



## STUDENT SATISFACTION AS AN INDICATOR OF HIGHER EDUCATION QUALITY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SHUMEN<sup>i</sup>

**Korneliya Todorova**

*“KONSTANTIN PRES LAVSKY” UNIVERSITY OF SHUMEN*

**Abstract:** *The article presents an empirical research in the University of Shumen aiming to assess students' satisfaction with the educational activities as one of the indicators for estimation of education quality at the University. The purpose of this investigation is to examine the attitude of students towards studies at SU and to establish the level of students' satisfaction with the quality of the educational process.*

**Keywords:** *Education quality, satisfaction with the educational activity*

The quality of educational activity is characterized by various components, including concepts, such as: quality of the faculty, quality of educational process organization, quality of methodological and informational supply of learning process, quality of infrastructure and learning environment, as well as quality of subjects of teaching.

Quality of education is a multi-aspect category and criteria for its evaluation can be very different. In this study as a quality indicator it is considered the ability of educational activities to meet the demands and expectations of consumers of educational services.

The study was conducted during the summer semester of the academic year 2015/2016. Objects of the study are newly admitted students and students which have completed the full course of study from all faculties of the University and the College of Dobrich. The sample of respondents included 197 first-year students and 1072 students which have completed the full course of study from all degree programmes.

Tools of the study include two types of standardized inquiry: an inquiry into the opinion of newcomer students and an inquiry into the attitude of students which have completed the full course of study.

The purpose of this investigation is to examine the attitude of students

towards studies at SU and to establish the level of students' satisfaction with the quality of educational process.

This goal presupposes resolving the following main tasks:

- Identification of the preferences, attitudes, and first impressions of newly admitted students from SU (at the input of learning process).
- Ascertaining the position of students which have completed the full course of study at SU (at the output of learning process).

The purpose of the inquiry into the opinion of newcomer students is to investigate the attitude of students towards studies at the University of Shumen. Students' views are being revealed by such indicators as: the used information channels concerning the University, disclosing their motivation to become a student at SU, priorities in choosing a degree programme, their idea about their tuition, are they inclined to exercise their right to study in parallel in a new or second degree programme, the vision they have about future professional realization, as well as their overall assessment of the first impressions from the University.

From the sample of 197 students who were being questioned 70.05% of them were women, and 27.92% - men. The sex structure is connected with the profile of the University and the feminization of the majority of degree programmes and professions. Almost half of them are young people aged up to 25 years - 49.49%. 30.81% are in the age group of 26 to 35 years, 16.67% - in the range of 36 to 45 years. It is noteworthy that about half of newly admitted students are in adulthood, which suggests a more serious attitude towards educational process.

The data show that candidate students have used various information channels on degree programmes offered at SU. The most frequently used source of information pointed out by 40.52% of respondents, is the website of SU. Almost the same relative share- 39.66% - has the group of persons who were informed through their acquaintances. In third place in the rating of answers a "candidate student guide" comes with 8.62%, while in the fourth - "advertising brochures" with 5.60%. Less than 1%, practically negligible, is the share of students who have received information from the mass media and advertising campaigns of the University. It can be concluded that the efforts of the University management on a priority basis should be directed towards optimization of its website.

The motives of students to study at SU are various and appear in different combinations. However, they represent a dominance of instrumental values over intrinsic ones. In the first place on the scale of responses presented with 28.68% the item "obtaining higher education" is positioned. In the second place is "proximity to the place of residence" presented with 23.44%. Intrinsic values - "getting a good education" are ranked third with 22.94%. Although the second and the third place are relative because of the little difference in percentage,

instrumental values are demonstrated again in fourth position in the rating - "financially accessible education" with 16.21%. It could be summarized that newly admitted students are in SU most of all to obtain higher education and considering the comfort of their families – nearness to the place of residence and financially reasonable education. Together, their share is 68.33%. Against this background, the percentage of students that have come to SU to obtain a good education is relatively small - less than ¼ of respondents.

