Saimaa University of Applied Sciences
Faculty of Business Administration, Lappeenranta
Degree Programme in International Business
International Business

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STUDENTS` EXPERIENCES ON DEGREE PROGRAMME IN INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS AT SAIMAA UNIVERSITY OF APPLIED SCIENCES

Bachelor's Thesis 2013

Abstract

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The purpose of this study was to find out how the Degree Programme in International Business, taught in Saimaa University of Applied Sciences, has succeeded from the students perspective. This was done through studying the original expectations and the experiences from the Degree Programme.

In the theoretical framework, two main theories are discussed; Quality in education and customer satisfaction analysis. The final results of the research are analyzed on the basis of these theories.

Data for this study was collected by empirical research. Questionnaires were sent via e-mail to a number of IB-students from the Saimaa University of Applied Sciences. Their starting year for the studies ranges from 2009 to 2012, therefore offering an excellent overall view on the subject. The quantitative research method was chosen in order to obtain the most accurate and comprehensive results possible. The theoretical information was gathered from various sources consisting of books, articles and Internet in addition to the empirical data.

The results from the research showed that overall, the Degree Programme has been successful and students experiences from it has been fairly good. Still, some significant suggestions for improvement were also found.

Keywords: international business, university of applied sciences, bachelor of business, quality in education, customer satisfaction

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background of the study

The Degree Programme in International Business at Saimaa University of Applied Sciences started in 2009 and therefore had its first students graduating as Bachelors of Business Administration a little while ago. Taught completely in English and with half of the students coming from abroad, it "provides students with versatile problem-solving and social skills in an intercultural environment, as well as first-rate theoretical and practical skills in international business". (Saimaa UAS, Brochure, p.2) But how has the Degree Programme succeeded from the student's perspective? This thesis will try to answer that question.

The main reason for choosing the topic in question comes from the author's own personal situation in the verge of graduating from the IB degree programme among the others from the first starting year. This offers also a unique opportunity to give comprehensive and constructive feedback to the Saimaa University of Applied Sciences in the form of this research.

The key factor in order to receive accurate and objective results from the research is to define and interpret correctly, what success actually means in the context of education. Therefore, the concepts of quality in education and customer satisfaction will be thoroughly examined to achieve a comprehensive theoretical framework for the research. In addition, the Gummesson 4Q Model of Offering Quality will be analyzed. The final results from the research will be analyzed on the basis of these theories.

1.2 Objectives

The purpose of this thesis is to find out, whether the Degree Programme in International Business, taught in Saimaa University of Applied Sciences, has succeeded from the student's point of view. This is done through analyzing the original expectations and experiences. In addition, student`s experiences from their work placement period(s) are studied to get a clear picture, if they have achieved the competence and skills needed for getting a position in the business field. Another goal is to examine the possible differences between international and Finnish students opinions regarding the success of the Degree Programme.

1.3 Scope and delimitations

The research will consist of students from the Degree program starting year 2009 to students, who have only just begun their studies in autumn 2012, thus covering four groups (IB09, IB10, IB11 and IB12).

1.4 Research question(s) and research method

The main research question was:

- How the Degree Programme in International Business succeeded from the student's perspective.

The research sub-questions were:

- How students original expectations and their experiences have met.
- If the Degree Programme matched in practice the aims set in the Study Plan.
- Were there differences between international students and Finnish students opinions.

The research method chosen was quantitative research. Links to the survey were sent by e-mail to the students studying in IB9, IB10, IB11 and IB12. The main reason for choosing this method was to gain a comprehensive and broad understanding from the students perceptions, which enabled the end results to have good usability and validity. These results were analyzed and interpreted using one or more theories chosen. The research method will be presented more thoroughly in the empirical part.

2 Theoretical framework

In the theoretical framework, two main theories are discussed; Quality in education and customer satisfaction analysis. The final results of the research are analyzed on the basis of these theories.

2.1 Saimaa University of Applied Sciences

Saimaa UAS is a higher education institute situated in Southeast Finland on the border between the EU and Russia.

According to their websites, Saimaa UAS has the following faculties:

- Technology
- Business and Culture
- Health Care and Social Services

The total number of young and adult students studying for a degree is 2,700, from which 480 are international students. From those, 315 are degree students and 165 exchange students. The number of teachers is about 260. Two of the faculty units are in Lappeenranta, two in Imatra. (Saimaa UAS Powerpoint presentation 2012)
Out of their total 20 programs, 4 are being conducted entirely in English:
the Degree Programme in Mechanical Engineering and Production Technology, the Degree Programme in Chemical Engineering, the Degree Programme in International Business and the Degree Programme in Tourism.

