# Student Satisfacttion as A Quality Management Technicque in Higher Education

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*Abstract*—**The importance of students' feedback within universities is gradually increasing, against the dynamic background of the demand and offer of higher education institutions. The present paper is focused upon the outcomes obtained by the implementation of a student satisfaction survey as a quality management technique in a Romanian university. The survey instrument followed three dimensions (teaching-learning activities, material base, facilities and services) and it was filled in by 997 students. The students' responses show that the most important aspects are the teaching and learning activities, followed by material base, facilities and services. For all the aspects evaluated, the students rate higher the importance they render to each of the dimensions than their satisfaction level with these dimensions.**

**Although the scientific literature often points out the weaknesses of student opinion surveys, such mechanisms prove to be extremely useful for educational institutions to gather feedback from its customers.**

*Keywords-student satisfaction survey, quality assurance, higher education*

The increasingly high standards for higher education, along with the dynamics of the global market compel universities to implement new strategies in order to face the newly-occurred challenges, so as to maintain their own performance at a competitive level. The challenges hint both at the scientific research and teaching quality, as well as other student-centred aspects – study conditions, financial support, low-cost schooling, and student life-style. Being aware of the fact that one's success implies continually improving the capacity to meet the needs and expectancies, both of students and teaching staff (Deming, 2000), the present study presents several strategies implemented in a Romanian higher education institution in order to enhance the quality of the services provided. It focuses on the outcomes and the difficulties met while implementing quality assurance mechanisms based on student satisfaction survey.

As national legal premises, since 1993 Romania has adopted the low regarding the authorization and accreditation of the universities, in 2000 there was established the National Evaluation and Accreditation Commission, while only in 2005 the Government Decision regarding quality in education and the organization and functioning of the Romanian Agency on Quality Assurance in Higher Education was adopted. Presently, the Romanian national quality assurance higher education system is closely following the Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area.

At the individual university level, conforming to the national perspective upon quality as excellence weaker standards checking approach, the Babeş-Bolyai University quality assurance system follows a rather customer-driven fitness for purpose approach (Sallis & Hingley, 1991). Within the higher education system, the student equals the client; therefore student satisfaction with various educational and administrative aspects proves to be symptomatic for the students' intention to remain within the institution (Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, 1986).

Barnett (1994) considers the debate of the different groups of stakeholders on quality as a "power struggle", where each of them tries to make its voice heard. Even if all of the stakeholders have a valid perspective upon quality, none can be the only legitimate voice that should be heard (Harvey, Green, 1993). Since the student represents an important customer of the higher education services, for the quality assurance system to meet the need of accountability of the educational results, developing student satisfaction monitoring procedures represent a condition (Möler, 2006).

The field literature indicates both uses and misuses of student opinion surveys (Bedggood & Pollard, 1999). In spite of the classical limits, the results of student satisfaction assessment reveal the strengths and weaknesses of the university which further allow the design of quality improvement strategies for the services rendered (Ansari, 2002). Furthermore, the increase of competitiveness among universities favours a discriminatory attitude from students with respect to their choice of higher education institution and increased demands from the chosen one; thus, understanding what actual and future potential students expect gains more importance.

The emphasis on student satisfaction is due to its positive impact upon student motivation, their maintenance within the university and fund raising and recruitment actions, on the one hand; on the other hand, this approach allows the institution an ongoing monitoring of its efficiency in meeting students' expectation.

Against this background, the concept of student satisfaction is regarded as a short-term attitude, resulting from the assessment of one's educational experience (Summers, 2005); it occurs when the student's actual outcome/actual perception reaches or exceeds his/her expectancy. Therefore, satisfaction is an average between

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one's expectancy and actual experience. Though satisfaction is tightly connected with the appreciation of benefits obtained through educational services, the letter represents a future-oriented notion. Awareness of student needs and satisfaction improvement strategies are directly proportional with the incidence of students' remaining in the faculty, respectively university. Moreover, research reveals that it is less expensive to maintain an actual client than to recruit a new one, and the probability that a satisfied client requires further service is greater than in the case of a less contented one (Babin, Griffin, 1998; Oliver, 1993). Consequently, the questionnaires regarding client satisfaction being considered an essential instrument in maintaining the clients, through the information it provides.

