

Author: Olga Saginova, Doctor of sciences, Professor, Dean of Graduate School, Plekhanov

Graduate School, Plekhanov Russian Academy of Economics

38 Stremyanny, Moscow, 115998, Russian Federation Tel/fax: +7 495 9582947,

e-mail: saginova@rea.ru

Enhancing students' satisfaction with their university experience in transition economies

Abstract

Modern economic environment creates additional challenges for a university: marketing its programs, ensuring graduates employability, ensuring degrees recognition by the labour market, teaching students with different educational backgrounds in one group, etc. The paper analyses some of these challenges and their impact on students' satisfaction with their university experience based on a series of research projects carried out between 2007 and 2009. The paper provides some ideas on satisfaction enhancement through course content, teaching methods and study process administration.

Introduction

Business education in Russia is following the general global pattern though data on Russian higher education is seldom found in the articles and surveys of international associations and research centres, which are more focused on the developments in China and India. However, even from the historical perspective Russian business education is comparable to the European and global HE systems. Higher Commercial School (now Plekhanov Russian Economic Academy) was founded by a group of Russian merchants in 1907 to provide undergraduate and graduate education in a variety of business related areas.

Analysing modern tendencies of business development one can define some educational needs arising from and linked to this development (Lorange, 2002). Globalization required graduates to be able to work in multicultural teams, adapt to fast changes and new environments. Deployment of separate stages of the value creation chain in different parts of the world requires an ability to

work under insufficient information and high uncertainty. Growing importance of environmental issues and sustainability needs strategic thinking and a responsible approach to business decision making.

Business education is often criticized for late reaction to the changing needs of the industry, excessive academism and high proportion of theory in its programs. Universities fail to provide interpersonal communications and leadership skills. Business programs are accused of being too general or too specialized.

Education in transition economy

Higher education sphere in Russia as in many other transition economies is characterised by high level of risk and uncertainty. There is a need to challenge and change what has successfully worked in the past, which creates resistance both within universities and in society at large.

Transformation in higher education should balance global market requirements against national needs and existing standards, be customer oriented, transparent and publicly accountable and include mechanisms to manage fast change. Education systems in transition economies are mandated with strengthening the market-based economy, improving local universities competitiveness both locally and internationally and generating additional income flows to support transformation.

Transformations in education can take the form of product innovations, new technologies and new markets. Product innovations are about introducing changes in the programs content and evaluating knowledge and skills of the graduates. Technologies concern with the programs format, teaching process and faculty competences. Market innovations are linked to the decisions about program positioning, selecting its target consumers and defining the most convenient channels of distribution.

Education services are a complicated type of services combining the characteristics of both professional and mass services (Saginova, 2005). On the one hand, students are dealing with people but not equipment (though a distance-learning format involves enough of technology to

enable students to study on-line almost without visiting the university campus). There are standard education services which are mass in character, but some professional or executive courses can be highly customised, and coaching which has become very popular lately can be really an individual one-to-one education. Even mass programs give students opportunity to select a considerable proportion of the subjects studied, thus creating their personalised offering. The core value of education is delivered by the teaching staff, but support staff such as secretaries, security guards or accountants can also influence customer perceptions of the value of the services provided.

University product that is offered to both students and companies of the labour market is its education program, which can be defined as a combination of educational and support services aimed at improving or changing the level and/or area of customer's education and provided with the adequate resources of an educational institution. The success of the program is measured by its graduates for whom quality parameters include employability in their special area within certain period of time (for many professions within 6 months), level of entry salary, career development path and speed, employer's evaluation and work satisfaction.

Variables affecting customers satisfaction

These are the criteria often used in business schools and study programs rankings. However alumni feedback and students' satisfaction surveys we carry on a regular basis suggested there are some intangible factors enhancing or diminishing students' satisfaction. Research projects of summer 2008 and winter 2009 enabled us to pinpoint some most relevant intangible criteria for students' satisfaction: flexibility and divergent thinking, personnel friendliness, faculty professionalism. Participating in 2009 Corporate recruiters survey organised by the Graduate Management Admission Council (GMAC), European Foundation for Management Development (EFMD) and the MBA Career Services Council (CSC) proved our earlier findings. Survey sample represented a cross-section of graduate management industry worldwide, as 157 business schools provided contact information for employers that recruited their graduates. A sample of

28000 employers were invited to answer survey questions of which 2825 (10%) completed the online questionnaire. According to survey results good communication skills (89%), ability to perform (73%), initiative (82%), professionalism (81%) and integrity (81%) were among the most demanded intangible traits sought in the graduates. Factor analysis using principle component analysis with varimax rotation was applied to summarize tangible and intangible aspects in graduates selection process. The examined tangible variables formed 4 factors: ability to manage, technical foundation, work experience, and execution. Intangible variables centred around 3 factors: professionalism, divergent thinking, and interpersonal skills. A correlation analysis of the relationship of intangible factors with each of the tangible factors showed that when the choice was driven by the ability of the graduates to manage, candidates' interpersonal skills were primarily considered (fig.1).

