



## THE EDUCATION IN ECONOMICS AT SHUMEN UNIVERSITY AT THE INTERSECTION BETWEEN EMPLOYERS AND STUDENTS<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT:** *The article is based on the idea that an improvement in the quality of education at Shumen University can be achieved only after surveying the opinions and evaluations of all concerned parties. The present study correlates the standpoints of students and employers regarding the quality of education within the Economics major at Shumen University. This way one of the main European principles for quality of education is observed - its self-evaluation.*

**KEY WORDS:** *the quality of higher education*

During the 2016/2017 academic year an empirical sociological survey was conducted at Shumen University's Faculty of Mathematics and Informatics. 136 people participated. It is part of the University's policy regarding the quality of education which includes the constant monitoring of different target groups having relation to the process of education.

The purpose of the survey is to juxtapose the evaluations of students and employers regarding the quality of education within the Economics major and to identify problematic points which need to be addressed.

The analysis of the survey data provides the university's management body with information regarding:

- the attitudes, expectations and priorities of the applying students regarding their choice of Shumen University;
- the level of satisfaction of university graduates regarding the quality of education in different sections;
- the attitudes, opinions and evaluations of users of staff regarding the professional capacity of Shumen University graduates who work for them.

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The survey uses 3 survey forms - for employers, for newly admitted students and for graduating students. The first form was used to survey 56 people, the second - 37 first-year Bachelor students of Economics, and the third one - 43 students from the same major.

The process of education is the shared responsibility of students, academic body and employers. Each one must fulfill their share of the work. Without the motivation and hard work of the young people, only with the dedication of the academic body and the administrative personnel it is impossible to achieve a competitive quality of the educational service. This is the reason for inter-relating the quality of education with the attitudes, ideas and expectations of the newly admitted students. This is also the purpose of surveying this category of persons, which is done at the end of the winter semester so that there is accumulated sufficient experience regarding the process of education.

The motives for doing the survey at Shumen University are related to instrumental rather than terminal values. They are various and form different combinations. Within the formed rating scale, the first place is held by the reason "acquiring higher education" with 36,67%. In second place is "proximity to the place of living" with 20%. Only in third place is the idea of "acquiring good quality education" with 18,33%. In fourth place is "affordable education" with 15%. The conclusion from the data is that the student chose the University mainly because of the convenience and comfort of their family. They are at this particular university in order to have a degree in higher education at an affordable price and close to their home.

Unlike their motives for choosing a university, the choice of a major among the young people is guided by terminal values. In first place is the motive "it corresponds to my personal interests and abilities" - chosen by 32,14% of the surveyed first-year students. In second place is the option "it provides an opportunity for realization" with 25%, and in third place - "it provides an opportunity for a good income" with 21,43%. Motives such as "influenced by my parents" or "by accident" have a symbolic share of 5,36% and 1,79% respectively.

The data shows that the surveyed students are well motivated to study the selected major, which is a prerequisite for a good quality of education. This is supported by the fact that during the application process 87,10% placed it as their first choice and 9,68% as their second choice. It is clear that the young people were not admitted in this major by chance but rather made a conscious choice.

Most of the surveyed are optimistic regarding finding a job - 70,97%. A portion evaluate these chances as good - 41,94%, another - as very good - 29,03%. Only a few do not expect to find a job which corresponds to their major - 6,45%.

The overall evaluation of the first impressions of the students at Shumen University is not uniform. A little over a half of the surveyed have given a positive evaluation: good (32,26%) and very good (19,35%). Approximately a fifth give the condescending satisfactory evaluation and 6,45% - unsatisfactory. The share of those without an opinion is large - approximately one fifth. This points to an immature attitude towards the process of education. The registered varying opinions can be explained with the fact that the students have great expectations and high demands for the University. Perhaps their adaptation towards the institution is still not completed.

The students gave a better assessment for the administrative service at the Students' Office. More than a half give a good grade (51,61%), 19,35% - very good, and 12,90% - satisfactory. Here there is also a relatively large group of people who do not have an opinion. These account for 16,13% of the surveyed.

The fact that so many young people do not have an opinion is worrying. The lack of opinion has to do not only with the student being disoriented, but also with an inability to judge their own actions, or to invest systematic effort and pursue their goals, which could influence negatively the quality of the process of education.

This is not so at the final surveying of the graduating students. The opinion of these students is important since they have the ability to compare their fresh impressions from their education at Shumen University and the requirements of the actual practice. At the moment of conducting the survey, almost half of the students are employed - 48,84%. Almost one quarter work in the field of their major.

The surveyed are satisfied with the fact that they will have a degree from Shumen University. 83,72% are entirely satisfied, 16,28% - partially satisfied. According to them this satisfaction has to do with three reasons, selected with an equal share of 28,07%: a good theoretical basis; an optimal balance between theory and practice; good theoretical basis, high quality practical preparation and a balance between them. Although there are no surveyed who are not satisfied, the students point out that the practical training programs and apprenticeships are insufficient - 28,07%.

