

**A STUDY ON THE LEVEL OF SATISFACTION OF STUDENTS
IN THE BUCHAREST UNIVERSITY OF ECONOMIC STUDIES****Diana-Eugenia IONCICĂ¹****Tom BURNS²****Antonia ENACHE³****Marina MILITARU⁴****Sandra SINFIELD⁵**

Abstract

*The current paper deals with studying the level of student satisfaction in the Bucharest University of Economic Studies. As for the **method** used – the paper commences with an outline of the main factors contributing to student satisfaction. Then, we introduce and analyze research which was undertaken by the authors in the academic year 2014-2015 in the Bucharest University of Economic Studies.*

*The main **objective** of the research is to reveal if our academy meets students' needs. We do that by trying to see if factors influencing the satisfaction level find appropriate responses from the teaching staff and, also if, from a student's perspective, the university curriculum contributes to their professional development.*

*The **results** of the research do not focus strictly on language learning in higher education. They are more general, including various aspects of student satisfaction. However, the conclusions of our study do not omit the role played by language learning opportunities in student satisfaction and emphasize its major importance, especially for students in International Business.*

*The **limitations of the research** follow from the method used – they are due to the fact that the conclusions are based solely on students' replies and are not, for the time being, correlated with other student satisfaction surveys or academic performance indicators. Thus, the connection established between student satisfaction and academic performance could be a direction for further research.*

Keywords: student satisfaction; university curriculum; foreign languages; academic performance; professional development; higher education..

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1. Introduction

In academic settings, “satisfaction has been defined as the extent to which students are satisfied with a number of college-related issues such as advising, quality of instruction, course availability, and class size” (Tessema et al, 2012: 36).

The current paper is concerned with studying the level of satisfaction of students in the Bucharest University of Economic Studies. The **method** used is the following – the paper starts by outlining the main factors contributing to student satisfaction, through an attentive perusal of available literature in the field. For instance, Corts et al. (2000) identified five such factors, and Elliott and Healy (2001) identified eleven factors affecting students’ satisfaction with educational experience (as seen in Tessema et al, 2012: 36). Among the factors, we could mention: quality of instruction, major course content, variety of courses, academic advising, overall college experience, class size, grading.

Afterwards, we present and analyze research undertaken by the authors in the academic year 2014-2015 in the Bucharest University of Economic Studies. The research consisted of (1) collecting the extended answers more than 100 first and second year students in the Faculty of International Business and Economics and Faculty of Finance, Insurance, Banking and Stock Exchange have given to the question ‘What do you find satisfying and frustrating about your studies?’ and (2) analyzing the answers, by extracting the key factors surfacing in students’ replies (for instance, ‘the degree to which the subjects studied contribute to improving the prospects of finding a good job in the field’, ‘the existence of a flexible schedule of activities’, ‘the number and range of electives’, ‘the degree of practical knowledge gained from the courses’, ‘the opportunity of studying foreign languages’ and so on).

The **objective** of the research is to discover whether our academy actually meets students’ needs (judging solely by their replies), by weighing the extent to which the factors influencing the satisfaction level find adequate responses from the academy’s teaching staff and, also, the extent to which, from a student’s perspective, the university curriculum (the choice and variety of subjects taught) is designed in such a way as to contribute to their professional development.

The **results** of the research do not focus strictly on language learning in higher education, as they are more general, encompassing multiple aspects of student satisfaction. However, the conclusions of our study include the role played by the opportunity for language learning in student satisfaction, highlighting its major importance, especially for students in International Business, but not only for them.

The limitations of the research ensue from the method used – the conclusions are based only on students' replies and, for the moment, are not correlated with other results of student satisfaction surveys, or with indicators of academic performance. The connection between student satisfaction and academic performance could be a direction for further research.

2. The concept of student satisfaction

Student satisfaction represents a concept that has undergone profound changes in recent years, in light of the on-going social, economic and cultural changes that are taking place worldwide.

To start with, student satisfaction appears to be inherently linked to higher education; hence, one cannot look at it without also taking into account the way in which higher education has changed, not only at the level of the actual activities therein, but also in terms of how it is perceived, of its place in society as a whole.

