

The Curricula – A Major Key Issue for Student Satisfaction

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Abstract. Student satisfaction, the students' choice of a higher education institution as well as the link between these aspects and the efforts of universities to ensure high retention rates have been an important topic of research in the last ten years. The quality of instruction and its effectiveness are issues prior to student satisfaction; however, their expectations are more wider-ranging. This paper aims to present the results of an analysis regarding the satisfaction levels of students enrolled in bachelor and master degrees at Babeș-Bolyai University from Cluj-Napoca, Romania. The article focuses on the issues that the students find to be the least satisfactory and which, as a result, could be important aspects for their satisfaction. The results show that, besides the academics' teaching performance, the curriculum, the possibility of choosing the study subjects and the practical skills acquired are major key issues.

Keywords: student satisfaction, quality of instruction, teaching effectiveness, practical skills, curriculum

Introduction

The contemporary academic environment forces universities to cope with major challenges, one of which being the selective attitude of students regarding their preference for a particular higher education institution. A study conducted about ten years ago (Schreiner, 2009) shows that while 75% of the variation in the probability of students choosing to continue studying in a certain institution is due to scientifically unidentified factors, 17% is due to their level of satisfaction. Students who are satisfied are more likely to continue their education (2018 National Freshman Motivation to Complete College Report). Moreover, a connection between institutions with higher student satisfaction and higher alumni response rates has been identified.

The standard number 1.7 of *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)*¹ provides that „Institutions should ensure that they collect, analyse and use relevant information for the effective management of their programmes and other activities.”

The quality of instruction and its effectiveness – the knowledge and expertise of teachers, their rectitude regarding the treatment of individual students, timely and useful feedback concerning the students’ progress, the content of the courses, the curricula and its flexibility, the variety of the courses, the overall opportunity of intellectual growing – are prior issues for student satisfaction. In the last ten years though, many other aspects became important as well, such as academic and career advising, financial policies, the campus climate or various administrative support (2017 National Students Satisfaction and Priorities Report).

¹Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area,
https://revisionesg.files.wordpress.com/2015/05/revised_esg_2015_adopted.pdf.

Quality assurance is a very important issue for Babeş-Bolyai University (hereinafter BBU). With a strong and embedded tradition of multiculturalism, BBU is the biggest higher education institution of Romania, having an extensive academic organisation. In its 21 faculties, BBU offers full-time, part-time and distance-education programmes in hard and soft sciences, for over 40.000 students - undergraduates, graduates, PhDs and trainees - in Romanian, Hungarian, German and English. The Centre for University Strategy and Quality Management is developing a twice-yearly survey on students' satisfaction concerning the teaching effectiveness, and every two years an analysis of student satisfaction regarding all the services provided by BBU- teaching and learning processes, material resources and facilities.

This paper aims to present the results of an analysis regarding the satisfaction of BBU students enrolled at bachelor and master levels, especially concerning those issues that they consider as the least satisfactory and which, as a result, could be important key issues for their satisfaction.

Methodology

The survey regarding the satisfaction of BBU students with the services provided by the institution was conducted online between May-June 2015 and 2017, based on a questionnaire and it targeted all students of the institution - enrolled at bachelor, master and doctorate level - including foreign nationals. The access to the questionnaire was allowed based on an individual password, students being invited by email to fill it in. The questionnaire had 42 items, 28 of them being grouped under three dimensions - 1) teaching-learning, 2) material resources and 3) facilities and services. The evaluation for these items was conducted on a 5-step Lickert scale (1 - very dissatisfied, 5 - very satisfied) and the scores were averaged for each item, for each dimension and also a total average was calculated.

The general level of student satisfaction was assessed by their willingness to recommend to others to study at the university, faculty, or study programme in which they were enrolled. The percentages of positive, respectively negative responses were calculated.

At the end of the questionnaire, three open questions were included, addressing the main positive and negative aspects of their experience as a BBU student, as well as suggestions for improvement. For the analysis, I codified these responses and I calculated the proportion of each code in relation to the total of the answers received.

Due to the fact that in 2017 the results were very similar to those in 2015, I chose to present the 2017 outcomes. The total number of filled-in questionnaires was 2699 – 2149 from bachelor students, meaning a response rate of 7.8%, and 550 from master, meaning a 7.5% response rate. This rate allowed the use the quotes sampling method, depending on the following variables: gender differentiation, level, form, and language of study, financing and field of study - hard sciences, respectively soft sciences.