Based on Saimaa UAS websites, they offer students opportunities for comprehensive and multidisciplinary studies, which enables them a wide range of options. They describe themselves as internationally oriented:
"In our international co-operation, we place emphasis on Western Europe, Nordic countries, Russia and the new EU member states, and China and Malaysia in Asia. Many of our students take the opportunity to complement their studies by studying or working at one of our international partners. The students from abroad who join us are welcomed as an integral part of the international atmosphere of our university of applied sciences, and they give us all an opportunity to learn how to work in a multicultural environment." (Powerpoint presentation 2012.)
Furthermore, Saimaa UAS highlight their level of internalization: "We also have a lecturer exchange scheme whereby we offer our expertise to our international partners and in exchange, we benefit from some of the unique knowledge they have to offer. We are strongly committed to addressing the challenges of international research and development projects." (Powerpoint presentation 2012.)

Saimaa UAS has three strategic focus areas, which are based on the university's strengths and interest groups' needs:

1. User-oriented technologies and their commercial applications
2. Management and entrepreneurship
3. Health and social services and service processes

According to these multidisciplinary focus areas, the university carries out education, research and development as well as international operations.

2.2 The Degree Programme in International Business

Based on Saimaa UAS websites, the Degree Programme in International Business prepares multicultural experts for international business and provides students with versatile competences for diverse aspects of international business operations including studies of marketing, finance, logistics and management. (Brochure 2010, p.2) The duration of studies is 3.5 years with 210 ECTS credits, including 30 credits of placement. The Degree is Bachelor of Business Administration (BBA), in Finnish tradenomi.

According to Saimia, "The international business world needs multicultural experts for companies and various foreign trade positions to run operations and implement projects around the world. Foreign languages, different cultures and global business operations form an essential part of the programme. The content of the studies is continuously updated together with the potential employers to meet labor market needs. Many courses are completed in joint workplace projects. In addition, Saimia describes that “The tutor teachers and an international peer group support you during studies and leisure time. The relationship between our students and lecturers is open and the learning methods are interactive and collaborative." (Brochure 2010, p.2.)

2.3 Expectations and experiences

According to Rope and Pöllänen, expectations can be defined as the starting point when the objective is to generate the best possible result for the organization through customer satisfaction since the expectations can be seen as a customer's internal standards that he uses to judge the quality of a service experience (1994, p.30).

They have also suggested that a customer’s earlier expectations have been formed through former experiences, word of mouth, image, public relations or e.g. marketing communications. Besides the expectations of the customers, also the experiences of the operation that influence their satisfaction are always different. Customer satisfaction is thus relative and always subjective, a personal point of view. As customer satisfaction consists solely of the customer's subjective experiences of the operation or object, it is greatly tied to a specific time, too. (Rope & Pöllänen 1994, p. 58-59.)

It is to note that also the level of expectations affect the experiences, as one for example generally expects different service from a two star hotel as opposed to a five star hotel. The same level of operation can therefore lead to disappointment when the expectation level is high and to a positive surprise when the expectation level is low. It is essential to also remember that the expectation level of a person varies according to the image they have of the operation or object in question, the image being formed through their personal basis of attitudes and set of values. (Rope & Pöllänen 1994, p. 29–30, 33.)

Important issues for all the employees in the company to keep in mind in securing the quality perceptions is that the customer’s expectations need to be managed. If a service provider over promises, it raises customer expectations too high and, consequently, customers will perceive that they get low quality. The level of the quality may very well still be high, but as customer expectations were not in balance with his experiences, the perceived quality is nevertheless low. To manage the quality perceptions it is always better to under promise and over deliver than to promise too much without fulfilling the given promise. (Grönroos 2007, p. 76-78.)

The minimum expectation is the required minimum level the customer has set for the company to be met. These minimum expectations are based on:
1. Personal expectations based on the characteristics and the background of the person; 2. Situational factors including different purchasing situations as well as environmental factors; 3. Industry factors and 4. Company factors that affect customers expectations through the marketing efforts of the company. (Rope & Pöllänen 1994, p. 35-37.)

3 Literature review

As mentioned before, in order to receive accurate and objective results from the research, the definition of success in the context of education has to be well analyzed in order to have validity and reliability for the whole research. Therefore, the next chapters discuss the theories of quality in education and customer satisfaction. These theories form the theoretical framework, from which the final results of the research can be analyzed later.

3.1 Quality in education

Quality itself has been defined as essentially relational:
“Quality is the ongoing process of building and sustaining relationships by assessing, anticipating, and fulfilling stated and implied needs." (Winder & Judd, 1996) Furthermore, Oxford Dictionaries (2013) defines quality as "*the standard of something as measured against other things of a similar kind; the degree of excellence of something".*

Parri (2006, p. 107) said that "Quality is a concept that lacks a common definition that could be applicable in all fields, for every phenomenon or any subject. The guiding principle is that the more complex, many-folded or abstract the object under quality measurement is, the more difficult it is to come up with a satisfactory definition. Therefore, the reason why it is not possible to find the one and only definition for higher education in literature lies in the fact that higher education is one of these objects".

According to a research published by Unicef, “Many definitions of quality in education exist, testifying to the complexity and multifaceted nature of the concept. The terms efficiency, effectiveness, equity and quality have often been used synonymously. Considerable consensus exists around the basic dimensions of quality education today, however. Definitions of quality must be open to change and evolution based on information, changing contexts, and new understandings of the nature of education’s challenges.“(Adams,1993; Rasheed,

2000, p. 4.)

