Abstract — Along with the educational expansion and the increasing demand regarding accountability for the outcomes of higher education institutions, a great emphasis is put on students’ feedback. The present paper is focused on the educational results obtained by the implementation of student satisfaction surveys in a Romanian university. The survey instruments measure three dimensions (the teaching and learning activities, the institutional material base, and the support services) and were filled in by a total of 1038 national and international students, in two consecutive years. Two different surveys format were administered: traditional paper-and-pencil and online. For both of the formats, the students’ responses show that the most important aspects are the teaching and learning activities, followed by the material base, and then by the support services offered by the institution. However a less favorable feedback was revealed by the online format of the survey. For all the aspects evaluated, there is a gap between satisfaction and importance: the students rate higher the importance they attach to each of the dimensions than their satisfaction level with these dimensions.

Keywords - student satisfaction; customers of higher education; higher education.

I. CONSIDERATIONS REGARDING CUSTOMERS’ SATISFACTION

The total quality management system has been approached from multiple different philosophical approaches, but as a common element, all of them emphasize the concern for customer satisfaction (Doherty, 1994). The challenges faced by educational institutions (higher education expansion and increased competition among educational suppliers) strengthened the orientation of the quality management system on customer satisfaction and external quality standards (Telford and Masson, 2005). Exploring the customer-driven approach, Barnett’s (1992) analysis of quality implies different expectations and criteria for assessing quality, as it is voiced by different categories of customers (e.g. government or students). He considers the debate of the different groups of stakeholders on quality as a “power struggle”, where each of them tries to make its perspective noticeable. Even if all of the stakeholders have a valid perspective upon quality, none can be the only legitimate voice that should be heard (Harvey and Green, 1993). Since the students represent important internal customers of the higher education systems, in order for the quality assurance system to meet the standards imposed, developing student satisfaction monitoring procedures represent an emergent condition (Möller, 2006).

Based on the acknowledgment that institutional success implies continually improving the capacity to meet the needs and expectations of both students and teaching staff (Deming, 2000), the present study presents several strategies implemented in a Romanian higher education institution in order to enhance the quality of the services provided. It focuses on the outcomes and the difficulties met while implementing quality assurance mechanisms based on student satisfaction survey.

Aiming efficiency, the educational organizations acknowledge that attracting and maintaining the students strongly depends on their opinion regarding the quality of the services provided. Students’ satisfaction with educational and administrative institutional aspects proves to be an indicator for students’ intent to remain within the institution (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry, 1986); even more, researches indicate that it is less expensive to maintain an actual customer than to recruit a new one (Babin and Griffin, 1998; Oliver, 1993).

In 1993 Romania adopted a law requiring the authorization and accreditation of the universities; in 2000 there was established the National Evaluation and Accreditation Commission, while in 2005 there was adopted the Government Decision regarding quality in education and the organization and functioning of the Romanian Agency on Quality Assurance in Higher Education. Presently, the Romanian national quality assurance education system is closely following the Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area. The quality assurance evaluation methodology considers the changes in the Romanian higher education systems: great diversity of higher education institutions, multiplicity of study programs, the shift from an elitist to a mass higher education system, increased external expectations. According to the national quality principles, the Babes-Bolyai University quality management system follows a rather customer-driven fitness for purpose approach (Sallis and Hingley, 1991).

Surveys of the stakeholders have been implemented at BBU since 2002 (such as faculty members’ satisfaction survey which identified the development needs and the level of work satisfaction; employers’ expectations survey – which aimed to analyze the employers’ opinions and their requirements towards young graduates; graduates’
labour market integration survey, student ratings of instruction), but the concern toward student satisfaction in relation to the broad range of aspects of university life is a relatively new practice.

II. USES OF STUDENT SATISFACTION SURVEY DATA

Student feedback on university experience, derived from student satisfaction surveys accomplishes two major functions (Marcus, Zaharie, and Silvasan, 2008). Firstly, it provides internal information meant to facilitate progress – information gathered from students may be integrated in the quality improvement policies and processes of the institution. Secondly, it provides external information, helpful for the prospective students and other stakeholders – the students already attending the university are a frequent used information source. Furthermore, getting feedback from international students represents a mechanism for increasing the international competitiveness of the institution.

