EXPLORING THE CHALLENGES RELATED TO AN INTERNATIONAL MASTER'S PROGRAMME

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ABSTRACT

The competition between education providers is getting harder. Information about different study programmes is easily available for the students via the Internet. It is getting more common to go and study abroad. This means that education providers should take a close look at their programmes to make sure that the quality of the education is good and that they produce holistic and competitive students for the labor market. This paper introduces a case study about the challenges related to an international master's programme in order to stir a debate. The purpose is more to raise questions than to provide answers. The dimensions of the master's programme are analyzed by using a framework for service quality (tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy). This framework will be further complemented by a few other dimensions. Student feedback and discussions with the students are used as material as well as observations in classroom situations. The objective is to find strengths and weaknesses of the programme so that the programme could be further developed. The paper shows that there are various challenges related to providing international masters' education in current flat world.

Keywords: *masters' education, quality of education, service quality*

INTRODUCTION

The competition in educational world is getting harder in the same manner as in other (service) businesses. In Finland the higher education (universities) has been for a long time funded by the state and the education itself has been free of charge for the students. Now the status of the universities has slightly changed and the external funding is more crucial than ever. Another drastic change is opening the doors of the universities to students from all over the world in the form of various international masters' programmes. Currently majority of the programmes are still free of charge for the students but there is a growing discussion about the fees. At the same time Finnish students have nearly unlimited possibilities to study abroad. The companies that are the future employers of the current students, both in Finland and abroad, are dealing with highly international environment and value employees that are ready to meet to global challenges. This all forces the universities to turn focus on quality of education.

There are various frameworks and tools for assessing the quality of education, e.g. ServQual (introduced in detail in the following chapter) (see Arabi,

Yarmohammadian and Esteki (2011) for an example) and AQIP (introduced in the following chapter) (see Yarmohammadian, Mozaffary and Esfahani (2011) for an example). It is fairly easy to take a ready-made questionnaire and ask the students to fill it up, then do some statistical operations, and say how high the quality of education is. But if we wish to improve the quality, we need to understand what is meant by the students when they for example say that "Helping students learn" – dimension is not functioning well. Does it mean that the lecturers do not possess the latest knowledge on the field? Or does it mean that they do not get enough support for their thesis work? Or does it mean that it is difficult to get the course literature? There are various reasons why students could feel that they do not get the needed support for learning.

This paper uses an International Masters' Programme in Industrial Management as an example in order to explore the quality of the Programme as well as the challenges in measuring the quality. The purpose is not to offer a thorough analysis of the Programme but to raise into discussion some issues that the Programme Manager has encountered during the past couple of years. The paper is organised as follows. Quality of services and education as well as assessing this quality is introduced in the following chapter. After that the empirical case is introduced and various aspects of the quality of the Programme are discussed. Finally, some conclusions are made.

Quality of services vs. quality of education

Compared to measuring quality of tangible goods it is more complicated to measure quality of services. Services are intangible so the customer cannot get any touchable or visible clues of the quality of a service. Often there is also a great level of heterogeneity related to services. Each customer has a role in defining the service. In some businesses like hamburger restaurants this role is smaller and in some others like in health care services the role is larger. Therefore each service is different based on the customer's needs. A service can also vary from one service producer to another and the supervision of the service process is more challenging than supervision of manufacturing process. The third important difference between a traditional product and a service is inseparability. One cannot get e.g. a haircut without being present in the service process.(See e.g. Parasuraman et al. 1985.)

Defining what service quality actually means is not easy either. Parasuraman et al. (1985: 42) state based on some earlier research that service quality is based on "*a comparison of consumer expectations with actual service performance*" and both the outcome as well as the process affects the quality. Some other researchers believe however that service quality can be measured based on only the customer perception of the service without knowing the customer expectations (Abari et al. 2011).

