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**THE BUCHAREST UNIVERSITY OF ECONOMIC STUDIES
THROUGH THE FOREIGN STUDENTS' EYES**

Aurelia Stănescu (a)*, Oana Mioara Mușat (b)
*Corresponding author

(a) The Bucharest University of Economic Studies, 6 Piata Romana, 1st District, Bucharest, 010374, Romania
aurelia.stanescu@man.ase.ro

Abstract

The paper presents the findings of the survey carried out to research one of the most important objectives for the Bucharest University of Economic Studies: to increase the international visibility of our university. One of the main tools is represented by the increasing the number of foreign students. The survey was designed by taking into account all the students' problems noticed on a daily basis, having teaching and administrative activities with foreign students. The authors adapted criteria from different studies on quality and student satisfaction and divided the material into four main objectives. The questionnaires were distributed over a two months period in February-March 2018, generating 60 usable responses. Of the 60 respondents, 43% were master students – i.e. 26ss, 57 % percent were undergraduate students – 34ss. The nationalities best represented were Turks (15 per cent), Iraqi (13 per cent), Moldavian (12 percent) and Syrian (8 per cent), followed by Tunisian, Moroccan, Albanian and others. We consider that the results of this survey represent a useful tool that the decision-makers can use in order to improve the quality of international student life and learning at the Bucharest University of Economic Studies.

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Keywords: Foreign student, feedback, internationalization, satisfaction.



1. Introduction

In this era of mass higher-education we have to show our capacity for improving, adapting, changing and adapting to totally new conditions. Students' feedback will help to improve the course formats, materials, and requirements, assessment methods, classroom management and interactions. The university are using student feedback as performance indicators of data, and because most of the times online system is used to evaluate the overall teaching and learning components in terms of teacher's quality assurance and performance, content and infrastructure, the data may not be answering properly to the questions. In order to do that, data need to be "good-quality, actionable data to determine whether policies, programs, and practices are having a desired effect" (Kuh, 2001).

The purpose of the authors of this paper was to discover problems faced by the foreign students during their studies at the Bucharest University of Economic Studies and to see if that influenced the decrease in the number of students during last five years. The starting point was the statistical situation regarding the number of foreign students enrolled in our university between 2013 – 2017 (Figure 01).

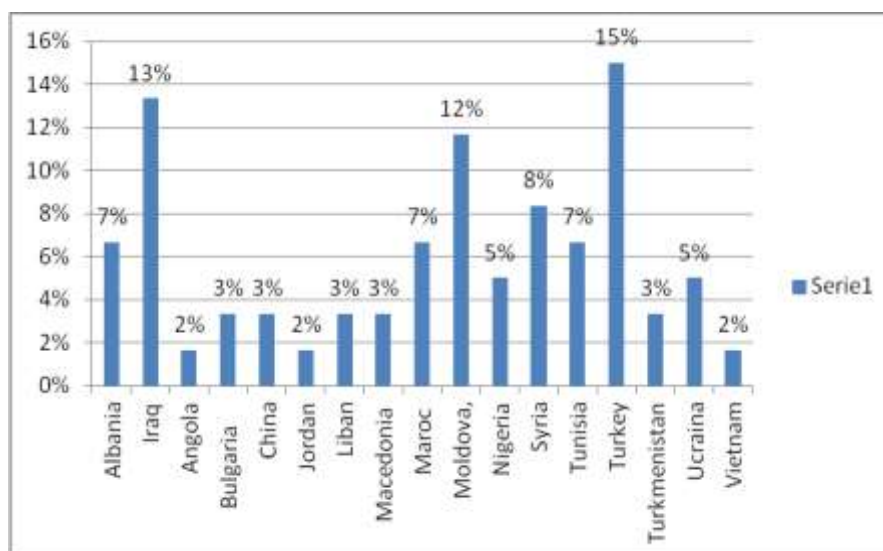


Figure 01. The sample distribution from the point of view of nationalities - in percent

2. Problem Statement

The motivation of this paper is that in the last decade the number of foreign students enrolled in the Bucharest University of Economic Studies gradually dropped. Despite a considerable and sustainable effort from the university's staff and academics, the abroad students do not choose to study at the university mentioned (BUES). The decrease of the number of foreign students was the trigger to carry out this research and the aim of the questionnaire and interview was to capture data in order to detect the real problems foreign students are facing in our university. As a direct result these problems can be dealt with properly and solved or improved. The starting point was the statistical situation regarding the number of foreign students enrolled in our university in the last five years, as we can see in table 1:

Table 01. Numbers of the foreign students in the last five years

Foreign students		
Academic year	Undergraduate	Master program
2013-2014	419	165
2014-2015	370	133
2015-2016	361	124
2016-2017	366	120
2017-2018	395	135

The absence of satisfaction can have baneful significances for both the university and its students. It can cause bad student performance, make students quit or transfer, and give negative reports or even might damage future solicitations.