Unesco highlights the meaning of quality education as "Quality is at the heart of education. It influences what students learn, how well they learn and what benefits they draw from their education. The instrumental roles of schooling – helping individuals achieve their own economic and social and cultural objectives and helping society to be better protected, better served by its leaders and more equitable in important ways– will be strengthened if education is of higher quality". (Global Monitoring Report 2005, p. 28.)

In addition, the European Commission (Report 2000, p. 5) says that " Lifelong learning is an important means of shaping one's future on a professional and personal level, and high-quality education is essential in the light of labour market policies".

According to Parri`s research (2006, p. 107), relying on different authors, the definitions of quality can be divided into the following five categories: quality as special or unique, refinement, goal-compliance, worth the price and quality as changing and reshaping.

- Quality as exceptionality, excellence.

This definition sets a goal for universities and academic communities to be always the best; belong to the elite and achieve better outcomes than the others. In higher education it can include admitting the best school-leavers according to specific rankings as presumably the higher quality of input affects the higher quality of output. This definition is very often keenly observed and stressed by educationalists and politicians when the quality of education is under discussion (European dimension of institutional quality management 2000). The particular definition does not set standards for quality measurement nor does it define exactly what is meant by quality. Quality is inevitable; irrefutable- a person recognizes quality instinctively (Green 1994; Parri 2006).

- Quality as zero errors.

This approach defines quality as consistent flawless outcome or perfection. In some ways this definition ‘democratizes’ the concept of quality and if consistency is achievable then anyone can achieve quality. When the prior definition focuses on getting a better position, then the current definition worships perfection. The above definition is easily applicable in industry as there are detailed standards set for the product or outcome, but when it comes to the university graduates, then it would be impossible to define what a flawless graduate should be, besides that it is not the aim of the university to produce identical graduates. Although the current approach is too idealistic for higher education, it still fosters the development of the learning environment to enhance quality. (Parri 2006, p. 107.)

- Quality as fitness for purpose.

This is the definition used most frequently regarding higher education. According to this concept, we have to decide to what extent the service or product meets the goals set. Such a definition enables the institutions to define goals in the mission statements– the quality is assessed and presented through mission statement and goal achievement. This approach concentrates on meeting the needs of the customers of higher education, i.e. interest groups. It also takes into consideration the differences of institutions instead of making them artificially resemble each other. The following definition is principally the same – “quality is defined through to what extent the set goals have been achieved”. Both definitions assume that fit and foremost the concept and goals of higher education are to be defined. When the moral and intellectual development of students, expansion of self-realization opportunities, etc. are considered to be of the utmost importance in higher education, then the focus in quality measurement should be on thorough analysis of the study process. According to the above given definition, the product or service should meet the needs and wishes of the customer. At the same time the customer has to express his/her needs and wishes explicitly. The goals of a higher education institution are presented on a general level in the mission statement and more concrete academic level in the programme objectives and expected learning outcomes. In other words, the institution says what it does, does what it promises and proves it to the third party. (Parri 2006.)

- Quality as transformation, reshaping.

According to this point of view, the main customer of the higher quality education is a student whose understanding, attitudes and objectives change and evolve in the course of the study process. The students are the focus of attention – the better the university, the better it can meet the goals that include equipping the students with special skills, knowledge and attitudes that enable them to work and live in the society of knowledge. (Parri 2006, p. 108.)

- Quality as value for money.

It is a populist approach that equalizes quality and value, especially value for money (Green, 1994). Statements such as “quality for reasonable price” and “quality at affordable price” mean that you are promised a high quality product at a reduced price. This is an opposite of the blind faith of the perfect competition market that states, “you get what you pay for”. The essence of this approach lies in the responsibility aspect of quality assurance. State funded universities are expected to be hold responsible towards financiers and clients. It is thought that the key of increase in cost-effectiveness is in increased competition between universities both for financing and students. Despite considerable drawbacks of this theory several governments have strengthened the bond between the quality of education and its monetary value mainly through demands for efficiency. (Green 1994;Parri 2006, p. 108).

Green (1994, p. 9) discloses that the concern about quality is not new in the educational context, although much of the debate outside of the sector has focused on standards. Part of the difficulty which educationists experience in their attempt to demonstrate the quality of the services they are offering rests on the tendency to use quality and standards interchangeably. During the last decades, the definition of quality most often used in industry has evolved and is no longer given solely in terms of conformance to a specification but in terms of meeting customers' needs. (Green 1994, p. 26.) High priority is placed on identifying customers' needs as a crucial factor in the design of a product or service. The difficulty in defining quality is to translate future needs of the user into measurable

characteristics, so that a product can be designed and turned out to give satisfaction at a price that the user will pay. Using this definition of quality, it is clear that fitness for purpose should be related to customers' needs. Yet there are a number of complications in defining quality as meeting customers' needs, particularly in the public service sector. Who is the customer in higher education? Is it the service user (the students) or is it those who pay for the service (the government, the employers)? Is the student the consumer, the product or both?