The inquiry has been approached in the Grounded Theory manner (Strauss and Corbin 1998), a step-by-step investigation being developed. The conducted case study on BBU was an instrumental one (Stake, 1994), with exploratory meanings (Yin, 2005).

Results

The first analysis shows an overall mean of 3.5 (3.5 for the teaching-learning process, 3.7 for the material resources and 3.4 for services and facilities). It also revealed that over 80% of students responded affirmatively regarding their willingness to recommend to others to study at BBU (96%), in the faculty or study program for which they opted (88%, respectively 84%), with very small differences between bachelor and master levels (*Figure 1.*)

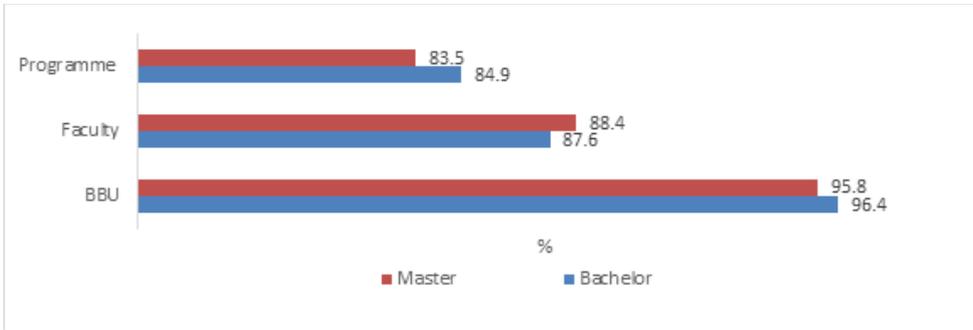


Figure 1. The percentage of affirmative responses regarding the students' willingness to recommend the university, faculty, or study programme

Based on these results, for a more in-depth analysis, I decided to split the subjects in two groups, depending on the responses regarding their willingness to recommend the study programme, which recorded the highest percentage of negative answers. Data shows a difference of 0.8 point between the average calculated from the 84.6% subjects answering YES (3.6) and those 15.4% answering NO (2.8); concerning the teaching-learning process, this difference is 1.0 point (Figure 2).

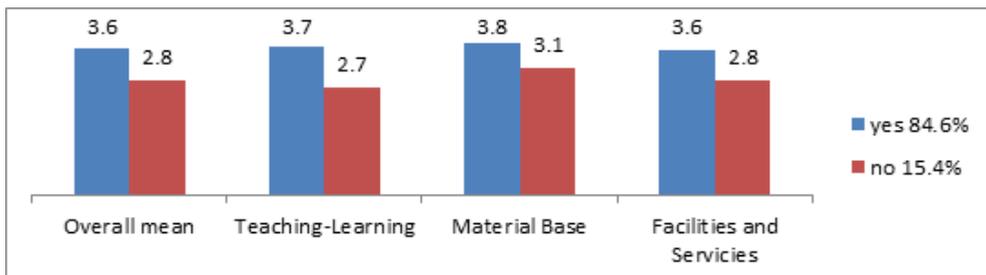


Figure 2. The average scores and percentage of negative / positive answers regarding the students' willingness to recommend the study programme

It is interesting that the subject populations for which high ratio of negative responses were recorded, did not give the lowest scores. For example, 90.5% of part-time and distance students answered YES (the highest ratio of positive responses) and their scores average is the biggest (3.9), while only the 9.5% of part-time and distance students

that answered NO (the smallest percentage of negative answers), recorded the lowest scores average (2.2). Moreover, 16.2% of the full-time students answered NO, their scores average being 2.9 though. Furthermore, 13.7% of the fee payers gave negative answer, their scores average being 2.6, while the 16.0% of no fee payers that gave a negative answer recorded an average of 2.9. The ratio of negative answers given by the students studying in Romanian is 14.3% and by those studying in German is 26.0% (the highest percentage of negative response), both average scores being 2.8 though. This data shows different levels of expectations (Usher, 2009), which is not a topic addressed by this paper. (*Table 1*).