Moreover, student satisfaction surveys offer a picture of the students’ perspective regarding the quality in higher education. By the means of the survey results, the management of the institution gets a better understanding of the quality values as they are perceived by the students (Telford and Masson, 2005).

Though the leading university concern is oriented towards the academic dimension of the educational experience – with view to the evaluation process and improvement of the quality of the didactic activity – studies point out that the majority of the students, though satisfied with the academic programs, may be disappointed in other aspects, such as academic support, career counselling or material conditions (Kotler and Fox, 1995).

On the other hand, the field literature indicates both uses and misuses of student opinion surveys (Bedggood and Pollard, 1999). In spite of the classical limits, the results of student satisfaction assessment reveal the strengths and weaknesses of the university which further allow the design of quality improvement strategies for the services rendered (Ansari, 2002). Furthermore, the increase of competitiveness among universities favours a discriminatory attitude from students with respect to their choice of higher education institution and increased demands and expectations from the chosen one; thus, understanding what actual and prospective students expect gains more importance for the institutional strategy.

III. METHODOLOGICAL DESIGN

The questionnaire focusing on student satisfaction was developed based on the survey instrument models used by international universities (National Research Report - USA, 2006, Student Satisfaction Survey, Oxford Brooks, 2005, YESS Survey, 2002, Student satisfaction at University of Central England, 2002) and based on the specific needs of the university students. It was distributed to a sample of 2100 national students and sent by e-mail to 80 international students. It was a stratified sample, in accordance to faculty, specialization and year of study. The questionnaire includes 47 items, grouped around three major categories: teaching and learning, material base, and support services. In addition, the general degree of student contentment is predicted by the respondent’s availability to further recommend application within institution. A distinct questionnaire was prepared for the international students, which followed several additional aspects: criteria for choosing a foreign university, sources of information used, and expectations regarding studying abroad (satisfaction is dependent on students’ expectations and theirs actual experiences) (Summers, 2005).

The questionnaires also cover a series of demographic questions, in order to provide a better segmentation of the population inquired, such as: gender, nationality, age, studies, faculty, specialty, family background, data regarding family members, and family monthly net income. Since one of the elements of the quality assurance is to identify the criteria which influence the quality of the services (Parthasarathy, Rapur, and Krishnan, 2005), on a 5 points Likert scale, the questionnaire measures both the students’ satisfaction and the importance they render to each of the dimensions assessed. We identify in this way the dimensions which from students’ point of view represent criteria for their satisfaction level with the quality of the educational services. A number of 1038 questionnaires have been returned, among which 997 filled in by Romanian students and 31 by international students. The students participating at the survey were of an average of 20.8 year age.

One of the main difficulties of this survey is related to the students’ retention in filling in the evaluation forms. Because of the growing number of surveys conducted within university, students became reluctant and distrustful regarding the outcomes of this kind of surveys. For this reason, but also in order to be able to compare the results, we both administered the questionnaire in a traditional form as paper-and-pencil and online format.

IV. ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The analysis of the Romanian students’ responses shows that the most important satisfaction-leading aspects are the teaching and learning dimensions (average mean 4.33), closely followed by material base and the support services (average mean 4.25 and 4.26). The most important aspects refer to: the chances to find a job position adequate to one’s qualifications after graduation (mean 4.65); the development along faculty of practical skills, useful in the chosen work field (mean 4.50); fairness of the examination (mean 4.55), while the least important aspects refer to: sports base facilities (mean 3.75); efficiency of student organizations and representatives (mean 3.95); following the initial course planning during the course of the semester (mean 3.95). Surprisingly, the dimensions perceived to be least important refer to the
sports base and student organizations. Both these two dimensions have a standard deviation slightly bigger than the others (1.222 and 1.235 compared with the average standard deviations ranging from 0.724 to 0.988), which show that the group of students is not that homogeneous in evaluating these two dimensions. Considering the fact that sport activities and student organizations are generally expected to play an important role in students' life, the results indicate the need for the existing organizations to become more involved in students' lives.