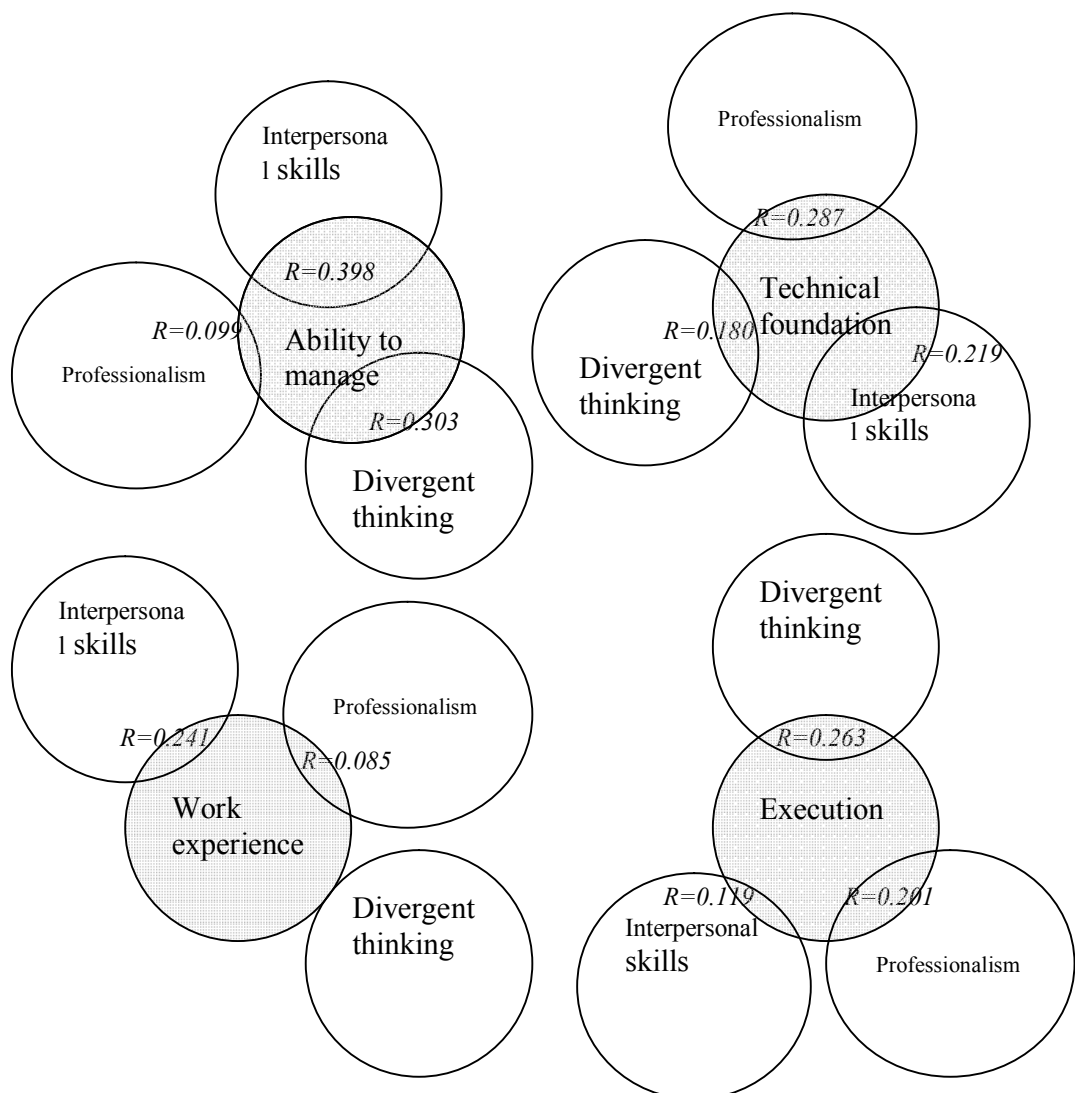


Figure 1. Relationship between tangible and intangible selection factors

When more attention was paid to the technical foundation, professionalism was valued.