	Overall average	Bachelor	Master	No fee payers	Fee payers	Full-time	Part-time and distance	Romanian	Hungarian	German	English /French	Female	Male	Hard sciences	Soft sciences
% of negative answers	15.4	15.1	16.5	16.0	13.7	16.2	9.5	14.3	17.5	26.0	19.6	14.5	17.3	15.8	15.3
Overall average	2.8	2.8	2.8	2.9	2.6	2.9	2.2	2.8	3.0	2.8	2.7	2.8	2.8	2.8	2.8
% of positive answers	84.6	84.9	83.5	84.0	86.3	83.8	90.5	85.7	82.5	74.0	80.4	85.5	82.7	84.2	84.7
Overall average	3.6	3.6	3.7	3.6	3.7	3.6	3.9	3.7	3.5	3.5	3.6	3.6	3.6	3.5	3.7

Table 1. The percentage of negative / positive answers and the scores average

Both the subject populations which answered *YES* and those answering *NO* regarding their willingness to recommend the study programme, have given the lowest scores for practical acquired skills (Teaching and Learning dimension), equipment for teaching and learning (Material Resources dimension) and carrier advising (Facilities and Services dimension) (*Table 2*).

Also, the possibility of choosing the study subjects, the acquired team-work abilities (Teaching and Learning dimension), the access to accommodation and the conditions in the student halls, and the support offered by the faculty for accessing international exchange programmes (Services and Facilities dimension) were aspects assessed with a low score. The most exigent subject populations - which afforded a negative answer and granted under 2.0 scores - were the students enrolled in part-time and distance education programmes, in master programmes and those studying in English or French.

Willingness to recommend the study programme		Overall average	Bachelor	Master	No fee	Fee	Full-time	Part-time and distance	Romanian	Hungarian	German	English/French	Female	Male	Hard sciences	Soft sciences
Practical skills (Teaching and Learning)	No	2.1	2.2	1.9	2.1	2.1	2.2	1.6	2.1	2.3	2.0	2.1	2.1	2.2	2.4	2.0
	Yes	3.4	3.4	3.4	3.4	3.4	3.4	3.6	3.4	3.5	3.3	3.4	3.4	3.4	3.5	3.4
Equipment for teaching and learning (Material resources)	No	3.0	3.0	3.0	3.0	2.7	3.0	2.8	2.9	3.1	3.7	2.9	3.0	2.9	2.7	3.1
	Yes	3.7	3.6	3.8	3.6	3.8	3.6	4.0	3.7	3.5	3.8	3.7	3.7	3.6	3.4	3.7
Carrier advising (Facilities and services)	No	2.1	2.1	1.9	2.1	2.1	2.1	1.7	2.1	2.2	2.3	1.7	2.0	2.1	2.1	2.1
	Yes	3.2	3.2	3.2	3.1	3.5	3.2	3.7	3.3	3.1	3.2	2.9	3.2	3.2	3.0	3.3

Table 2. The lowest assessed issues

Based on this data, the analysis of the open responses was carried out, according to the following issues

- the academics' teaching performances and their attitude;
- the curriculum and the possibilities of choosing the study subjects;
- practical skills;
- team work abilities;
- material resources for teaching and learning process;
- support for studying outside the country;
- financial and accommodation facilities.

Consequently, I explored the ratio of the satisfactory, respectively unsatisfactory aspects that were mentioned by both the groups answering YES and NO regarding their willingness to recommend the study programme. The investigation shows that the most frequently mentioned unsatisfactory aspect is the curriculum and the possibilities of choosing the study subjects (satisfactory – 45.3%, unsatisfactory – 37.1%) especially at master level, hard sciences and fee payers students which gave negative answer. About half of the subjects that mentioned the curriculum as an unsatisfactory aspect pointed out the lack of enough practical activities. The material resources for teaching and learning process are more frequently mentioned as an unsatisfactory aspect rather than satisfactory, even by the students which gave positive answer - mainly by master students – as well as the practical acquired skills through practical activities as part of the classes as well as through internships. Financial and accommodation facilities represent an aspect which, on the one hand, was often pointed out as satisfactory by both categories of subjects (those answering YES as well as those answering NO), when they referred to scholarships. On the other hand, access to accommodation and the lodging conditions, mainly the speed of the internet, were declared as unsatisfactory, especially by the full-time and master students.

Academics' teaching performances represents a satisfactory issue for 57.7% of subjects and an unsatisfactory one for 34.8% of them, with a significant difference for those answering YES (satisfactory – 32.5%, unsatisfactory – 9.6%) and perfectly equal for those answering NO (satisfactory – 25.2%, unsatisfactory – 25.2%) (Table 3).