3. Research Questions

A survey was carried out to research one of the most important objective for the Bucharest University of Economic Studies, i.e. to increase the international visibility of the institution. The administered questionnaire measures student satisfaction and priorities, showing how satisfied students are as well as the issues that are important to them. In order to ensure better understanding in respect to the interest in continuous development, the questionnaire was followed up by informal interviews. The authors circulated via e-mail interviews to some of the survey' respondents. They were asked to provide detailed answers to two questions:

1. If you had to choose again, would you still choose this university? If not please explain why.
2. Will you recommend this university to others? If not please explain why.

4. Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of the authors is to take a deeper look and to identify the problems that foreign students are facing when it comes to decide where they will study. A secondary objective is to propose a set of measures in respect to improve the offered conditions for those who might have the interest in study at the Bucharest University of Economic Studies. Regarding that the aim of this paper was to identify problems and to find solutions to overcome them the authors chose to refer specifically to one of the objectives set in the strategy of internationalization of the Bucharest University of Economic Studies, namely "Generate international visibility for ASE's academic and research programs and thereby heightens the university's appeal for international students and staff."(The Bucharest University of Economic Studies - International Strategy, 2015-2020, March 2015)

5. Research Methods

Concerning the methodology used, the study is generally based on descriptive research methods (a 15 items questionnaire applied to 60 students from different programmes within faculties of The Bucharest University of Economic Studies, and a series of informal interviews with 15 of them in order to analyse in deeper details their insights comprised in the questionnaire). Authors adopted criteria from different studies regarding quality and students' satisfaction and divided the material into four main parts:

Part 1: about facilities and services offered to foreign students

Part 2: resources and learning spaces

Part 3: program studies, curricula, courses

Part 4: the effectiveness and efficiency of teaching-learning process

6. Findings

At the questionnaire responded 60 foreign students from 1st, 2nd and 3rd year of undergraduate and from 1st and 2nd of Master Program. They are from following countries: Bulgaria, Moldova, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Syria, Jordan, Iraq, China, Nigeria, Vietnam, Angola, Morocco, and others.

The administrated questionnaire showed the students' satisfaction level and priorities, as well as other issues that are important from their point of view. The absence of students' satisfaction can have baneful significances for both university and students (Popli, 2005). It can cause bad performance (Alves Raposo, 2009) or can determine students to quit or ask for transfer (Chadwick & Ward, 1987), and give negative reports or even might damage future solicitations. Based on their answers to the questionnaire the authors tailored the proposals to improve the quality of the services offered and as the direct consequence the raise of the number of foreign students.

Table 02. The results of the questionnaire in percentage

	Questions related to	Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neutral	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied
1	Accommodation services	12%	30%	33%	17%	8%
2	Canteen services	17%	37%	30%	17%	0%
3	Sports and recreation	0%	0%	75%	25%	0%
4	Secretary (operating hours, professionalism)	5%	13%	33%	33%	15%
5	Trouble shooting (time, bureaucracy, behaviour and staff availability)	3%	15%	37%	30%	15%
6	The university site (accessibility, availability, updating)	0%	17%	33%	38%	12%
7	Laboratories and research facilities (equipment, software)	32%	47%	13%	8%	0%
8	Classrooms, lecture (features, suitability, functionality)	30%	42%	15%	13%	0%
9	Providing modern resources (projectors, simulators etc.)	25%	43%	27%	5%	0%
10	Library program and facilities	42%	47%	12%	0%	0%
11	Library's collection (including databases, virtual library)	25%	47%	15%	13%	0%
12	Courtesy of library staff	17%	38%	22%	13%	10%
13	The relevance and usefulness of the courses for the chosen specialization					
	13.1. MASTER	3%	17%	12%	12%	0%
	13.2. BACHELOR	10%	20%	23%	3%	0%
14	The ability of teachers to communicate	8%	27%	40%	15%	10%
15	The teachers' attitude towards colleagues and to you	18%	17%	47%	8%	10%
16	The existence of auxiliary materials	0%	33%	47%	10%	10%
17	Professor adapt the teaching to students' needs and learning opportunities	0%	47%	40%	10%	3%
18	Feedback given by the teacher	8%	27%	48%	12%	5%
19	Objectivity and fairness of assessment and grading	8%	30%	45%	13%	3%

It is important to highlight that the students from the master program give more importance to the relevance and usefulness of the courses because they want to improve what they have already studied during the undergraduate program.