Although a strong relationship was observed between work experience and interpersonal skills, it appeared that when work experience was sought, graduates were not expected to be strong divergent thinkers; divergent thinking instead was correlated with the ability to execute.

Survey results gave us a clear picture of what employers are looking for in a business school product and what we should pay attention to in order to increase their satisfaction and thus graduates employability.

However universities also have another target audience to satisfy – current and potential students. Comparing the findings of our previous students’ satisfaction surveys with the results of the GMAC project we defined tangible and intangible factors enhancing students’ satisfaction with their university experience. Applying the same technique of factor analysis to the findings of students’ satisfaction surveys we centred all tangible variables related to the course content around 4 main areas: broad managerial competences, technical skills, practical competences, and international perspective (Fig. 2). Intangible variables related to course administration and students – faculty interrelations and were also centred around 4 areas: program flexibility, personnel friendliness, faculty professionalism and university/business school brand (Fig. 2).

Tangible factors			
Broad managerial competences	Technical skills	Practical competences	International perspective
Strategic management	Quantitative skills	Research projects experience	International aspects of different subject areas
Planning	Presentation and reporting skills	Team work and management experience	Study abroad experience
Risk management	Marketing research skills	Guest lecturers from companies providing insights into the changing business environment in the country, region, industry	Cross-cultural communication and management skills
Project management	Information analysis and decision making skills	Additional professional qualifications/ certificates	Foreign guest lecturers

Intangible factors			
Program flexibility	Personnel friendliness	Faculty professionalism	University/school brand
Individual study track	Personnel interpersonal skills	Professionalism	Experience and traditions
Included placements or study abroad periods	Empathy	Motivation	Quality of graduates
Innovation and creativity in program content, design and administration	Listening skills	Discipline	Visibility and prestige
Collaboration and initiative	Tact and diplomacy	Collaboration and initiative	Networks and partnerships

Figure 2. Tangible and intangible factors affecting students satisfaction

Russian national education standard describing the society expectations and requirements for HE graduates defines competences critical for the success of a transition economy. These can be classified into three groups:

1. Personal competences include communication and interpersonal skills, ability to socialise and adapt in a new environment and tolerance to any form of difference: cultural, national, religious, etc.
2. Professional competences depend on the study program profile and subject area, but more and more interdisciplinary and cross-functional knowledge and skills are required. Business ethics and corporate social responsibility are also of great importance among professional competences.
3. Development competences include the ability to learn and regularly update one's knowledge base, personal development planning and exercising. In knowledge economy no university program can provide a student with the knowledge and skills sufficient and relevant during all of their professional career. Graduates should be able to identify the need for additional education or training, be able to use upcoming opportunities, find and analyse possible alternatives and plan their professional and personal development in an effective and efficient way.

Research findings defined university target markets requirements to a quality educational product offering, which can be summarised in a set of tangible and intangible factors (Fig.3).