Taking the view that it is the service user, or student, who is the customer, raises a number of difficulties, particularly in the evaluation of the service. While it may be relatively easy to identify the physical needs of students in higher education in terms of access to adequate library provision and adequate student accommodation, the heart of the education service is the relationship between the lecturer and student in the teaching and learning process. Unlike the manufacturing industry, the producers and customers (lecturers and students) are both part of the production process making the process individual and personal, depending on the characteristics of both the producer and the consumer. The result of these characteristics is that standards of quality are difficult to state and maintain. In some cases services are not only physically but mentally intangible, because they are difficult to grasp and understand.
Some critics of this approach to defining quality in relation to higher education ask whether students are in a position to know what their needs are. They may be able to identify their short term needs, but do they have enough knowledge and experience to know what they need in the long term? Are they in a position to judge whether their needs are being met? (Green 1994, p. 27.)

The usual response to this issue is that satisfying students' needs is not the same as satisfying their wants. It also points to the need to make an analytical distinction between different concepts of quality and the best methods for assuring or assessing quality. Defining quality as meeting customers' needs does not necessarily imply that the customer is always best placed to determine what quality is or whether it is present. (Green 1994, p. 27.)

Given the difficulties in defining quality in higher education, some have opted out of trying to find an underlying theory or definition. Vroeijenstijn (1991) says 'it is a waste of time to try to define quality'. The basis of this argument is that quality is a relative concept; different interest groups or stakeholders' in higher education have different priorities and their focus of attention may be different. For example, the focus of attention for students and lecturers might be on the process of education, while the focus of employers might be on the outputs of higher education. It is not possible, therefore, to talk about quality as a unitary concept, quality must be defined in terms of qualities, with recognition that an institution may be of high quality in relation to one factor but low quality in relation to another. The best that can be achieved is to define as clearly as possible the criteria that each stakeholder uses when judging quality, and for these competing views to be taken into account when assessments of quality are undertaken. (Green 1994, p. 27.)

As can be seen, analyses of the benefits of education have a long history in the economics literature. Studies have established that spending on education is an investment with a return and conclusions about contributions of education to productivity are well established. In addition, the literature counts hundreds of studies that estimate the economic benefits of investments in education. Adding the important dimension of quality – what students know, or cognitive ability – re-establishes the link between education and economic growth. (Hanushek&Woessmann 2007; World Bank 2013.)

The crucial factor is learning achievement. Improving learning outcomes, along with the expansion of schooling, will improve labor productivity, reflected in workers' earnings, and will contribute to higher and sustainable rates of national income growth.

The crucial step is to establish what policies and programs can improve learning outcomes. There are important efforts underway in a number of countries to document through rigorous impact assessments the causal links between reforms and learning outcomes. There is also a need to better measure learning outcomes. (World Bank 2013.) Researchers have begun to use international assessments to analyze the determinants of learning. They have focused on

such issues as central examinations, curriculum, school autonomy, teachers, unions, student assessments, parental participation, administration and competition, among other factors. The approaches vary but most use an education production function. More recently, researchers have begun to take advantage of over time data and applied more rigorous empirical strategies in order to get at the vexing question of causation. There is a growing use of international assessment results to analyze the determinants of learning in developing and emerging economies. (World Bank 2013.)

University of Helsinki describe quality of education as an entity consisting of various components (figure 1).

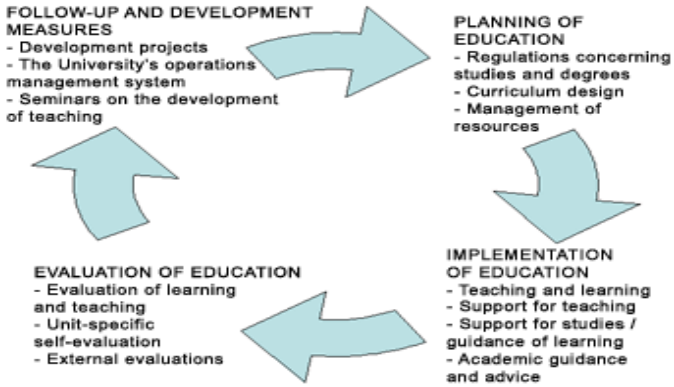


Figure 1. Components of the quality of education (University of Helsinki 2012).

These components are all in relation to each other and when improving one, it affects positively to the others as well. Therefore, when measuring and managing quality of education, one has to be able to control the whole entity.

Based on the University of Helsinki websites, distribution of responsibility for the quality of education is an important matter. The provision of education is managed in the departments, faculties and the University as a whole and the university is responsible for the overall quality and resourcing of education. Faculties are responsible for the quality of their degrees, the attainment of agreed objectives, and for the allocation and prioritizing of resources.

Departments are responsible for the quality of teaching and completed studies in their fields. More specifically, their responsibility encompasses curriculum design, setting learning objectives and defining field-specific learning

assessment criteria and methods, and ensuring the professional qualifications and competence of their teachers. Each teacher is responsible for the quality of his or her teaching and for the assessment of learning outcomes as part of the teaching duty, whereas each student is responsible for the progress of his or her learning and studies. (University of Helsinki 2012.)

