INTERNATIONAL AND DOMESTIC STUDY PROGRAMMES COMPARED: RECENT GRADUATES’ PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Current internationalization trends in higher education require more attention to the quality and attractiveness of international study programmes. Moreover, higher education institutions that are currently in the process of internationalization still rely heavily on domestic studies, therefore they face the need to maintain high levels of quality, strong curriculum and student satisfaction in both, international and domestic study programmes. In our study we aim at comparing dynamics of satisfaction with studies in international and domestic study programmes in the fields of economics and management. We disclose the topic from recent graduates’ perspective, as recent graduates can provide a broader view on study programmes’ theoretical and practical adjustment to latest trends in labour market by assessing satisfaction with abilities and skills acquired during their studies.

Our study is based on the longitudinal survey of recent graduates of international and domestic study programmes in the Faculty of Economics, Vilnius University. In addition to graduates’ satisfaction with study programmes’ outcomes and general satisfaction with studies, we explore satisfaction with programme design and teaching quality as paths for further improvement. Based on the results of comparative analysis of recent graduates’ satisfaction with studies we develop insights for minimizing the gaps between international and domestic study programmes’ design.

Keywords: International study programmes, graduates, student satisfaction, comparative analysis, university.

1 INTRODUCTION

Most research in international education focuses on exchange students and study abroad experience in general – city atmosphere, teachers, services, costs of living. Usually they are more satisfied in studies than local students (see [1]). Other studies indicate that international students are more satisfied with their overall study experience in comparison to local students, while sharing similar levels of satisfaction with study programme [2]. It also should be taken into consideration that student satisfaction is subjective and may not be related with satisfaction in study quality and acquired competences [3]. Most of student surveys explore the satisfaction of exchange students studying abroad for one or two semesters and fewer investigate the satisfaction of students in full undergraduate or even to less extent in graduate programmes. Those studies that focus on full programme students indicate that international students value study quality: course content, good teaching, advising [4].

In the analysis of the dynamics of satisfaction with studies in international and domestic study programmes we combine data from a survey of recent full-time bachelor and master study programmes’ graduates of the Faculty of Economics, Vilnius University (VU), conducted in 2012-2016. The survey includes four main areas of our analysis:

- **Overall satisfaction of international and domestic study programmes graduates**: satisfaction with studies at the Faculty of Economics, VU; overall satisfaction with study programme;
- **Satisfaction with programme implementation**: the quality and overall satisfaction with the study programme;
- **Satisfaction with skills obtained**: satisfaction with professional skills acquired in the context of labour market; satisfaction with general skills acquired.

All the variables in our analysis are measured in 10-point scale, from “1”- very unsatisfied, to “10” – very satisfied. We calculate the average scores of graduates’ responses for every variable. In addition, we indicate satisfaction gaps by calculating modules of differences between international and domestic graduates’ average scores and explore the relationships between satisfaction variables under analysis by performing correlation analysis.
2 OVERALL SATISFACTION OF INTERNATIONAL AND DOMESTIC STUDY PROGRAMMES’ GRADUATES

In our annual survey, we ask graduates to evaluate their overall satisfaction with the studies at the Faculty of Economics, VU and satisfaction with their study programme. Figure 1 presents the dynamics of graduates’ satisfaction with studies at the Faculty in 2012-2016.

As table suggests, the overall satisfaction with studies at the Faculty remains rather stable in case of domestic graduates (average change by 0.10 points in 2012-2016), while in case of international graduates, the change is more intense (average change by 0.81 points in 2012-2016): after rapid increase in 2012-2014, it faced a drop in 2015-2016. An interesting pattern emerges in gaps between international and domestic graduates’ satisfaction: initial gap of 1.28 points in 2012 has decreased in 2013-2015 as new international study programmes were launched during this period and faculty’s administration has put additional efforts in creating internationalized environment at the faculty. The year 2014 can be marked as successful for international study programmes: the overall satisfaction with studies at the faculty among international graduates exceeded the overall satisfaction among domestic graduates (0.68 points difference). However, in 2016, during the decrease in overall satisfaction among both, international and domestic graduates, the gap increased again (0.85 points).

The results of t-test show that in 2016 the gap between international and domestic graduates is statistically significant (t=2.865, p=0.004). We suggest that instability and significant gap between international and domestic graduates may be caused by difficulties to study or teach in foreign language. Therefore, we further compare international and domestic graduates’ overall satisfaction with their study programmes (Figure 2).