The satisfaction is supported by the fact that if they decide to pursue a higher degree, most of the surveyed would choose to do it at Shumen University - 72,73%. Those who have a negative opinion are 15,91%. There is a further 11,36% who hesitate and cannot decide.

The students evaluate highly the quality of education at the University. The generalized answers about the overall evaluation of the teaching process form up a rating scale where the leading position is given to the option "interesting and very useful knowledge is given" (46,58%). This is followed by "conditions are created for an active and creative participation in the process of education"

(34,25%) and “a passive behaviour and the acquisition of pre-selected knowledge is provoked” (13,70%).

In their large part, the surveyed evaluate the academic ethics and the atmosphere within the major as very good (53,49%) and good (34,88%).

The graduating students evaluate their behaviour during the process of education as responsible. According to them, more than half attended the classes regularly (55,81%) and another 41,86% - partially.

Within the acquired rating of motives for attending classes the most preferred one with 35,48% states “due to personal practical use and importance for the future work”. In second place is the motive stating “in order to prepare myself better for the exams” - 27,96%. In third place is the reason stating “due to an interest in the particular subject” with 16,13%, and in fourth - “the lecturer provides interesting information on the subject” with 15,05%. The data shows that terminal values prevail, which is a precondition for an effective process of education.

The surveyed are of the opinion that the subjects they studied correspond to the major they chose - 95,35%. Only a few have a negative opinion - 4,65%.

In spite of the positive evaluation, if they had the opportunity the students would change different elements of their education. Despite the rich diversity, the scale of propositions is led by the idea selected by one third of the surveyed - “more discussions and disputes should be held”. This is followed by “alternative methods of education should be used”(27,27%). There are also a few who believe no changes are necessary - 13,64%.

The attitude towards current assessment is positive. More than half of the surveyed believe that it “stimulates systematic preparation” - 55,81%. 34,88% believe that it helps “more objective assessment”. The negative opinions are relatively few - 9,30% believe that it “unnecessarily burdens the student”. The aforementioned data points to the fact that the students have a mature attitude towards the current assessment, and thus towards the process of education, which is a prerequisite for a better quality education.

The positive evaluation students give the education at Shumen University is confirmed in another cross-cut. Almost half claim that the education prepares the for their future job “to a certain degree” - 46,51%. Another 39,53% believe it is “to a large degree”.

In this sense the circumstance is logical that most of them expect as a result from the acquired education to find quick and effective realization - 69,77%. The pessimists (to a different extent) are 16,28%. There are also those who are confused and do not have an opinion - 13,95%.

The graduating students evaluate positively their opportunity to participate in academic research work. 27,91% evaluate it as vary good; 27,91% as good and 23,26% as satisfactory. There are also critical attitudes. 9,30% define this opportunity as unsatisfactory and 6,98% are unaware of the existence of such an

opportunity. The latter statement should be challenged since the connection between the academic staff of the department, as well as the special efforts of the lecturer, who is also the course leader, are very active. The students are informed about the opportunity for participating in academic research work as early as their first meeting in their first year and are constantly invited during their classes.

Also positive is the evaluation of the administrative service at the Students' Office. More than half - 51,16% give it a very good grade and 34,88% - a good grade. Here, too, there are negative opinions, but those are only a few - 6,98%.

Not so uniform is the evaluation of the library services. Although 39,53% evaluate it as very good, and 32,56% as good, there are some who are not that satisfied. 16,28% claim it is satisfactory, and 11,63% - unsatisfactory.

Very significant is the students' answer that if they were to apply right now, in their majority they would choose the same major once again - 83,72%. Those who have a negative attitude are 16,28%.

The point of view of the employers is of great importance as it evaluates the final product of the efforts of students and academic staff. Generally speaking, the attitude is positive. 85,71% of the surveyed have an employee who is a graduate of Shumen University. This means that in their majority the surveyed employers have personal experience regarding the work of graduates. It is a positive fact that those of them who do not have employees from the University are willing to hire such. Only 1,79% give a negative answer.

There are three main motives for providing employment. More than a third of the surveyed are willing to hire a graduate from Shumen University because they already have experience with the work of other students (36,21%). In second place with 29,31% is the claim "I have information about the good quality of education of students at Shumen University". In third place with 18,97% is the statement "I needed an employee with a university degree in this major". The thus formed opinion of the employers shows trust in the education at Shumen University.