To conclude, definitions of quality vary and, to some extent, reflect different perspectives of the individual and society. In a democratic society there must be room for people to hold different views: there is no single definition of quality that is right to the exclusion of all others.
Indeed, we may catch ourselves switching from one perspective to another without being conscious of any conflict. Even if we opt for one definition of quality, the conclusions that we reach when interpreting this notion for higher education would depend on our values and our priorities. The outcomes might be very different, depending on who defines the purpose. We might all have different understandings of quality in higher education and that none of us is necessarily wrong or right. That does not mean, however, that we are absolved of the responsibility for maintaining and enhancing quality (Green 1994, p. 27-28).

3.2 The Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council

According to the website of the Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council (FINHEEC), it is “an independent expert body assisting universities, universities of applied sciences, and the Ministry of Education and Culture in matters relating to evaluation, and thus contributes to improving the quality of higher education”.

They conduct three types of evaluations:

- audits of quality systems of higher education institutions (universities and universities of applied sciences)
- centers of excellence in education evaluations
- thematic evaluations and programme/field-specific evaluations

According to their websites, "The responsibility for the quality of their activities rests with the higher education institutions. FINHEEC's role is to support higher education institutions while they are developing the quality of their activities. When planning the evaluation criteria and methods, higher education institutions' views are sought in advance, for example in writing or at seminars. Moreover, the higher education institutions also give feedback after evaluations, which are utilized in planning future evaluations and developing evaluation methods". (FINHEEC Quality Manual 2010, p. 6.)
Furthermore, "The higher education institution prepares self-evaluation or audit materials for use by the audit group appointed by FINHEEC. The higher education institution's personnel, students and stakeholders participate in interviews and thematic discussions during the auditing visit. The higher education institution then receives a written report from the audit group, which contains observations on its strengths and development targets. However, the responsibility and freedom for deciding on development measures introduced after the evaluation rests with the higher education institution". (FINHEEC Quality Manual 2010, p. 6.)

FINHEEC`s focus and scope in the evaluations regarding the international degree programs is on international degree programs in which the language of instruction is other than Finnish or Swedish and to which students are recruited also from outside Finland. Evaluation is carried out in English.

The evaluation covers both university and university of applied sciences sectors. In the evaluation, international degree programs refer to Bachelor's-level and Master's-level programs. Programs within the term-fee pilot project will also be evaluated. The scope of the evaluation excludes doctoral education and study programs that do not lead to degrees conforming to the Finnish system of higher education.

Overall purpose of the evaluation is to support higher education institutions in the development of international degree programs by identifying good practices and

development needs, by providing recommendations for operational development and by encouraging higher education institutions to continually evaluate and improve the quality of education. (FINHEEC 2012)

3.3 Customer satisfaction

This thesis will consider the students of Saimaa University of Applied Sciences as "customers" or "clients" of the university and thus it is crucial to determine the concept of customer satisfaction properly.

To begin with, customer satisfaction is extremely difficult to measure for several reasons. As Paul Szwarc (2005, p.11) writes in his book, there is no simple management model or research technique that will provide a clear and unambiguous answer as to what drives customer satisfaction and customer loyalty. First of all, requirements for satisfaction are not only unique to each individual customer, they can be extremely difficult to quantify, even on a personal level. The word “satisfaction” is like happiness – it is something we are all interested in and would like to measure – one that is extremely hard to quantify.

Johnson and Gustafsson (2000, p.50) define satisfaction as a customer’s overall evaluation of the purchase and consumption experience with a product or service. Satisfaction can be defined also as the total satisfaction or satisfaction towards a service. A customer can be dissatisfied towards a single transaction but still satisfied towards the company overall. (Ylikoski 2000, p.155).
Furthermore, Schiffman &Kanuk (2004) have defined customer satisfaction as "the difference between customers’ expectations about a product or service and the actual outcome. However, the expectations may differ drastically depending on a customer’s personal values".

Kotler (2009) on the other hand defined satisfaction as “a person’s feelings of pleasure or disappointment resulting from comparing a product are perceived

performance (or outcome) in relation to his or her expectations". Hoyer and MacInnis (2001) said that satisfaction can be associated with feelings of acceptance, happiness, relief, excitement, and delight (Manyi Agbor 2011, p. 2).

As can be seen, defining customer satisfaction in itself is a complex and multiform task. Therefore, measuring the actual level of customer satisfaction can prove to be even trickier. As Bob E. Hayes (2008, p.2) defines, "to use customer's perceptions and attitudes to assess the quality of products and services, customer satisfaction instruments must accurately measure these perceptions and attitudes. If the instruments are poorly developed and inaccurately represent the customer's opinions, decision based on this information can be detrimental to the success of the organization. On the other hand, organizations with accurate information about customer's perceptions about the quality of services and products can make better decision to serve their customers".
In addition, Hayes (2008, p. 2) describes that "businesses have to also count on customers not only to give feedback, but also to be honest in their assessment. Many people, when satisfied, feel no need to contact the company, while others will quietly grumble about flaws in service or products and swear off a company without ever seeking redress or voicing their complaints so that the situation can be remedied."