The first factor that seems to have had a strong impact on academic studies nowadays is the **massification of higher education**. Academic studies have gradually turned from a non-profit activity financed solely by the state to the benefit of its citizens, into a business that faces all the challenges other businesses on the market face. (The reasons for this massification are numerous and complex; however, it appears that the increasing numbers of young people pursuing academic studies have to do primarily with the process of urbanisation, and also with the hourglass economy, a concept which we shall refer to below). If higher education has become a business, it has to comply with the rules of *supply* and *demand*, providing satisfaction to its customers, catering for their needs, and adapting the services they sell to the fickle requirements of the marketplace. What this means, in reality, is that teaching can no longer be viewed as an abstract activity meant to lead to the students' personal and professional growth. Similarly, learning is no longer an end in itself, while education must be analysed in the larger context. External factors have come to affect its structure and development; thus, teaching is seen primarily as a means to an end: attaining personal success, profit and power.

Ideally, universities ought to equip their students with the **skills** they are likely to need in later life, when they find a real job on the real labour market. In this context, "student satisfaction is to be understood as one aspect of the overall concern for quality in higher education". (Webster, 2012: 82) Students see themselves as customers (stakeholders) of the education process; hence, their demands and expectations are increasing and becoming more complex. Primarily, universities are expected to turn them into marketable, vendible entities for which demand will exist once they graduate.

Initially, the concept of *student satisfaction* used to be linked to the concept of *good teaching*. However, although in theory a connection between the two concepts appears inevitable, what happens in fact goes beyond the theoretical background and has to take into account the external context. Thus, among the most obvious factors affecting student satisfaction, the following spring to mind:

2.1 The financial factor

The financial factor refers to the fact that higher education is rarely free nowadays. Only a limited number of students (the very best or those with an already proven academic track record) are eligible for a state-subsidized place in a University. The other students (a large majority) have to pay tuition fees, for which they either get a job or turn to their parents (since education loans are not yet common in Romania). As a consequence, not only do they see themselves as customers, they also act accordingly. Their demands increase, they see the teaching staff as their direct employees and they tend to become harder to please and less forgiving in their assessments.

2.2 The students' personal ambitions

In this respect, universities are expected to live up to the younger generations' ever higher expectations. Strangely enough, few students are able to see the paradox that you cannot have both a massified higher education, and an elitist view of it. If higher education has become available on a large scale, it goes without saying that it is no longer there only for academically outstanding students, but also for people previously perceived as of average intelligence (or perhaps those with an unproven academic track record) as well. Therefore, universities have to cope with the difficult challenge of keeping their standards high, while also keeping their doors open to more and more potential students. This paradox also takes its toll on the academic staff, since, on the one hand, they cannot afford the luxury of being too strict in their approach, while on the other hand they are expected to prevent the University from relentlessly churning out high numbers of graduates.

As far as young people themselves are concerned, they find themselves trapped between family expectations, peer pressure, their own personal ambitions and the stringent desire to make a good living fast in the consumer society. Therefore, they face a difficult decision - whether to start working at an early age, in order to be financially independent, or to go to university. Should they decide to pursue academic education, their expectations will be high and in a marketised university system, they will act accordingly.

2.3 The labour market perspective

Students do not embark on the time-consuming, painstaking project of completing academic studies only for the pleasure of it. As we have said before, they have a precise goal in mind - future employment, which brings our analysis to the controversial issue of the labour market.

Theoretically, we now live in what is called a *global knowledge economy*, namely an economy "which has put a premium on learning throughout the world", in which "ideas and know-how as sources of economic growth and development, along with the application of new technologies, have important implications for how people learn and apply knowledge throughout their lives."⁶ The knowledge economy goes hand in hand with the information society and with machines gradually replacing part of the activities that were formerly performed by humans. "Technology changes how we do business; teachers use this to increase their skills, others to deliver services and the technology is making many administrative and assessment tasks" (Burns et al, 2009: 3).