Most of the newly admitted students were accepted to the degree programme that they have pointed out as their first wish – 85.79%, and 9.14% from them were admitted to the degree programme they have specified as their second desire. Only a few students have indicated third and other wish.

Among the motives for choosing a given degree programme intrinsic values dominate. In the first place with a percentage of 40.06% comes the item "it meets my personal interests and abilities", in the second place with a relative share of 32.23% - "it gives the opportunity for realization". Instrumental values are presented in the third and fourth position: "it gives the possibility to make a good income" with 9.64% and "it gives the possibility to easily find a work" with 7.83%.

Respondents are optimistic in regard to finding a job in the area of their degree programme. More than half (57.07%) claim that these opportunities are relatively good and about 1/5 (20.71%) - very good. Only a few of respondents define them as very small or do not expect to find a work in the area of their degree programme.

There is parity in the proportions of students who would and would not exercise their right to study in parallel in a second degree programme. 50.25% of respondents have given a negative answer. 36.55% would receive training in the same faculty, and 10.66% would learn in another faculty. Similar are the results regarding the use of the right to study in parallel in a new degree programme. 55.33% have given a negative answer. 30.96% would study in the same faculty, and 11.68% - in another faculty.

The overall assessment about the first impressions of newly admitted students from SU gravitates around good (pointed out from 44.16%) and very good (specified from 26.90%). It should not be neglected the fact that about 1/5 (20.30%) have given a satisfactory assessment. During the investigation with a subsequent questionnaire in the second course we must look for the reasons for this.

44.78% of respondents exercise their right of facilitated mode of study. The most common reasons for this are because they work (29.85%) and because they are parents of a child under 6 years (16.42%). About 2/3 of the students are familiar with their obligations as regards the use of facilitated mode of study. 38.07% of respondents have answered with categorical "yes", 28.43% - with "yes, in part". There are students who are not acquainted with their duties. They

make up about 1/5 of the sample (20.81%). Perhaps these are students who do not use this right, but this is not an excuse for their ignorance.

The administrative services in the student office are assessed primarily as very good and good. For the student office in corpus 1 the part of students which have given a very good valuation is 32.16%, while for this one in corpus 2 - 22.34%. The percentage of students which have given a good assessment for the student office in corpus 1 is 30.65%, while for this one in corpus 2 - 27.41%. There is a category of students who characterize administrative services as satisfactory. They form 9.05% of the sample for corpus 1 and 10.15% for corpus 2. One can be impressed by the big percentage of answers "I can't decide". For corpus 1 it is 19.60% and for corpus 2 - 24.37%. Probably students have no impressions from both offices and use the services of only one of them.

Establishing the level of students' satisfaction is one of the instruments for measuring the quality of education. Satisfaction is formed when the expectations with which students enter the SU and the degree programme are realized. The extents to which they have been fulfilled and the level to which student needs have been satisfied determine the level of satisfaction. As indicators of students' satisfaction are accepted: motives for satisfaction and arguments for dissatisfaction, overall assessment of teaching, evaluation of academic ethics and atmosphere in the specialty, reasons for attending classes, estimation of the specialized disciplines, assessment of the possibilities to participate in the research work, the attitude to the current control, evaluation of administrative services in the various units of the University and others.

The sample of respondents included 1072 students - bachelors and masters of regular (full-time) and correspondence (part-time) courses. 72.79% of them are women, and 25.63% - men. The largest is the percentage of young people up to 25 years - 32.18%. The second largest group is between 31 and 40 years - 29.01%, followed by another one including the period of 25 - 30 years of age - 25.37%. Students who are in the age group over 40 years form 12.31% of the sample. We can say that the respondents over 31 years make up 41.32%, which is an impressive relative share. It is assumed that in this mature age they will be more responsible to the questionnaire survey and the evaluation of educational process.