Companies should always keep in mind that the customer is the success factor of every business, since without customers they simply cannot operate.
Highly satisfied customers bring numerous benefits to the company, since they spread positive word-of-mouth, which lowers the cost of attracting new customers. Higher levels of customer satisfaction also lead to greater customer loyalty and relationship commitment. (Lovelock &Wright 2002; Poutanen 2011, p. 21.)
The customer's most important role for the company's point of view is to bring sales revenue, which is the basic principle for the company's successful operation. In addition, the customer has an important role as a spokesperson for the company and therefore the best customer is a satisfied customer, who spreads the word for the company, which is the most effective form of

advertising. (Lahtinen & Isoviita 1998, p.75; Flinck-Heino, 2009, p.9.) Highly satisfied customers are also more forgiving, meaning that in a case where a single failure occurs, a satisfied customer is naturally more forgiving than unsatisfied customer. This means that high level of customer satisfaction acts as an insurance policy against mistakes.

In addition, loyal customers are less price sensitive and the cost of selling to the loyal customers is much less than the cost of capturing new customers.
Finally, delighted customers are less susceptible to competitive offerings than customers who are simply satisfied or are unhappy with the company's services. (Lovelock & Wright 2002, p. 87; Hill & Alexander 2006, p. 21.)

In contrast, dissatisfied customers are a real cost to a company, because they become the "terrorists" for the company spreading negative word-of-mouth to others. According to numerous researches, dissatisfied customers are more likely to tell people about their dissatisfaction than satisfied customers about their satisfaction towards the company. (Szwarc 2005, p.12.) In detail, satisfied customers are most likely to share their experiences to perhaps five or six people. Equally well, dissatisfied customers are more likely to tell another ten people of their unfortunate experience.

Therefore, the consequences of not satisfying the customers can be severe. According to Hoyer and MacInnis (2001), dissatisfied consumers can decide to discontinue purchasing the good or service, complain to the company or to a third party and perhaps return the item, or as said before, engage in negative word-of-mouth communication.

So, what are then the factors that affect the company's ability to acquire satisfied customers? According to Singh (2006, p. 1), these factors include friendly, courteous and knowledgeable as well as helpful employees, accuracy of billing, competitive pricing, service quality, good value and being quick.
In addition, the company has to always remember that the customers’ needs and wants are the driving force behind their buying behavior, meaning that the needs

state the felt deprivation of a customer, whereas customers' wants refer to "the form taken by human needs as they are shaped by culture and individual personality". (Kotler 2000; Singh 2006, p. 1.)

Regarding the customer satisfaction level, a good customer focus in the company is helpful, which means that strategies and decisions have to always be made with customer centered focus. This also requires the organization to change their services, operations and human resources, since customers are evidently assets to be valued, developed and retained. (Johnson 1998, p. 4; Flinck-Heino 2009 p. 9.)

Customer loyalty is, without a doubt, an essential part and driver of customer satisfaction. As Bansal and Gupta (2001) described that building customer loyalty is not a choice any longer with businesses - it's the only way of building sustainable competitive advantage. Building loyalty with key customers has become a core marketing objective shared by key players in all industries catering to business customers. Furthermore, Bowen and Chen (2001) said "having satisfied customers is not enough, there has to be extremely satisfied customers. This is because customer satisfaction must lead to customer loyalty" .(Singh 2006, p. 3.)

There is also another subtle distinction between satisfied and loyal customers, since they contribute to the company's profitability in different ways. Satisfied customers are more likely to promote the company, because satisfaction is something people are likely to talk about. Loyal customers however are more profitable, because they are more likely to buy additional products, often without shopping around for the best price.

It is to note, that loyalty is about the customer's intention or predisposition to buy, but retention is the actual act of buying again. (Johnson & Gustafsson 2000, p. 7; Szwarc 2005, p.11.) Thus, retention is a stronger measure than loyalty, which makes it potentially one of the most powerful weapons that companies can employ in their fight to gain a strategic advantage and survive in today's ever-increasing competitive environment. It is vitally important to understand the factors that impact on customer retention and the role that it can play in

formulating strategies and plans. (Singh 2006, p.3)

There is an increasing recognition that the ultimate objective of customer satisfaction measurement should be customer loyalty. The notion of customer loyalty may appear at first sight to be outmoded in the era of the Internet, when customers are able to explore and evaluate competing alternatives as well as checking reports from others – at the touch of a button. Yet the evidence shows that the old rules of successful and profitable management still hold good: customer retention is still a key to long-term profits, while on the other side of the coin there is a high cost-penalty to low loyalty. Indeed, the very fact that customers can so readily assess the competing services and products on offer and then so easily make the new purchase does in itself give added weight to the importance of building strong ties of loyalty with customers. (Singh 2006, p. 3.)

Clarke (2001) said, “a business that focuses exclusively on customer satisfaction runs the risk of becoming an undifferentiated brand whose customers believe only that it meets the minimum performance criteria for the category. Long-term customer retention in competitive markets requires the supplier to go beyond mere basic satisfaction and to look for ways of establishing ties of loyalty that will help ward off competitor attack”.(Singh 2006, p.3.)