The willingness to recommend the study programme	NO		YES	
	Satisfactory %	Unsatisfactory %	Satisfactory %	Unsatisfactory %
Academics' teaching performances	25.2	25.2	32.5	9.6
Academics' attitude	7.0	10.9	11.8	5.0
The curriculum and the possibilities of choosing the study subjects, practical activities	17.7	26.2	27.6	10.9
Practical skills	5.7	13.5	6.4	7.5
Team work abilities	7.0	0.3	6.3	0.3
Material resources for teaching and learning process	4.4	13.0	5.5	18.8
Support for studying outside the country	4.2	2.1	1.4	0.7
Financial and accommodation facilities	6.0	8.1	5.2	7.7

Table 3. The problematic issues

Based on this results, I decided to analyse the results of the last six inquires (three academic years) regarding student satisfaction concerning the teaching effectiveness, especially regarding the academics' teaching performances and their attitude. Without an exhaustive presentation of the results, the investigation revealed high median scores. The averages registered for the full-time students were between 4.0 and 4.9 (on a 5-step Lickert scale, 1 - very dissatisfied and 5 - very satisfied) concerning both

teaching performances - slightly higher for seminars and practical work (bachelor 4.3 – 4.8, master 4.4 – 4.6) than for theoretical courses (bachelor 4.2 – 4.3, master 4.3 – 4.6) - and academics' attitude. The distance and part-time students assessed both the direct teaching activities and the virtual space activities with scores between 3.8 and 4.8. These marks are showing that most of BBU students are satisfied or very satisfied with the academics' teaching performances and their attitude.

Conclusions and Discussion

The quality of instruction and its effectiveness – academics' teaching performance, their attitude toward students, the content of the courses, the curricula and its flexibility, and the variety of study subjects are prior issues for students' satisfaction. In the last ten years though, many other aspects became important as well, like academic and carrier advising, the financial policies, the campus climate or various administrative support (2017 National Students Satisfaction and Priorities Report).

On the one hand, the results of the 2017 analysis on student satisfaction regarding all the services provided by BBU presented above show an average of 3.5 (on a 5-step Lickert scale, 1 - very dissatisfied and 5 - very satisfied) - 3.5 for the teaching-learning process, 3.7 for the material resources and 3.4 for services and facilities -, and 84% of the subjects stated their willingness to recommend to others the study program for which they opted. The lowest percentage of negative responses (9.5%) came from the students in part-time and distance education programmes, they also being the subjects that gave the smallest scores (average of 2.2), while the other 90.5% rated them the highest (average 3.9).

The open responses outcomes revealed that the academics' teaching performances represents a satisfactory issue for 57.7% of all subjects and an unsatisfactory one for 34.8% of them. There were significant difference for those answering YES (satisfactory – 32.5%,

unsatisfactory – 9.6%) and perfectly equal for those answering NO (satisfactory – 25.2%, unsatisfactory – 25.2%) regarding their disposition to recommend the study programme.

On the other hand, the results of the last six inquires (three academic years) concerning both teaching performances and their attitude revealed that the averages scores (on a 5-step Lickert scale, 1 - very dissatisfied and 5 - very satisfied) are between 3.8 and 4.9. These marks are showing that most of the BBU students are satisfied or very satisfied with the academics' teaching performances and their attitude.

The investigation of the open responses shows that the most frequently mentioned unsatisfactory aspect is the curriculum and the possibilities of electing one's study subjects, about half of the respondents mentioning a lack of enough practical activities. Also, the material resources for teaching and learning process are more frequently mentioned as an unsatisfactory aspect rather than satisfactory, even by the students that gave positive answer - mainly by master students – as well as the practical acquired skills.

All these data put together lead to the conclusion that, at this time, besides the academics' teaching performance and their attitude, the curriculum, the possibility of choosing the study subjects and the practical acquired skills - through practical activities as part of the taught classes as well as through internships - are major key issues, even more important for the BBU students than the teachers' professional achievements.

These conclusions determined the university's leadership to lay greater emphasis on practical activities as part of the teaching process. Moreover, in order to update the curriculum and to provide better practical training for students, third-stream strategies were enhanced and the efforts to improve the relationship with the socio-economic environment were increased.

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