Also, the present economies worldwide have gradually turned into what is called the *hourglass economy*, that is, economies where "there are growing numbers of people at the high and low ends of the income spectrum, and fewer and fewer in the middle"⁷. What this means, in reality, is that it has become increasingly difficult for companies to survive and, consequently, increasingly difficult for young graduates with no work experience to find a job⁸. At the high level of the income spectrum we find highly qualified people with a wide array of skills, including foreign languages and technological skills; by contrast, at the low end of the income spectrum we find people with almost no skills and / or qualifications at all, struggling to make a living in a fiercely competitive environment, and it is a clear fact that no college graduate will ever aspire to a low-paying, unskilled job. This means that competition at the high end of the market is ferocious, another factor which has bearing on the students' expectations from a college. As we have said before, they would like their academic education to equip them with the skills necessary to survive and make a good living as soon as possible, another incredibly difficult task for universities and their teaching staff as well.

Moreover, not only do we live in an economy that is both hourglass-like and based on knowledge (the two aspects can be concretely translated into a progressively

⁶ <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTLL/Resources/Lifelong-Learning-in-the-Global-Knowledge-Economy/frontmatter.pdf>

⁷ <http://www.inc.com/minda-zetlin/how-to-survive-in-the-hourglass-economy.html>

⁸ also refer to *A Dictionary of Human Resource Management*, Edmund Heery and Mike Noon, OUP, 2008, p. 75, <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199298761.001.0001/acref-9780199298761-e-1645?rkey=HILon6&result=749>

more competitive work environment), but it has also been affected by the economic crisis in recent years. The recession has led to a further reduction of employment opportunities and to an even stronger competition among both companies and individuals; thus, the more difficult it is for a young alumnus to find a job, the more criteria they have to meet, the stronger their demands on the University they go to, especially if they also pay tuition fees.

2.4 Exploring Student Satisfaction

When aiming at the assessment of student satisfaction, there is a list of criteria that one should keep in mind. In the following section of the present paper, we are looking into some of these criteria; our list is by no means exhaustive, nor does it claim to provide complete, universally accepted answers; we are merely attempting to shed some light on how BUES students nowadays see their studies, and especially their foreign language courses and seminars.

The main question students ought to be asked is “*What do you find satisfying and frustrating about your studies?*” It is an all-encompassing question, allowing them freedom to speak about both the positive and the negative aspects of their studies. Some of the particular aspects that should be taken into consideration are the following:

1. *The opportunity of studying foreign languages* is of the utmost importance for our field of activity. In the knowledge-based economy, one cannot survive without good knowledge of at least one foreign language. It is considered a form of illiteracy nowadays not to have at least some knowledge of English, the same way in which you are "illiterate" if you have no computer skills. If we refer to the hourglass economy again, getting a job at the high end of the income spectrum (which is our students' wish) is inconceivable in the absence of these skills.
2. *The degree of practical knowledge gained from the courses* represents another aspect to be taken into account. If anything, universities nowadays are arguably still too theoretical in their approach; in this respect, most of them fail to keep up with the fast pace of the economies. Focusing on theoretical knowledge to the detriment of the practical aspects of a subject appears to be a downside in most Universities as well as in most subjects. However, since what we teach is Business English, it appears that we are, to a certain extent, spared this minus, since our courses and seminars aim at providing students with practical skills, directly related to their future working lives.
3. *The degree to which the subjects studied contribute to improving the prospects of finding a good job in the field* is directly related to point 2 above. As we have repeatedly stated before, one cannot hope to find a good job in the absence of a

wide range of skills which include language and computer skills. In this respect, again, the subject we teach works to our advantage.

All the aspects mentioned above should be taken into account when measuring student satisfaction. "Due to an increasingly competitive and dynamic educational environment, as well as numerous challenges, universities are becoming more aware of the importance of student satisfaction". (Usman, 2010: 2-8; Altbach, 1998; Arambewela and Hall, 2009; Al Khattab and Fraij, 2011: 113) Since universities have become businesses on the lookout for customers, they need to provide a customer-centered service (Kotler et al, 2009), delivering superior value to their target market. In order to do that, universities must pay attention to the customers' agenda, to their needs and wants, and also to the publicity they generate. Thus, happy students will recommend the university to their family, friends and acquaintances; by contrast, unhappy, dissatisfied customers can do infinite damage to a university's reputation by means of word-of-mouth negative advertising. Therefore, we can undoubtedly say that the quality of services is endowed with a key strategic value (Rashid and Jusoff, 2009) and must be recognised as such by universities and their academic staff.