Figure 2 shows rather similar pattern in overall satisfaction with the study programme as in case of the overall satisfaction with studies at the Faculty (Figure 1): the dynamics of overall satisfaction is more intense in case of international graduates (1.01 points average change in satisfaction scores in 2012-
2016), while in case of domestic graduates, satisfaction scores vary slightly (only 0.19 points average change in satisfaction score in 2012-2016). Again, similarly to the results in overall satisfaction with studies at the Faculty, in case of overall satisfaction with the study programme, international graduates were most satisfied with their study programme in 2014, and during that period their satisfaction score exceeded domestic graduates’ satisfaction score (by 0.85 points), and in 2016, the gap has almost reached the initial level of (1.20 points). Additionally, the gap between international and domestic graduates’ overall satisfaction with study programme was statistically significant in 2016 ($t=3.513$, $p=0.001$).

As the trend of increase of international graduates’ satisfaction in 2014 and rather intense decrease in 2016 emerges, while the satisfaction of domestic graduates remains rather stable with slight decrease in 2016, we suggest that these years were important in terms of graduates’ satisfaction with particular elements of their study programmes, therefore we further analyze and compare international and domestic graduates’ satisfaction with study programme design and skills acquired during their studies in years 2014 and 2016, to find out possible causes of changes in overall satisfaction.

3 INTERNATIONAL AND DOMESTIC GRADUATES’ SATISFACTION WITH PROGRAMME IMPLEMENTATION

In the analysis of the satisfaction with programme implementation, we consider two major pillars of the study programme: the quality of the content of studied courses and quality of teaching. These elements reveal the ability of academic staff to develop and deliver study courses that are relevant in terms of modern trends within professional field, as well as attractive in the use of innovative teaching methods and high personal teaching skills of academic staff. The above mentioned aspects are especially important in case of the satisfaction with international programmes’ implementation as they require additional efforts from administration in training local academic staff to deliver study courses in international environment, as well as attracting academic staff from abroad. Figure 3 presents international and domestic graduates’ satisfaction with programme implementation at the Faculty of Economics, VU.

Figure 3 shows that in 2014, international graduates were more satisfied with study programme design, especially in case of quality of teaching (0.99 points gap), however, in 2016, despite reducing gap between international and domestic graduates’ satisfaction with programme design (from 0.59 to 0.24 in case of satisfaction with the content of studied courses and from 0.99 to 0.45 in case of satisfaction with the quality of teaching), international graduates’ satisfaction with both elements of study programme implementation decreased below domestic graduates’ satisfaction while domestic graduates’ satisfaction remained comparatively stable. Firstly, rather consistent results in domestic graduates’ satisfaction with study programme implementation illustrate consistency in academic staff and study courses among domestic study programmes, while in case of international study programmes, these changes occur more often due to visiting academic staff’s participation in international programmes at the faculty, and growing involvement of local academic staff into international courses. The latter raises issues in the lack of local academic staff's experience in working with international students and reveals the need of additional preparation of academic staff before delivering international courses. Secondly, due to growing internationalization, the geography of students is expanding and more students with different cultural background and knowledge are enrolled. As a result, in case of international study programmes, it becomes more difficult to maintain
identical standards of teaching and requirements for all students and it is necessary to give additional personal attention to some students and less to others.

Furthermore, in 2014 and 2016, statistically significant correlations between both elements of satisfaction with study programme implementation and the overall satisfaction with studies at the faculty, as well as overall satisfaction with study programme across international and domestic graduates can be found (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** Correlations between international and domestic graduates’ satisfaction with study programme implementation and overall satisfaction with studies at the Faculty of Economics, and with study programme, 2014 and 2016.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Satisfaction with the content of studied courses</th>
<th>Satisfaction with the quality of teaching</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall satisfaction with studies at the Faculty of Economics, VU</td>
<td>International graduates</td>
<td>0.61**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Domestic graduates</td>
<td>0.77**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall evaluation of the study programme</td>
<td>International graduates</td>
<td>0.64**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Domestic graduates</td>
<td>0.72**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Source: data from graduates’ surveys at the Faculty of Economics, VU in 2014 and 2016.

As there are moderate to strong positive correlations between international and domestic graduates’ satisfaction with programme implementation and their overall satisfaction with studies at the faculty and with their study programme. Therefore, in accordance with solving the above mentioned issues, faculty’s efforts in developing more consistent and strong academic staff in international study programmes, as well as additional training for local academic staff would help strengthen overall satisfaction of international graduates. In contrast, domestic study programmes may benefit from slight changes in academic staff and programme curriculum, which would help boost domestic graduates’ satisfaction.