Parasuraman et al. (1985) introduced ten dimensions of service quality which they (Parasuraman et al. 1988; 1991) later compressed further into five dimensions. The ten dimensions of service quality according to Parasuraman et al. (1985: 47) are: reliability, responsiveness, competence, access, courtesy, communication,

creditability, security, understanding / knowing the customer, and tangibles. Based on the five dimensions (tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy) the ServQual instrument was created for measuring the service quality. ServQual includes some statements which are used for customers to first evaluate the importance of the different dimensions for a certain type of service in general (expectations) and the for a certain service provider (actual service performance). The difference between the expectations and perception reveals the actual service quality. (Parasuraman et al. 1991.)

One example of a tool created for assessing and improving the quality of higher education is AQIP (introduced in 1999 by Higher Learning Commission in United States of America). Nine dimensions of education are evaluated in order to measure the quality of education: helping students learn, accomplishing objectives, understanding students' needs, valuing people, leading and communication, supporting institutional operations, measuring effectiveness, planning continuous improvement, and building collaborative relationships. (Yarmohammadian et al. 2011: 2918.)

If we consider using ServQual and AQIP for assessing the quality of education the difference is fairly clear. ServQual takes purely the viewpoint of the customer (student) whereas AQIP looks at the education also from other viewpoints. The question is: can we consider education as a service? Education has many of the characteristics of expert services. The customer does not always know what she needs, because her knowledge level is not high enough (compare e.g. with medical services, the customer is not expected to know what kind of examinations are needed to find out what is causing the symptoms). We should also ask if it is enough to assess the quality of educational institution purely based on the students' views. Parasuraman et al. (1985: 48) refer to the category of quality characteristics that Darby and Karni (1973) introduced: credence properties. These properties are such that the customer may not be able to evaluate even after they have consumed the service and they are typically related to the nature of expert services. Sometimes the value of a certain characteristic of education can also be understood by the student only after years (e.g. knowledge of how to use a strategic tool or mathematical method). Third interesting question is the role of higher education institution in the society. Should we for example consider also the companies employing the students as customers?

Empirical case

The orientation in the Master's Programme in Industrial Management is technology management,. At the moment it is one of the seven International Masters' Programmes at the University of Vaasa. Currently the intake is about 35 students each year and in addition to this maximum of 30 Finnish students continue from the bachelor level to this Programme. International students come mainly from Asia (China, Pakistan, Nepal), Russia, Middle East (Iran) and some from European countries. Each year the International Affairs Unit conducts a survey among the

graduating students to measure quality of the Programme. The main problem with the survey is the low number of respondents that means that there is no statistical value for the results. However, some of the questions are open ended and give some hints what improvements might be valuable.

Tangibles refer to the physical facilities and staff appearance. At the university settings students could think about classrooms and equipment, library, offices of the professors, cafeterias etc. This seems to be the dimension that our students are most satisfied with. However, in Finland the dress code for the university staff is fairly free, a professor might come to a lecture wearing a pair of jeans and a t-shirt and some students could find it offensive. Should we pay more attention to the staff appearance? In many countries the dress code is more strict and this kind of problem would not exist.

Reliability means the ability to perform services precisely and reliably. For example keeping the promises and showing a sincere interest in solving the customers' problems. This could mean for our students for example that the grades for the courses will be available within 30 days (as promised) or that the professor gives feedback for written assignmentsas promised. The students also face various problems, e.g. related to their personal study plans, that they try to solve with different parties (student counseling, international affairs office, the Industrial Management Unit). The variation between student opinions regarding this dimension seems to be fairly high. Some seem to have faced a numerous bad experiences and some are very satisfied with this. The variation is most likely caused by the number of different people the students contact and differences in their behavior. How could we guarantee services on the same level for all the students by all the personnel they deal with?

Responsiveness refers to the staff being able and willing to answer quickly to customer requests.This is the dimension that our students give the most negative feedback for. About 60 new students (plus 30 in bachelor level and a number of doctoral students) for three busy travelling professors and two other members of teaching staff does make it difficult to answer quickly even the staff would like to. In various feedbacks the students suggest that the best way to improve the Programme would be hiring more professors. Unfortunately this seems to not be possible in reality.Perhaps we should find other channels to help the students with their requests like has been done in various other services.