According to the employers, the main competences necessary for the professional realization of the students are different. From among six suggested competences each makes their own scale of significance. After averaging out the grades, a scale of three grades emerges. With the largest importance for professional realization are selected 2 items with equal percentage: "basic knowledge in the professional field" and "ability to apply knowledge into practice". In second place in terms of importance also with equal percentage are selected two other items: "ability for using information technologies" and "communicativeness and ability for teamwork". Of the smallest importance for employers are two equal competences: "ability for individual work" and "ethics and loyalty in relations".

It is interesting to observe the opinion of the employers regarding whether the Shumen University graduates possess this competence. In their majority the surveyed claim that graduate students possess basic knowledge regarding their professional field - 85,71%. The remaining small part are evasive in their answers and have selected “partially”. There are no registered negative answers.

Similar are the numbers for evaluating the abilities for using information technologies. 83,93% of the employers believe that the students possess such skills.

Similar are the grades for communicativeness, teamwork and individual work. 80,36% of the surveyed employers think that graduate students possess those entirely, and 16,07% - partially. There are no negative evaluations, but there are 3,57% who did not answer.

The grade employers give regarding loyalty and ethics in professional relations is high. 87,5% of them are certain that the students possess such loyalty.

The situation differs partially regarding the evaluation of the graduate students` abilities for applying knowledge into practice. The share of the certain ones, although it prevails, is lower by 10 points - 76,79%. The share of evasive answers such as “partially” is larger - 21,43%. The very fact that more than a fifth have concerns regarding the application of knowledge into practice requires attention.

This claim is supported by the answer to the question “Do you think that the education at the University has provided the students with the necessary preparation for an adequate professional realization?”. In their large part - three quarters - the employers have answered “yes, entirely”. 14,29% have answered “yes, to a small extent”, and the rest cannot decide.

It can be observed that the high grade is not entirely uniform. Perhaps this is the reason why not all employers are willing to provide student apprenticeship positions. 58,93% of the surveyed are willing to accept students from Shumen University for an apprenticeship. About a quarter are hesitant, but the variation leans towards “quite agree”(23,21%). There are those who openly refuse the idea of an apprenticeship at their firm - 8,93%. When the share of the undecided (5,36%) and of those who did not answer (3,57%) is added, quite a large percentage of employers who are unwilling to provide apprenticeships to Shumen University students is formed.

Paradoxically, they are reserved regarding apprenticeship positions, but give recommendations for practices and apprenticeships. In their majority, employers have no recommendations regarding raising the quality of training of graduating students. The only recommendation, given by 33,93%, is more hands-on practice.

The employers are interested in cooperating with Shumen University but mainly with the academic staff. The largest share is formed by those who are

interested in forms of further qualification and lifelong learning - 35,16%. Those are followed by a quarter of the surveyed who are interested in educational programs at the University. Quite a few of the employers are excited about participation in common projects - 19,78% and about high-achieving students - 10,99%. Meanwhile, nobody chose the item "sponsoring university activities". The data shows that the employers are interested in the educational service in terms of consuming the educational product rather than in sharing common work.

The analysis leads to the conclusion that students of Economics at Shumen University have not been accepted in this major accidentally. Yes, they chose the University for practical reasons, but they selected a desired major which corresponds to the interests and abilities.

Towards the end of their education, the students of Economics express satisfaction and to such a degree that if they had to choose again, they would choose the same major.

The graduating students give a high grade to the quality of the process of education, especially regarding the teaching process and the academic atmosphere. They demonstrate a responsible and mature participation in this process: they attend classes, do not protest against but instead applaud current assessment, approve of the subjects they study, appreciate the opportunities for academic research work. However, for about a quarter of them the apprenticeships and practice are insufficient.

In general, towards the end of their education the students claim that it prepared them well for their future profession. And what is the employers' opinion?

The employers believe that the University education has provided the students with the necessary preparation for adequate professional realization. They are almost unanimous that Shumen University students possess the necessary basic knowledge regarding the professional field, using internet technology, communication. The University graduates possess abilities for teamwork, are ethical and loyal in their profession.

The recommendations for optimizing the education have to do with additional hands-on practice. There is also more to be desired in terms of putting knowledge to practice.

Simultaneously, not all employers are willing to provide apprenticeship positions. Less than 60% of the surveyed are willing to provide such for Shumen University students. They are quite unwilling to sponsor University activities.

Here exists a controversy. Employers give recommendations for connecting education with real-life practice, but are not willing to provide this connection themselves. They are interested in life-long learning, participation in joint projects, high-achieving students. They are willing to consume the ready product of the process of education, but unwilling to participate in the process itself.

Until employers realize that they are an important part of this process and begin to fulfill their part of the work, there will not be competitive results. They need to become an invested structure within the process of education. The quality of higher education is not the sole responsibility of the academic staff. It is the result from the “correspondence of the purpose”.

The academic management body needs to put effort in developing the quality of education as a complex activity. This can be achieved only through the active cooperation with the environment of the institution. It cannot happen, however, without reconsidering the goals and results of education on the part of employers.

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