*Factors rating for choosing a master's degree programme*

Table 1

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Labour market demand	287	4.5889	.61304
Program reputation	285	4.2281	.83955
Tuition fee	287	4.1533	.89140
Professors' reputation	284	4.1092	.82714
Admission requirements	287	4.1045	.80831
Program novelty	284	4.0951	.73392
Faculty reputation	287	4.0732	.94511
Faculty facilities	287	4.0035	.81291
Location	286	3.9021	.97559
Future colleagues' characteristics	287	3.0314	1.08827
Valid N (listwise)	281		

The most important factor in choosing a master's degree is the demand for that particular specialization. This factor has the lowest standard deviation; therefore, the opinions regarding the labour market demand as an important characteristic of the master's degree are similar among the respondents. But there are many other factors considered important or very important: programme reputation, tuition fee, professors' reputation, admission requirements, programme novelty, faculty reputation and faculty facilities.

#### 4. Conclusions

The results of the study are consistent with the literature with respect to the complexity of the student behaviour and student decision making.

Taking into consideration that the selection of the factors included in the questionnaire was based on a qualitative study, it becomes obvious that at least

eight factors and four student characteristics must be taken into account when the student decision making process is considered.

The complexity of these issues is not only a result of the important number of factors and characteristics, but also a consequence of the wide range they cover. The top three factors from Table 1 are heterogeneous. First, the labour market demand is impossible to be controlled through educational institution policies. The second one, programme reputation, is a melange of programme background and student perception. The third one, tuition fee, is the only top-three factor that can be controlled solely by university decision. Therefore, the students' decision making process is not just a complex topic when it comes to understanding its characteristics, but also a difficult issue when it comes to changing the behaviour itself.

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