McIlroy and Barnett (2000) describe that “An important concept to consider when developing a customer loyalty programme is customer satisfaction. Satisfaction is a measure of how well customer’s expectations are met while customer loyalty is a measure of how likely a customer is to repurchase and engage in relationship activities. Loyalty is vulnerable because even if customers are satisfied with the service they will continue to defect if they believe they can get better value, convenience or quality elsewhere. Therefore, customer satisfaction is not an accurate indicator of loyalty. Satisfaction is a necessary but not a sufficient condition of loyalty. In other words, we can have satisfaction without loyalty, but it is hard to have loyalty without satisfaction”. (Singh 2006, p.4.)

How to then build a loyal customer base? Bansal & Gupta suggest following

strategic measures: focus on key customers; proactively generate high level of customer satisfaction with every interaction; anticipate customer needs and respond to them before the competition does; build closer ties with customers; and create a value perception. (Bansal & Gupta 2001; Singh 2006.)

Still, customer satisfaction is not automatically a guarantee of loyalty. In certain industries up to 75% of customers who switch providers say that they were 'satisfied' or even 'very satisfied' with the previous provider. Customers may change providers because of price, new opportunities, or simply because they want some variation. (Storbacka & Lehtinen, 2001; Singh 2006.)

Customer service is naturally a huge part of customer satisfaction. It includes every touch point that a customer experiences with a representative of your company, and it can make or break your customers' perception of your brand. It is just as important to provide polished, professional service to customers, as it is to provide them with reliable, quality products. (Nagy 2012, p.1.)

Based on an article by Nagy (2012, p. 1), the key to a satisfied customer base is to focus on specializing your products and services toward designated markets, rather than trying to be everything to everyone. By actively listening to what your customers are saying, it will let them know you value their feelings and opinions. If a problem arises, empathize — then go above and beyond to fix any issues they may have.
By incorporating the goal of delivering high quality customer service into your overall business plan, your employees naturally will develop the ability to respond to customers' needs and concerns. This ongoing commitment is one of the most important ingredients in the recipe to customer satisfaction and, in turn, your business's success. (Nagy 2012, p.1.)

3.3.1 Customer satisfaction analysis

In order for the company to attain information about the current level of customer satisfaction, and thus create strategies to improve customer satisfaction, the level

of customer satisfaction needs to be measured. (Fečiková 2004, p. 58.) But how the organization is able to measure their customer’s satisfaction level efficiently and accurately? Bob Hayes (2008, p.2) suggest surveys and/or questionnaires, since in order to incorporate customer's perceptions and attitudes into their quality improvement efforts, companies must be able to gauge the customer's attitudes accurately. One way to measure these is through questionnaires. Therefore, companies should design customer satisfaction questionnaires that accurately assess customer's perceptions about the quality of services or products.

A questionnaire can be defined as a research instrument which consists of a series of questions as the purpose of gathering information from respondents. According to Proctor (2003, p. 178-180), it is an effective method for data collection when the researcher knows what is required and how to measure the variable factors. The questionnaire has three major parts; the introduction which has to be persuasive, the body which consists of questions that cover the information needed and the basic data of all the demographics about the respondents. Self- identification is the starting point of the questionnaire. Prior to the study the company has to identify the research problem or objectives, for example what we need to study, why we need to study and how to conduct the study. (Flinck-Heino 2009, p.21.)

But, these surveys are somewhat meaningless to the company without thorough and clear interpretation on the results, which enables the company to take needed corrective measures. In order to do that, companies should conduct a customer satisfaction analysis. Customer satisfaction analysis can be defined as a methodology you can use to analyze the results of a customer satisfaction survey and identify ways to improve customer satisfaction and retention. In addition, the insights from the analysis can be shared amongst staff to both raise awareness of customers’ expectations and take corrective action. (Hayes 2008, p.3.)

When doing a customer satisfaction analysis, measuring the satisfaction levels of

current customers reveals the customers needs for service development, which helps in analyzing customer retention and commitment.
Effective customer satisfaction measurement should start form the following questions: 1. Who are the company's customers?; 2. What does the customers satisfaction include and what does it mean?; 3. What does the company need to measure?; 4. How to measure it?
One common approach is to ask customers to identify what factors are important in satisfying them and then to evaluate the performance of a service provider on these factors. (Lovelock & Wright 2002, p. 272.)

When measuring customer satisfaction it is not enough to determine customer needs, but also to identify their relative importance. In that way the company can identify the quality that customers really want. Furthermore, based on the importance, the company can structure the customer's needs into a hierarchy of primary, secondary and tertiary needs in order to determine customer satisfaction with the features that really matter for the customers. (Fečiková 2004, p. 61.)
The primary needs are the strategic needs that have a strong, positive influence to purchase decisions of the customers and the prospects. The top five to ten needs are the base for customer satisfaction. The secondary needs are tactical, while the tertiary needs usually provide the detail. Sometimes there is a very visible and high customer satisfaction, but with the features that aren`t very important. This is why in the strategy formulation the customer's primary needs are to be highlighted. (Fečiková 2004, p. 61; Poutanen 2011, p. 22.)