4 INTERNATIONAL AND DOMESTIC GRADUATES’ SATISFACTION WITH SKILLS ACQUIRED

Trends in nowadays globally competitive higher education market often emphasize the importance of study programmes’ potential to meet labour market needs as the success of higher education institutions is often defined by their graduates’ employability and career success. Thus, in order to build and sustain satisfaction with studies, higher education professionals should put efforts in creating study experience that prepares graduates with broad, strong and competitive professional, as well as general skills. In addition, internationalization and globalization of studies suggests that students (and later, graduates) who choose international studies usually focus on global employability perspectives. Thus, it is important to understand current trends in institution’s ability to prepare successful graduates for both, local and global labour markets. We suggest that looking into international graduates’ satisfaction with skills acquired during their studies helps reveal international programmes’ ability to meet global labour market needs, while domestic graduates’ satisfaction reflects programmes’ alignment with local labour market.

4.1 International and domestic graduates’ satisfaction with professional skills acquired

In order to explore graduates’ satisfaction with professional skills acquired, we ask them to indicate their satisfaction with the accordance of acquired skills to nowadays labour market needs, as this helps evaluate whether studies provide relevant theoretical and practical knowledge and contribute to graduates’ competitive advantages in the labour market. Additionally, we measure graduates’ satisfaction with ability to apply knowledge in practice, which illustrates whether study programme maintains a balance between theoretical learning and practical activities and ensures graduates’ readiness for the employment. We also explore graduates’ satisfaction with skills acquired in the field.
of their profession in order to evaluate whether study programme design meets the needs for depth or broadness of graduates’ professional knowledge for successful career (Figure 4).

Figure 4. International and domestic graduates’ satisfaction with professional skills acquired, 2014 and 2016. Source: data from graduates’ surveys at the Faculty of Economics, VU in 2014 and 2016.

As seen in Figure 4, graduates’ satisfaction with professional skills acquired during their studies follows similar trend as in case of satisfaction with study programme design: satisfaction of both, international and domestic graduates, decreases in 2016 in comparison to 2014, however the decrease in case of domestic graduates is less intense. Additionally, in 2014, in cases of all elements of satisfaction with professional skills acquired, international graduates were more satisfied than domestic graduates: the biggest gap is observed in case of satisfaction with skills acquired in professional field (0.71 points). In 2016, the gap between international and domestic graduates has minimized resulting in very close satisfaction scores, except from satisfaction with how knowledge and skills acquired meet the needs of the labour market, where the gap between international and domestic graduates’ satisfaction became greater (from 0.29 points in 2014 to 0.51 points in 2016). There results highlight the importance of involvement of employers into study programmes’ design and study processes, as they can help update studies for better accordance to the latest trends in labour market: in case of domestic programmes, employers’ involvement is rather high, as they are involved in programmes’ boards as social partners, participate in theses defence and as practitioner guest lecturers. However, in case of international study programmes, Faculty lacks of such involvement, and we suggest that attracting international employers would help in both reducing the gap between international and domestic graduates, and increasing graduates’ satisfaction with professional skills.

To illustrate the relationship between graduates’ satisfaction with professional skills acquired and overall satisfaction in 2014 and 2016, correlation analysis was performed (Table 2).

Table 2. Correlations between international and domestic graduates’ satisfaction with elements of satisfaction with professional skills acquired and overall satisfaction with studies at the Faculty of Economics, and with study programme, 2014 and 2016.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Satisfaction with how knowledge and skills acquired meet the needs of the labour market</th>
<th>Satisfaction with skills to apply knowledge in practice</th>
<th>Satisfaction with skills acquired in the professional field</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Overall satisfaction with studies at the Faculty of Economics, VU</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International graduates</td>
<td>.483**</td>
<td>.336*</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic graduates</td>
<td>.604**</td>
<td>.570**</td>
<td>.636**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Overall satisfaction with the study programme</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International graduates</td>
<td>.754**</td>
<td>.694**</td>
<td>.651**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic graduates</td>
<td>.629**</td>
<td>.591**</td>
<td>.665**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).
** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
ns - Correlation is not significant

Source: data from graduates’ surveys at the Faculty of Economics, VU in 2014 and 2016.
In 2014, most of the elements of graduates’ satisfaction with professional skills acquired showed statistically significant moderate positive correlations with overall satisfaction with studies at the faculty and overall satisfaction with the study programme, and international graduates’ satisfaction with how knowledge and skills acquired meet the needs of the labour market showed strong positive correlation with overall satisfaction with the study programme. In 2016, all of the elements showed moderate correlations with overall satisfaction with studies at the faculty and study programme, whereas international graduates’ satisfaction with how knowledge and skills acquired meet the needs of the labour market showed strong positive correlation with overall satisfaction with studies at the faculty. These results support the above suggestion that more efforts should be put into establishing and maintaining relationships with international employers in order to strengthen attractiveness of the faculty (and of the university in broader perspective) for prospective international students.