3. The research

As mentioned above, the research consisted of (1) collecting the extended essay answers more than 100 first and second year students in the Faculty of International Business and Economics and Faculty of Finance, Insurance, Banking and Stock Exchange have given to the question 'What do you find satisfying and frustrating about your studies?' and (2) analyzing the answers, by extracting the key factors surfacing in students' replies (for instance, 'the degree to which the objects studied contribute to improving the prospects of finding a good job in the field', 'the existence of a flexible schedule of activities', 'the number and range of electives', 'the degree of practical knowledge gained from the courses', 'the opportunity of studying foreign languages' and so on).

The **objective** of the research is to discover whether our academy actually meets students' needs (judging solely by their replies), by weighing the extent to which the factors influencing the satisfaction level find adequate responses from the academy's teaching staff and, also, the extent to which, from a student's perspective, the university curriculum (the choice and variety of subjects taught) is designed in such a way as to contribute to their professional development.

We would like to start with a 'disclaimer' for qualitative research:

Data collection, analysis and writing are virtually inseparable in qualitative research. Thus, these categories are not intended to be treated as mutually

exclusive; their main purpose is to show you the diversity of research experiences. If, in selecting your topic, you are pushed and pulled by different forces, you are not unique. ...Ultimately, everything depends on the research problem you are seeking to analyze. (Silverman, 2013: 3)

The textual analysis strategies used in working on students' answers were the following:

- **Identifying key words**
- **Identifying recurring topics**
- **Finding positives/negatives and qualifiers**
- **Finding metaphors**
- **Analyzing the frequency of words pertaining to the domain (specialized vocabulary)** (to show students' interest in/commitment to the subject chosen)

We shall present in the following examples for the types of strategies mentioned above. We would like to mention the fact that students' mistakes have not been corrected in the tables and appear as such (the examples are actual samples of students' opinions, in the form they were initially expressed in. Students have given their permission for the samples to be made public in the research.)

Textual analysis I
Positives/Negatives; Qualifiers

Positives	Negatives
<i>effective</i> <i>practical</i> <i>modern</i> <i>not uninfluential</i> <i>offer</i> <i>can apply</i> <i>powerful</i> <i>educational system improvements</i> <i>grow</i>	<i>doesn't seem to work</i> <i>behind</i> <i>hard</i> <i>too much theory</i> <i>isn't actualized</i> <i>lack of real experience</i> <i>really frustrating</i> <i>don't allow sharing</i>
Qualifiers	<i>Really</i>

As presented above, the share occupied by positives and negatives in the replies was fairly equal, pointing to a balanced view of the university and the advantages and disadvantages it offers. We should mention here one point that might have had an influence over the replies – the argumentative structure of the essays called for the presence of both positive aspects and downsides in the students' replies. However, there were no restrictions as to the number of paragraphs/arguments used for either of the sides, so the choice was ultimately up to the students. We therefore

concluded that, though somewhat constrained by the essay form, the existence of an equal number of positive and negative arguments for and against was not accidental, but shows the presence of ‘mixed feelings’ with BUES students concerning the institution.

Textual analysis 2: Key-words

Key-words
<i>development</i>
<i>knowledge</i>
<i>like</i>
<i>lose interest</i>
<i>hate</i>
<i>(more) connected</i>
<i>communication</i>

Most of the key-words we extracted from students’ answers were, however, positive. Words like *development*, *knowledge*, *connected*, *communication* surface the most often in their answers. As optimistic as this may sound at first glance, we should, however, keep in mind the fact that most of these words are aspirational, and their presence in the replies could also point to a description of the system as the students envisage it, not just how it actually is.