Efficient organizations have comprehended that student maintenance depends on the way they perceive the value of services provided, on the establishment of an advanced study program and on the message conveyed. Thus, through the survey upon student satisfaction, not only did we elicit a feedback from students, but also a proactive orientation of university actions, based on the perceived value of benefits resulted from BBU services, contributing to students' further actions regarding education.

Surveys of the stakeholders have been implemented at BBU since 2002 (such as Faculty members' satisfaction survey which identified the teaching staff development needs and their level of work satisfaction; Employers' expectations survey – which aimed to analyze the employers' opinions and their requirements towards the BBU graduates; Graduates' labour market integration survey, student ratings of instruction), but the concern toward student satisfaction in relation to further aspects of university life is a relatively new practice.

Student feedback on university experience, resulted from student satisfaction surveys, accomplishes 2 major functions. Firstly, it provides internal information meant to facilitate progress – information gathered from students may be integrated in the quality improvements polices and processes of the institution. Secondly, it provides external information, helpful for the potential students and other stakeholders – the students already attending the university are a veritable information source for other potential students.

Though the chief university concern is oriented towards the academic dimension of the educational experience – with view to the evaluation process and improvement of didactic activity quality – studies point out that the majority of students, though satisfied with the academic programs, may be disappointed in other aspects, such as academic support, career counselling, material conditions (Kotler , Fox, 1995).

The questionnaire focusing on student satisfaction was developed based on the survey instruments models used by international universities (National Research Report - USA, 2006, Student Satisfaction Survey, Oxford Brooks, 2005, YESS Survey, 2002, Student satisfaction at University of Central England, 2002) and based on the specific needs of the university students. It was distributed to a sample of 2100 students. It was a stratified sample, in accordance to faculty, specialization and year of study. The questionnaire includes 47 items, grouped around three major categories: teaching-learning, material base, facilities and services. In addition, the general degree of student contentment is predicted by the respondent's availability to further recommend application within BBU, at the same faculty and section, respectively.

The questionnaire also covers a series of demographic questions, in order to provide a better segmentation of the population inquired, such as: gender, age, studies, faculty, specialty, family background; data regarding family members, monthly net income. Since the one of the elements of the quality assurance is to identify the criteria which influence the quality of the services (Parthasarathy, Rapur & Krishnan, 2005), on a 5 points Likert scale, the questionnaire measures both the students' satisfaction and the importance they render to each of the dimensions assessed. We identify in this way the dimensions which from students' point of view represent criteria for their satisfaction level with the quality of the educational services. A number of 997 questionnaires have been returned. The students participating at the survey were of an average of 20.8 year age.

One of the main difficulties of this survey is related to the students' retention in filling in the evaluation forms. Because of the growing number of survey conducted within university, students became reluctant and distrustful of the outcomes of this kind of surveys.

The analysis of the students' responses shows that the most important satisfaction-leading aspects are the teaching and learning dimensions (average mean 4.33), closely followed by material base and facilities and services (average mean 4.25 and 4.26). The dimensions perceived to be least important refer to the sports base and student organizations. Considering the fact that student organization should play an important role in students' life, the results indicate the need for the existing organizations to become more active.

| The most important aspects refer to: | The least important aspects refer to: |
|---|---|
| 1. The chances to find a job position adequate to one's qualifications after graduation (mean 4.66) | 1. Sports base (sport activities, fields and gyms) (mean 3.47) |
| 2. The development along faculty of practical skills, useful in the chosen work field (mean 4.59) | 2. Efficiency of student organizations and representatives (mean 3.91) |
| 3. Objectivity of exam grades (mean 4.56) | 3. Equity in the difficulty degree of lectures and volume of study requested by different subjects (mean 3.93) |
| 4. The access to information regarding the admittance system (mean 4.54) | 4. Respecting the initial subject planning in the course of the semester (mean 3.94) |
| 5. The quality of living conditions in the student dorms (average 4.53) | 5. Expenses due to purchase of course books/equipment (mean 4.05) |
| 6. Library endowment (mean 4.52). | 6. The timetable (mean 4.09) |
| 7. Field knowledge developed from lecture attendance (mean 4.51) | 7. The utility for your future development of the feedback received in examinations (mean 4.11) |
| 8. Opportunity to get accommodation in the student dorms (mean 4.48) | 8. The opportunity to take part in extra-curricular activities (associations, clubs, certain events) (mean 4.13) |
| 9. The quality of medical service provided (mean 4.47) | |
| 10. Hygiene and sanitary conditions (mean 4.47) | |