4.2 International and domestic graduates’ satisfaction with general skills acquired

Although professional skills acquired during studies are extremely important for graduates entering the labour market, the development of general skills is a valuable source of employment and career prospects. In our study, two types of general skills are analyzed: individual work skills and teamwork skills.

Figure 5. International and domestic graduates’ satisfaction with general skills acquired during their studies, 2014 and 2016.

In contrast to satisfaction with programme design and professional skills acquired, gaps between international and domestic graduates’ satisfaction are rather small and did not face greater changes from 2014 to 2016. Interestingly, in cases of both, international and domestic graduates, the satisfaction with individual skills acquired in 2014 and 2016 scored highest among all the elements of satisfaction analyzed in our study. However, due to comparatively greater decrease of satisfaction with individual skills acquired among international graduates, more efforts should be taken to maintain high levels of satisfaction with this element by implementing more individual tasks and assignments into international study programmes. The importance of satisfaction with general skills acquired is illustrated by correlations with overall satisfaction with studies at the Faculty, and with study programme (Table 3).

Table 3. Correlations between international and domestic graduates’ satisfaction with elements of satisfaction with general skills acquired and overall satisfaction with studies at the Faculty of Economics, and overall satisfaction with study programme, 2014 and 2016.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Satisfaction with the acquired individual work skills</th>
<th>Satisfaction with the acquired teamwork skills</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall satisfaction with studies at the Faculty of Economics, VU</td>
<td>International graduates</td>
<td>.514**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Domestic graduates</td>
<td>.515**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall satisfaction with the study programme</td>
<td>International graduates</td>
<td>.774**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Domestic graduates</td>
<td>.481**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). ns - Correlation is not significant.

Source: data from graduates’ surveys at the Faculty of Economics, VU in 2014 and 2016.
As Table 3 reveals, both elements of international and domestic graduates’ satisfaction with general skills acquired shows statistically significant moderate positive correlations with overall satisfaction with studies at the Faculty in 2014 and 2016. In case of domestic graduates, moderate positive correlations with satisfaction with the study programme are maintained, while in case of international graduates, such relationships take place only in 2014, showing no statistically significant correlations in 2016. These results reveal an interesting phenomenon: for international graduates, general skills acquired are part of overall study experience rather than study programme’s strength.

5 CONCLUSIONS

Findings from comparative analysis of international and domestic graduates’ satisfaction reveal that although changes in satisfaction scores throughout the years follow similar trends, the intensity of changes in international graduates’ satisfaction is higher in comparison to domestic graduates, where satisfaction scores vary to lower extend.

In cases of all of the main areas under analysis: graduates’ satisfaction with programme implementation, satisfaction with professional skills acquired and satisfaction with general skills acquired, positive correlations with overall satisfaction with the study programme and satisfaction with studies at the Faculty are identified. Interestingly, our analysis showed no statistically significant correlations between international graduates’ satisfaction with individual skills acquired and overall satisfaction with study programme in 2016.

Results of comparative analysis highlight rather intense fluctuations in international graduates’ satisfaction with programme implementation over years, caused by more frequent changes in academic staff and, as a result, more frequently adjusted content of courses, as well as changing cross-cultural characteristics in international programmes. Therefore, administration should focus on consistency of international programmes’ implementation, attraction of full-time international academic staff and additional support for local academic staff involved into international study programmes.

Growing gap between international and domestic graduates’ satisfaction with how professional skills acquired meet the needs of labour market highlights that the accordance of study programmes to labour market needs should be evaluated in wider perspective, capturing not only requirements of local labour market, but also in global perspective. Therefore, it is suggested, that international employers should be involved into study programme development and implementation.

Our analysis showed that international and domestic graduates tend to be most satisfied with individual skills acquired during their studies, however satisfaction with this element tends to decrease more rapidly among international graduates, thus we propose enhancing the implementation of individually-oriented teaching approach to international study programmes would help maintain high levels of graduates’ satisfaction with individual skills acquired.

The majority of elements of graduates’ satisfaction with study programme implementation and professional and general skills obtained have statistically significant moderate to strong positive correlations with graduates’ overall satisfaction with study programme and studies at the Faculty, thus, overall graduates’ satisfaction is inseparable from the satisfaction with programme implementation and skills obtained. There results emphasize the importance of complex efforts and managerial decisions from faculty administration in order to enhance overall levels of international graduates’ satisfaction and maintain sufficient levels of domestic graduates’ satisfaction.

REFERENCES