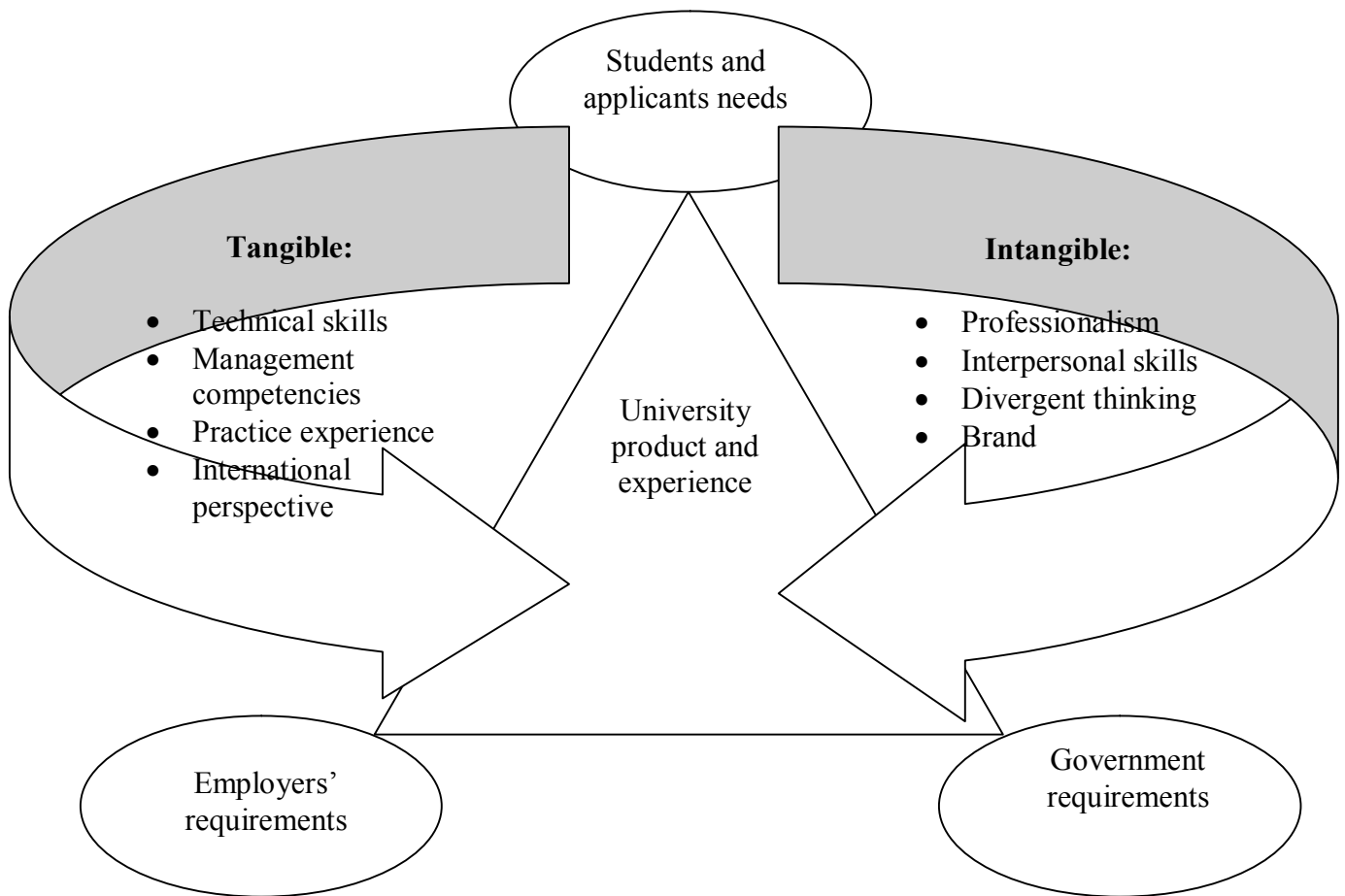


Figure 3. Tangible and intangible factors reflecting the needs of all target markets

Entrepreneurial approach

Economic downturn, a virus-like collapse of property and financial markets and failure of confidence in global economic system initiated new criticisms of the business education. It is believed to serve business well in times of stability but now lacks entrepreneurial approach which is called for. It is said to be training technocrats rather than responsible and morally focused professionals (Waddock, 2009). Its short-term orientation and lack of systems thinking are said to account for business leaders' inability to deal with modern complicated and dynamic world.

Measures to be taken by individual universities to meet the requirements of all universities' stakeholders, as well as the new challenges, depend on specific market situation and universities' positioning and strategy. However it is necessary to emphasise the importance of considering not only university product offerings but the overall study experience students have. Interestingly it is in line with the overall tendency in marketing, something which universities still use to a very limited degree.

Changes in the nature and role of marketing in the 21 century and universities' responses to some of them are summarized in table 4

Changes	Marketing strategies	Organisation	Universities' response
Some markets are fashionable, some are not	Shorter PLC, New products are developed more speedily	Hierarchy	Attention to product portfolio New products being developed to cater for the needs of new emerging audiences
Micromarkets development	Products customisation	Smaller business units	Business schools are set both independent and within universities Corporate universities branch in most sectors
Growing customer expectations ("made in .. " no longer works	Quality is key (all is made in China)	Self-managed teams	Traditional education centres are still preferred (UK, USA), though strong business schools emerge in other regions (Europe, China, Australia)
Macro crisis	Innovations are key	Breakthrough brands	Universities are developing their brands
New technologies	Information networks creation	Reengineering	Learning networks are created, distance learning is spread
Growing competition	Focus on core competences	Entrepreneurial flexibility	Is visible in the leading business schools only

Table 4. Universities response to the changes in marketing I the 21 century

Universities should acquire this entrepreneurial approach to marketing its products, which means a flexible organisation to enable free generation of ideas which are then filtered and developed into product offering by teams of specialists and integrators (project managers).