With respect to students' level of satisfaction regarding the educational system, the results show that the dimensions related to the material base are considered to be the most satisfying (average mean 3.31), followed by the teaching-learning activities (average mean 3.09), while those aspects related to support services are the least satisfying (average mean 2.90). The students express the highest level of satisfaction for the following items: following the initial course planning during the course of the semester (mean 3.62), access to information regarding the admittance system (mean 3.51), the learning space provided, such as classroom dimensions, thermic and acoustic conditions (mean 3.46), the efficiency of the course materials provided (mean 3.43), while the lowest level of satisfaction regards the photo-copy services available at the faculty (timetable, price, promptitude) (mean 2.39), student counselling services, career counselling, support for international mobility (mean 2.44), expenses needed in order to purchase textbooks/course equipments (mean 2.54).

On the whole, for all the aspects evaluated by the survey, the students rate higher the importance rendered to each of the dimensions, than their satisfaction level with these dimensions. This means that in students' opinion the satisfaction level is significantly lower than the importance of the evaluated dimensions \( t = 20.4, p<0.001 \). The biggest gap between the importance attached and the satisfaction level of 1.8 and 1.9 points was found for the dimensions measuring the career counselling services, photo copy services and the chances to find a job.

The answers to the 4 global questions of the questionnaire indicate the highest level of satisfaction for the quality of the teaching staff (mean 3.99) and the lowest level for the support services offered to students (mean 3.29). The quality of the teaching staff seems also to be the most important aspect for the students.

The results indicate significant differences among junior students (first and second year of study) and senior students \( F \) (year of study; 790) = 3.979; \( p<0.01 \), the latter ones being less satisfied than the young ones.

The analysis of the international students' responses shows that they have been most satisfied by the social life in the campus (mean 4.3) and by the university infrastructure (mean 4.1). The main criteria the international students use when choosing which foreign university to attend are the reputation of the institution (mean 4.2), the advantages brought by the experience in a foreign university (mean 4.1), and the quality of teaching (mean 4.0). The number of places for foreign students available at the university and the distance from the home country seem to be the least important (mean 2.31 and 2.14).

When comparing the results obtained on the paper-and-pencil administration to the online format, the answers students offered on the online administration were slightly less favourable. We also noticed that students express a more negative feedback regarding the items evaluated. The explanations may be various. For one hand, there may be differences regarding the student population filling in the questionnaire in the two formats. On the other hand, students may feel more anonymous when filling in the online form. Starting from these results, we need to focus on delivering instructions when advertising the student surveys.

We analyzed the association between student perceived satisfaction with certain dimensions and the importance rendered to each of the dimensions (Fig. 1). The analysis of the interaction between students’ satisfaction and the importance students render to the dimensions evaluated positions each of the items in one of the following four categories: high satisfaction but low importance, high satisfaction and high importance, low satisfaction and low importance, low satisfaction and high importance.
The interaction between satisfaction and importance of the items evaluated

From the above four categories, the items rated by the students to be highly important are the ones decisive for the institutional strategies aiming quality. Nevertheless, not all the aspects considered to be important are also satisfactory. The dimensions perceived as important and satisfactory are relevant especially for the monitoring actions and the maintenance of high standards. Particularly, the dimensions viewed as important, but unsatisfactory are the ones university has to approach in order to increase the quality of the educational system (Marcus, Zaharie, and Silvasan, 2008). Analyzing the weaknesses identified from the students’ point of view, the strategies adopted by the university should be related to adapting the curricula to the labour market needs and enhancing the chances to find a suitable job; the chances to get accommodation in the university campus and to the services offered to students (administrative services, career services, and medical services).

V. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The items rated as important mark the chief intervention direction for increasing the quality of the educational services provided by the institution, but the position of each of the aspects in one of the four windows is not static. Not only students’ opinions change across time, but as one dimension gets improved, the chances to be considered less important arise. This means that when an aspect gets to be enough satisfactory, it is more probably for it to be considered less important.

The survey indicates comparable results with other university student satisfaction surveys, where the teaching dimension seem to be the most important ones (Douglas, Douglas, and Barnes, 2006). Although the scientific literature often points out the weaknesses of student opinion surveys, such mechanisms prove to be extremely useful for educational institutions to gather feedback from its customers. If the common errors of such types of surveys
are well controlled, the results offer important information for the institutional management. These practices strongly contribute to the development of the quality culture, involving stakeholders in the implementation of quality assurance mechanisms and bring complementary evidence for the other evaluation procedures.

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