At the time of investigation 59.05% of respondents have been working. 1/4 (24.49%) of them have been working in the area of their degree programme, 13.04% - in the professional field. For the most part, however, graduates do not have been working in the sphere of the studied degree programme - 54% of working students. Students have been working primarily in Bulgarian companies. In a Bulgarian public institution have been working 37.34% of the respondents, while in a Bulgarian private one - 29.14%. A relatively small is the proportion of those who have been in a Bulgarian company with a foreign participation - 3.91% and in a foreign one - 3.26%.

A small part of the respondents have completed another else degree programme in SU - 15.86%.

The data show that almost all of the respondents are satisfied with the fact that they have completed a degree programme at SU (97.02%). Categorical in their assessment ("yes, absolutely") are 76.40%. Evasive ("yes, in part") are 20.62%. Dissatisfied are only a few (0.56%) and they are of no interest for the discussion.

The reasons for this satisfaction are different. None of them is dominant. In the formed rating of opinions at the first place according to its relative part with 31.32% backing is "good theoretical training." Second with a small difference comes the "optimal balance between theoretical and practical training" (29.95%). The argument "quality practical training" ranks third with 18.97% of the votes. The fourth position is for the combination of the above mentioned three motives with 16.96%.

The reasons for dissatisfaction are brought mainly to the fact that "trainings and practices are not enough" - 24.92%. The fact that  $\frac{1}{4}$  of the respondents are unsatisfied with the practical training is a sufficient ground for this to become a reason for updating the curricula of the degree programs. Another cause for discontent is the study of unnecessary disciplines - 15.61%. Third with a percentage of 8.76% is the consideration "the presented knowledge lags behind the practice". There are also such a category of students who claim that "the quality of teaching in some disciplines is not satisfactory". Although this group has a small relative share of 6.37% it is a matter for reflection.

Despite the variety of opinions, the majority of students – 85.82% - would continue their higher education in the University of Shumen. Some of them are categorical ("yes") - 65.76%, while others are evasive ("rather yes") - 20.06%. Negatively disposed are 7.56%: "rather not" – 5.04% and "definitely not" – 2.52%. This controlling question strongly confirms the thesis that most of the students which have completed the full course of study are satisfied with their education at SU.

The overall respondents' assessment of the teaching is high. Half of the students stand by the thesis that the presented knowledge is interesting and very useful (49.56%). Other 35.22% support the idea that conditions for active and creative participation in learning process are formed. Negatively oriented students constitute 14.27% of the sample and have different points of view. Some of them (10.16%) think that the teaching at SU provokes passive learning behaviors and getting 'ready' knowledge. Another part affirm that the teaching is boring and uninteresting - 2.43%. Isolated cases are those who point out the consideration that the material presented is incomprehensible (1.68%).

Students' assessment of academic ethics and atmosphere in the degree programme is similar to the previous one. More than half of the students define

it as very good (54.84%). 34.26% adhere to a good estimation and 7.54% - to a satisfactory one.

According to the graduating students, they have had a good school attendance. 71.58% claim they have attended at the classes regularly and 26.47% - partly. Only a few of them confess that they have not been strict at their attendance - 1.03%.

The motives for attendance at the classes are different and appear in various combinations. In the formed rating of answers the argument "because of the personal practical usefulness and importance for the further work" occurs with greatest frequency - 37.82%. Second is the reason "for improving the exam preparation" - 26.61%. The third and the fourth places are taken from "due to the interest to a particular discipline" (17.76%) and "the teacher provides interesting information on the subject" (13.26%) respectively.

The respondents' satisfaction is also due to the fact that the studied disciplines are in accordance with the chosen degree programme. 63.71% are categorical about it ("yes, absolutely") and 34.24% are evasive ("yes, partly"). Only a few of them are negatively disposed (1.12%).