Textual analysis 3: Frequency of specialized (business) vocabulary

Business vocabulary
<i>economics</i>
<i>buying</i>
<i>selling</i>
<i>paying taxes</i>
<i>credit</i>
<i>business</i>

As one can notice from the examples above, the business vocabulary used is rather basic. However, this can be explained by the fact that many of the respondents were first year students in the Faculty of International Business and Economics and Faculty of Finance, Insurance, Banking and Stock Exchange, which makes for a rather limited exposure to such terms, at the moment the essays were written (at the end of the first semester of the academic year 2014-2015). However, the presence of such terms shows, up to a certain degree, students’ interest in/commitment to the subject chosen – which will be hopefully expressed by using more complex economic/financial vocabulary in subsequent years. We think that this type of

research could successfully be continued in the future and extended to students in the 3rd year of studies, as well as to students in Master's or PhD programmes.

Textual analysis 4: Recurring topics

connections (in diplomacy)

knowledge acquired by speaking with people from different countries

learn so many things from various domains

the ability of having a global vision

old and unsafe buildings

'aged personnel': teachers cannot adapt teaching methods to the students

outdated syllabus

The topics recurring in students' essays were both positive – referring to the opportunities the university provides (some of which were extremely practical – like *connections (in diplomacy)*, some were of a more abstract nature - *the ability of having a global vision*) and negative, focusing on practical aspects (*old and unsafe buildings*) as well as issues related to syllabus or the quality and performance of teaching staff.

Discussion: The primary data is positive in terms of 1st year student satisfaction in re how the University, Courses, Modules, Languages, Tutors and Peers meet and often go beyond their expectations in terms of developing knowledge, skills and building employment capabilities. The scripts also illuminate concerns about the demands made of them around identity, 'being distracted from principals' and the amount of 'freedom' offered by the university experience coupled with an anxiety about 'being with' tutors and peers. This could also be seen as for some a reluctance to embrace the potential that theory can offer in articulating and forming responses to the threats and insecurities offered by an increasingly neo liberal world.

4. Conclusions

The **objective** of the research was to see if the BUES met students' needs, by seeing the extent to which the factors influencing the satisfaction level find adequate responses from the academy's teaching staff. As students gave balanced replies to the question related to their satisfaction (or frustration) with their studies (which implied also the performance of teaching staff), we concluded that, although the overall training and performance of teachers was seen as satisfactory, aspects related to the conveyance of more practical skills still need improvement, as, unfortunately, the academy is seen as focusing too much on theory and too little on the more useful, practical aspects it could teach.

We also wanted to find out the extent to which, from a student's perspective, the university curriculum was designed in such a way as to contribute to their professional development. Students' replies show the same weakness of the system as the one expressed previously – although most of the subjects taught are seen as useful and interesting, the curriculum is seen as rather outdated and the teaching methods used as failing to keep up with the changing needs of the new, highly technical and much more demanding generation of students.

Overall, from the essays processed (analyzed) BUES students seem to have a balanced view of university life and have a relatively high level of satisfaction with the educational supply of the university.

We are in the 21st century with a globalising world, one filled with uncertainty – yet the offerings of our education systems are named and structured in discourses framed for the most part in the 19th Century ironically when most European countries were embarking on attempts at mass education for the first time. Today we have education systems that are now ostensibly evidence based and accountable yet they occupy troublesome space. On the one hand we have the market place, where education is bought and sold, on the other the old ideals still flourish, advocating universal Higher Education that wants to elicit the creative and intellectual potential of citizens such that they become the economic and cultural drivers of nations. It is within this tension that university lecturers teach, the students travel – and student satisfaction becomes ever more nebulous and more difficult to measure.

As mentioned before, the **results** of the research do not focus strictly on language learning in higher education. They are more general, as they include a multitude of aspects of student satisfaction. However, the conclusions of our study include the role played by the opportunity for language learning in student satisfaction, highlighting its major importance, especially (but not restricted to) students in International Business.

The limitations of the research ensue from the method used – namely, from the fact that the conclusions of the study have as a basis students' replies only and, for the moment, are not correlated with other results of student satisfaction surveys, or with indicators of academic performance. Consequently, the connection between student satisfaction and academic performance could be a direction for further research. Moreover, the research could be extended to students in the 3rd year of studies, as well as to students in Master's or PhD programmes.

A further direction for research – which we intend to undertake in the near future – is to extend this to other universities (for instance, London Metropolitan University), so as to benefit from the comparison with other educational systems.

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