The data concerning the relevance and usefulness of the courses for the chosen specialization indicate that, while students from the undergraduate program are satisfied and very satisfied with the courses offered at a rate of 10% and 20%, the percentage of satisfaction from the master program is much lower: 3% and 17%. A large percentage of students are dissatisfied with the ability of the teacher to communicate – 15% in comparison with the other five categories. If we are looking only at the category – The ability of teacher to communicate the number of students who are satisfied is higher – 27% than the number of students who are dissatisfied.

Regarding the open questions the respondents made diverse suggestions and recommendations for improvement and even a small number of negative remarks.

Only 12 of the 60 students would not recommend enrolling anymore in the Bucharest University of Economic Studies because they are dissatisfied with the conditions offered, other 10 would not come to Romania and would not recommend to others but reasons are unrelated to the university.

The results of the survey do not generally indicate serious issues regarding the satisfaction of foreigners who come to study at our university, and also indicate that the main problems that need improvement are not related only to teaching or learning. The main items where we had the largest percentages of negative scores were related to:

- ❖ Sports and recreation – 25% dissatisfied while 0% are satisfied, 75% were neutral
- ❖ Secretary (operating hours, professionalism, while waiting) – 33% dissatisfied, 33% neutral and only 13% are satisfied)
- ❖ Troubleshooting (time, bureaucracy, behaviour and staff availability) – 30 % dissatisfied, 37% neutral and 15% satisfied)
- ❖ The quality of the university site (accessibility, availability of information, updating information, presentation) - none of the respondents were very satisfied, 17% said that they are satisfied and 38% dissatisfied).

The results of the survey can be seen as a useful and powerful tool that can be used to improve the quality of the international students' life and learning at the Bucharest University of Economic Studies.

7. Conclusion

To establish a good long-term relationship with its students the university need to satisfy them. As we can see from the results students are generally satisfied with the academic process within the Bucharest University of economic Studies. The highest percentage was accorded to the “Resources and learning spaces section”, on the second place was “The effectiveness and efficiency of teaching – learning”. Program studies, curricula, courses offer was the third in terms of satisfaction. In this section only one subdivision regarding “the relevance and usefulness of the courses for the chosen specialization” was differently evaluated by the students attending the bachelor program and those who were enrolled in the master program. The latter seemed that they were not very satisfied with the courses. A possible solution in this case is to reconsider the master program curricula, especially for

those who have the same major as in the undergraduate program. Often here the curriculum is similar with the undergraduate program. Master students complain that courses do not offer more information than already attained during the undergraduate programs. According to the Bucharest University of Economic Studies Evaluation Report from December 2016, “the need for practical experience and development of personal skills, including also entrepreneurial skills, should be considered as a necessary addition to the theoretical courses, which prevail in the study programs” it was one of the issues raised in all meetings with student focus groups.

On the last place in terms of the percentages obtained is section “Facilities and services offered to foreign students: accommodation services, canteen services, sport and recreation, secretary, troubleshooting.

The results of the study provide a comprehensive picture of relevant aspects concerning the foreign students enrolled in university.

Based on those presented previously, the authors put forward some proposals of improvement of our system in order to have satisfied foreign students by what we offer.

The vision formulated in the Bucharest University of Economic Studies general strategic plan is to achieve recognition as a leader in the higher education system. And to fulfil this all the academic and non-academic staff should participate and should be open to changes, and what is most important is to allocate necessary funds for the implementation of this process.

Internationalization should be the concern of every member of the university: professor, study program director, head of department, scientific secretary, dean or vice-dean, each research centre director. It is a must to improve the internal collaboration between university structures. It is not enough for the Erasmus Office or the Department for International Relations to work properly if the other actors involved do not show interest and respect for foreign students.

Many foreign students view themselves as a customers challenging professors and administrative staff within universities to provide them better service. Globally, the literature suggests that the student voice in feedback has increasing status and value as a source of rich insight into teaching effectiveness and the learning experience (Blair & Noel, 2014). In a globalized environment dominated by a burgeoning “rating industry” the universities are required to act in such a way to help their students to fulfil their needs and expectations. In such a highly competitive environment in which competition between universities is fierce, Romanian universities need to raise their attractiveness in order to balance the decreasing number of their students (included foreign students). When the number of students decreases, universities and professors must have open minds and develop more flexibility in approaching it. To conclude, in our opinion, attractiveness of the universities can be reached by ensuring and improving the quality of education and research, and by developing a good international network of cooperation with various partners. Raising attractiveness requires major transformations such as: more flexibility and openness, quality assurance. There is also a need for increasing the inter-university cooperation, in order to improve the educational offer and to attract more foreign students.

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