The reality of executive business education has already called for such an entrepreneurial approach. Even in a big university centre like Moscow with over 10 million population and over a million students attending classes in more than 110 government and over 140 non-government institutions of higher learning the pool of faculty able to teach at executive level is limited to about 200 people. So many of them, though formally linked to one university, participate in several educational projects, bringing in their specific expertise and skills. Some business schools are adapting a “choice board” model, when the university designs its courses to meet a variety of needs of both applicants and the labour market, and individual students are then allowed to choose, constructing their own programs and study tracks. It is this choice, university flexibility in terms of program structure, content and study path linked with a customised approach and individual attention, supported by a strong brand and reputation, that influence student’s experience and form their satisfaction level.

Enhancing students’ satisfaction

Over 10 years of experience of applying entrepreneurial marketing model to graduate business studies at a leading Russian school of Economics developed some tools which can be recommended to enhance students’ satisfaction with their study experience. The tools will be linked to the tangible and intangible factors sought by students and companies.

Friendly front-office staff

Management competences, interpersonal communication skills and professionalism can be developed in students only when these are clearly demonstrated by faculty and staff. Obvious as it may seem, it is not often supported by dean’s office secretaries and students support staff. This is a common shortcoming of many professional services (Saginova, Nefedova, 2006). Professionals do not seem to see the need in explaining their actions to their clients. Students and applicants often complain about information being scarce and given by staff with difficulty (“you should know it” attitude), in an unfriendly manner (“don’t bother me” attitude), and without customisation (“I’m not changing any rules for you” attitude).

To develop a customer-oriented attitude 3 things work effectively and fast: involving staff in surveying customer satisfaction, providing special training to staff and supporting front-desk contacts with sufficient information. When dean's office secretaries are participating in collecting and analysing responses about students' satisfaction, they understand the importance of customer-oriented attitude and are motivated to be friendly and helpful. Special training can also help, this can be provided internally as topics like time management, active listening, empathy or cross-cultural communication are often on any business school curriculum.

An important thing is sufficient support information for the front-office staff. Office staff was asked to complete a list of frequently asked questions, and this information was developed and put on the web-site, so that secretaries can just refer to the relevant section of this site. Proper signage (like office hours, lists of documents required, schedules and timetables, etc.) both on paper on the notice boards, and on the web make things a lot easier.

Developing this support information to enhance customer-oriented attitude leads to another important factor to develop professionalism, interpersonal skills and divergent thinking: clear definition of all the rules and regulations.

Clear rules of the game

Misunderstanding causing stress and dissatisfaction often arises from lack of information about rules and regulations. True, students may pretend they did not know something to cover their own mistakes, but many academic rules and regulations (especially in high context cultures like Russian) just do not exist on paper, being part of oral norms. Modern IT can dramatically improve the situation. A simple spreadsheet on the students' web-site can show graduate students the percentage of semester coursework completed, it takes an hour a week for a secretary to fill in, and saves hours of unpleasant discussions with students. A spreadsheet registering submission of graduation assignments for external revision we introduced two years ago changed the number of papers submitted by the deadline from 60% to 90% in just one year.

Guests are welcome

Practical experience, international perspective and professionalism can be developed through involving visiting and adjunct professors as much as possible. This is no novelty; many institutions have been using them for years. However, they can be difficult to manage and sometimes put additional pressure on university staff and budget. Trying to integrate a visiting or an adjunct professor into the academic schedule is not easy, and executives tend to change the timing of their guest lectures at short notice to fit their business schedule. We solved this by providing slots in our academic calendar for guest weeks. When these weeks are planned for a year to come, it's easier to allocate incoming guest lecturers, and changes do not affect regular courses, and provide a lot of flexibility and choice for the students. Some courses within this week are credited, some non-credited, but can accommodate many company presentations, special events and support faculty mobility.

Adding value through cross-selling

Any university or a business school now has a portfolio of different programs they offer to various publics. It is possible to develop technical skills, practical experience and divergent thinking by cross-selling these programs. We started offering individual courses and lectures within our guest weeks first to our corporate partners, and then to the open market. Modules providing training for international qualification exams (like CIM and ACCA) were offered to current students replacing similar subjects in the program. Some highly specialized subjects from Master's programs (like Luxury Brand Management or Sports Marketing) are offered to our corporate partners and alumni. This helps to generate some additional revenue, but what's more important, adds value to our graduate offering, enhancing students' satisfaction and demonstrating the competences we are aiming to develop.

Conclusion

For universities to be competitive in the modern business environment, it is important to define the factors affecting customers' satisfaction with their university experience as well as requirements of employers, but of no less importance is to demonstrate the required factors

through the content, organisation and administration of the study programs, using the same competence oriented approach HE establishments now use to report the compliance of their programs with government and international standards.

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