The results show that the dimensions related to the material base are the most satisfying for the students (average mean 3.31), followed by the teaching-learning activities (average mean 3.09), while those related to facilities and services are less satisfying (average mean 2.90).

| BBU students show the highest level of satisfaction for: | BBU students show a lowest level of satisfaction for: |
| --- | --- |
| 1. Respecting the initial subject planning in the course of the semester (mean 3.67) <br> 2. Teaching-learning space (classroom dimensions, thermic and acoustic conditions) (mean 3.54) <br> 3.Access to information regarding the admittance system (mean 3.52) <br> 4. Field knowledge obtained from lecture attendance (mean 3.48) <br> 5. Endowment and timetable of the informatics labs (mean 3.47) <br> 7. Library endowment (mean 3.44) | 1. Photo-copy services (timetable, price, quickness) (mean 2.48) <br> 2. Expenses due to purchase of course books/equipment (mean 2.51) <br> 3. Student counselling services, career counselling, support for international mobilities (mean 2.52) <br> 4. Quality of medical service rendered in the university (mean 2.62) <br> 5. Information regarding optional courses available (mean 2.71) <br> 6. The availability of accommodation in student dorms (number of beds, distribution system) (mean 2.73) <br> 7. Student stimulation for efficient and steady learning approach (mean 2.73) |

On the hole, for all the aspects evaluated by the survey, the students rate higher the importance they render to each of the dimensions than their satisfaction level with these dimensions. This means that the satisfaction level is significantly lower than the importance the evaluated dimensions have for the students ($t = 20.4$, $p<0.001$).

The answers to the 4 global questions indicate the highest satisfaction for the quality of the teaching staff (3.99) and the lowest for the services offered to students (3.29). The quality of the teaching staff seems also to be the most important aspect for the students.

The results indicate significant differences among junior students (first and second year of study) and senior students F (year of study; 790) = 3.979; $p<0.01$, the latter ones being less satisfied than the young ones.

We analyzed the association between student perceived satisfaction with certain dimensions and the importance rendered to each of the dimensions. Though students seem very contented with certain aspects, the analysis has been done because those aspects are not relevant and decisive for BBU student satisfaction analysis.

The answer analysis within the interaction Satisfaction X Importance makes them fall under one of the following four categories:

| | Importance | |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Satisfaction** | 1.High satisfaction and low importance | 3.High satisfaction and high importance |
| | 2.Low satisfaction and low importance | 4.Low satisfaction and high importance |

From the above categories, the ones students render high importance are the ones chiefly relevant, decisive for the student satisfaction assessment. Among the ones rated as important, certain dimensions are satisfactory, whereas some are unsatisfactory. The dimensions perceived as satisfactory and important, are relevant especially for monitoring actions and the maintenance of high standards of the quality of education. The dimensions viewed as unsatisfactory, yet rendered importance by students, play a prominent part for their satisfaction level, therefore mark the chief intervention direction in order to increase the quality of products and services provided. These dimensions are the ones the university has to approach in order to increase the students' satisfaction.

A relevant example meant to illustrate the importance of response analysis based on the interaction satisfaction degree – importance degree, constitutes the item making reference to 'following the initial subject planning in the course of the semester'. Though it is the leading item in the satisfaction hierarchy – meaning that students are mostly satisfied with this aspect – it comes last from the importance point of view as it constitutes the less important aspect among the ones included in the teaching-learning dimension.

At the opposite pole lies the item making reference to 'chances of filling a job position adequate to one's qualifications after graduation' which is seen as most important, rated as first according to the importance criterion, yet generally it fails to satisfy students.

Analyzing the weaknesses identified from the students' point of view, the strategies adopted by the university should be related to adapting the curricula to the labour market needs and enhancing the chances to find a suitable job; the chances to get accommodation in the university campus and to the services offered to students (administrative services, career services, and medical services).

The survey indicates comparable results with other university student satisfaction survey, where the teaching dimension seem to be the most important ones (Douglas, Douglas, Barnes, 2006). Although the scientific literature often points out the weaknesses of student opinion surveys, such mechanisms prove to be extremely useful for educational institutions to gather feedback from its customers. If the common errors of such types of surveys are well controlled, the results offer important information for the institutional management. These practices strongly contribute to the development of the quality culture, involving stakeholders in the implementation of quality assurance mechanisms and bring complementary evidence for the other evaluation procedures.

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