In spite of the positive assessment of the education as a whole, the respondents have ideas for optimization. A part of them offer "to use alternative teaching methods" - 29.20%. Others are of the opinion that it is necessary "to hold more discussions and disputes" - 24.19%. There are students who make a suggestion "to increase students' independent work" - 15.30% or "to write essays, courseworks, papers" - 11.99%. Notwithstanding this variety of ideas, there are students who believe that no changes are needed in the education - 18.19%.

The respondents have a mature attitude towards the current control. More than half of them stand behind the thesis that "it stimulates the systematic school classes preparation" - 53.66%. Over 1/3 support the position that "it contributes to more objective assessment" - 35.68%. Only 8.43% take the view that the control unnecessarily hampers the student.

The positive attitude towards learning at SU is registered in another aspect too. 93.93% of the respondents support the opinion that education prepares them for the future profession. 56.62% believe this is true to a large extent, 37.31% - to some extent. Pessimists who claim that the preparation is to a small extent make up 4.85% of the sample. Negativists who state that education at SU does not prepare them for the future career are isolated cases - 0.47%.

As a result of the dominating satisfaction and positive assessment of education at SU, the majority of the students are optimists as regards their professional realization. 79.31% of them expect to find quick and effective realization as a result of the received education. Categorical in this connection are 40.54% and evasive ("rather yes") - 38.77%. Skeptically disposed are 8.67% with a response "rather not", and the pessimists with an answer "no" - 2.05%.

The respondents appreciate the opportunity to participate in a scientific research. More than ¼ (27.52%) assess it as very good, 37.41% - as good and 14.93% - as satisfactory. Uninformed about such a possibility for a research work constitute 11.75% of the sample. Though small, this percentage shows that the communication between the teaching staff and the students needs to be improved.

As a whole, students are contented with the administrative services in various sections of the University. Evaluations for the service in the Student office are: for "very good" have voted 45.31%; for "good" - 34.91%; for "satisfactory" - 12.07%. Estimates for the service in the Academic department are: for "very good" have voted 49.67%; for "good" - 32.90%; for "satisfactory" - 10.90%. Assessments for the service in the Accounting department are: for "very good" have voted 56.20%; for "good" - 32.33%; for "satisfactory" - 6.90%. Ratings of the service in the respective faculty are: for "very good" have voted 55.60%; for "good" - 32.84%; for "satisfactory" - 7.18%. Appraisals of the service in the department of the relevant degree programme are: for "very good" have voted 60.15%; for "good" - 30.17%; for "satisfactory" - 6.15 percent. Assessments for the library service are: for "very good" have casted their vote 52.05%; for "good" - 34.33%; for "satisfactory" - 8.77%.

The overall satisfaction of the respondents with the education at SU is confirmed by the fact that the vast majority of the students (87.13%) would choose the same degree programme if applying again.

From the analysis carried out it can be concluded that students' expectations have been realized for the most part which determines a good level of students' satisfaction with the learning process. The overall respondents' assessment of teaching is high. So is the students' estimation of academic ethics and atmosphere in the degree programme. Satisfaction of the respondents is also due to the fact that the disciplines which are studied are in accordance with the chosen degree programme.

Respondents have a mature attitude to the current control. More than half of them stand behind the thesis that "it stimulates systematic training". They appreciate the opportunity to participate in a scientific research. As a whole, students are satisfied with the administrative services in various departments of the University.

As a result of the dominating satisfaction and positive evaluation of the education at SU, the majority of students are optimistic about their professional realization.

The conducted research gives grounds to assume that the available quality of learning process at the University of Shumen is on a good level. There are, however, some particular components that could be optimized and improved in order to enhance efficiency and competitiveness of educational activity.

The results can be used to give some recommendations:

- The efforts of the University management should be predominantly directed towards optimizing its site as a main source of information;
- It is necessary to update the curricula in the direction of increasing the share of practical training;
- It is necessary to regulate and control direct and feedback communication between the students and the teachers.

### **Reference:**

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