Assurance means that the staff has the knowledge to help the customers and that the customers can trust the staff. For a university student the knowledge should start from curriculum planning. It should reflect the work life needs and provide a student with a firm foundation on which to build a successful career. This aspect seems to be a bit problematic in ourinternational Programme. Some of the students feel that the Programme does not meet the needs of work life and does not give them tools for their careers. On the other hand, the international companies located in the area claim that they are very happy with the competences and knowledge of the graduates from

our Programme. Many graduates also have very good career prospects. The cultural differences and the different work life needs in different countries could explain this variation. However, if this is the case, the objectives of the Programme should be better communicated for the future applicants.

Empathy is related to personal attention to the each customer whenever they need it and understanding the specific needs of the customers. It is only natural that each student would like to be treated individually. However, again this is balancing between the scarce resources available and satisfying the students. All our students have basically different background: education and work experience. Some of them have a bachelor degree in business administration or in technology from a foreign university, some have studied at the Finnish universities of applied sciences. A Personal Study Plan is prepared for each student when they begin their studies. However, we do not get very high score from the students for this dimension. Improving the admittance process might be one answer to this. However, the current strategy is to admit different students in order to give them competences also in dealing with different people from different cultures because this is going to be the reality for many of them after they graduate.

However, some important aspects of the quality of the Programme seem to be neglected if we only use the dimensions of ServQual instrument. These aspects include international aspect and management aspect that will be discussed next.

A good programme should be well planned and organized. When this Programme was started, there was not much experience about international masters' programmes either in the department or at the university. The student feedback on how well planned and organized the Programme is has been fairly poor at the beginning. The students' comments are getting better each year and lot of improvement work has been done with the Programme. Some of the challenges are not related to department internal things but more to other units of the university proving e.g. method studies (not so many of them in English and not all taught in English every year) or language courses (it is not possible to take many language courses at the same time). The basis of the Programme management is now on good level but yet there is work to be done. Some challenges can be met by improving the Programme and others may require the students to plan their studies (personal study plans) better and also to follow the plan they make.

The final interesting and challenging dimension of an international study programme is the international aspect. Our students give feedback on the following statements:
- The Programme exposes students to the international aspects of the field of study.
- I receive good basis for working in an international environment.
- The programme improves my international managerial and leadership skills.

- The programme creates a good basis for working effectively in international teams.

The international group of students and several visiting professors should at least in theory give good possibilities to meet all the requirements above. However, the reality is not too rosy. Some students can make the most of the possibilities given to them but not all. Visiting professors may (should) have a different point of view to the field of study but this is not sometimes appreciated or understood by the students. Also different teaching methods may hinder learning. The students themselves may also have prejudice against students from other cultures. Many of them are very competitive and ambitious and they may fear that other students (that they don't know) in the group may cause them weaker grades. If the students are allowed to form groups themselves we often end up with a couple of groups of Finnish students, a group of Chinese students, a group of Nigerian students etc. Building team spirit among the whole group of students is something that we should pay more attention to especially in the beginning of the studies.

CONCLUSIONS

Pondering about the quality of education in this paper seems to bring up some issues that are not rare. Yarmohammadian et al. (2011) highlight many of the same challenges. However, we should realize that before we can improve the quality of education or study programmes, we need to know where we are at the moment and where we would like to be. Different frameworks or tools (like ServQual) may help us to find answers to the first question. We need some input from the students, whether we consider them as customers or not. After that it is up to us to find the objectives and a way there. However, mere quantitative information may not be enough for finding the improvement tasks we probably need also some qualitative information.

Yarmohammadian et al. (2011) and Latorre-Medina et al. (2013) state that one important view to improvement of the education quality is paying attention to teaching and learning processes. Although this view has not been dealt with in depth in this paper it is an important issue and should also be considered.

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