3.3.2 Customer satisfaction and social media

When discussing the different aspects of customer satisfaction, social media is nowadays a force to be reckoning with, a force that companies simply cannot afford to ignore.

The whole face of customer service and customer satisfaction has changed in recent years due to the arise of social media. As Breed (2011, p.1.) explains “Customer service used to be managed as an in-store experience, but then the

telephone, then the web and now customers have experiences across thousands of touch points or more. Social media has changed the way the customers want to interact and certainly the pace by which they expect to be interacted with”. In 2011, there were hundreds of millions of active blogs, over 175 million registered users on Twitter and Facebook gets over 600 million visits /month. All of these sites offer the ability to easily post anything to entire networks of loosely coupled “friends” in a way that creates a permanent digital record that is easily accessed by any search engine. (Breed 2011, p.1.)

This means that if customer satisfaction is a result of the combined experiences that a customer has over time, then every touch point presents an opportunity to improve or diminish overall satisfaction. The challenge is the daunting amount of new possible outlets that customers use for those experiences that companies have to contend with. As noted above, the numbers of people using social media and the amount of new social media channels being rapidly adopted are simply impossible to keep up with. (Breed 2011, p.1.)

Consequently, regardless of their field of business or size, companies’ customer service departments are currently facing the tough situation of adapting to these social media based communications from customers. Kambria Nagy (2012, p. 1) also suggests that social media is the key element to customer satisfaction through usage of different social media outlets, since companies do operate in an ever more "social" corporate environment and their customers are eager to use forums and other social media outlets to ask for assistance, express their views and share information about products and services.

In addition, James Michell (2012) implied that "Social Media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn can level the playing field enabling businesses of all sizes to interact directly with customers like never before – so companies must look at this as an opportunity to increase their customer satisfaction. Solving customer issues quickly and efficiently via social media shows both a dedication to consumer experience and transparency as a company serving them". (Michell 2012.)

The golden rule when you are looking to deliver great customer service is to communicate with customers through the medium that they want to use, not the medium that your business would prefer them to use. This means that a company should have a strategy in place to manage their interactions and turn them to an advantage. (Hansen 2013, p. 1.)

Hansen (2013) suggests that using social media to improve customer satisfaction is less about the channel used and more about how it is used to communicate. It is important to respond to customers quickly – an immediate solution is not mandatory but customers need to know that the company is working on it. In addition, communicating through a human, instead of a corporate voice, is important. By being personable the customers know that although they are communicating virtually, there is a real person out there who cares. (Hansen 2013, p.1.)

Social media can also be a priceless tool when measuring customer satisfaction. Online surveillance of social networking sites has become the latest tool in the arsenal of techniques for measuring and predicting customer buying behavior. According to an article in *USA Today*, Indiana University has developed techniques for capturing daily tweets, analyzing them with mood measurement tools, rating the mood of the tweets as positive or negative and calm versus anxious, and then quantifying the data in summary form. Since many people use twitter and other social networking sites to comment on their experiences, this can provide a wealth of data that might be used to measure customer satisfaction without having to do surveys. (Brown 2012.)

In addition, new technologies are giving leading companies today a scientific approach for measuring and improving the relationships they have with key customers that drive real business results like growth and profits. Companies relying on unsophisticated measures like surveys are likely to get left behind by those adopting a more systematic approach. (Brown 2012.)

In a nutshell, when implemented and managed well, social media has numerous

advantages; it can help to respond to customers quickly, it can help turn a possibly negative situation into a positive by building a direct relationship with a customer and it can help to delight customers beyond their expectations. (Hansen 2013, p.1.)

Social media is also highly connected to another crucial element in improving customer satisfaction - word-of-mouth communication (WOM).
Yang et al. (2004, p. 33) defined word of mouth as the "verbal person-to-person communication between groups, such as independent experts, family and friends, without a commercial purpose". It is not only the input to the potential customers concerning a product or service for sale, but also the output after his or her purchasing. Word-of-mouth has a strong impact to customers' judgments and it is recognized as a more reliable information provider than other communication channels by customers. (Yang et al. 2004.)

Harrison-Walker (2001, p. 63) defined WOM communication in his article as "informal, person-to-person communication between a perceived non-commercial communicator and a receiver regarding a product, an organization, or a service". It is a form of communication between consumers about what they think and the use of a product, service or an organization. In a commercial setting, WOM includes opinions, consumers sharing attitudes and reactions about products, businesses or services with other people. (Schaap 2012, p. 10.)
The valence of word-of-mouth may be positive, neutral or negative. Examples of positive of word-of-mouth, broadly defined, include relating pleasant, vivid or novel experiences, recommendations to others and even conspicuous display. Negative word-of-mouth on the other hand includes behaviors such as product denigration, relating unpleasant experiences, rumor and private complaining. (Anderson 1998, p. 2.)

The Word of Mouth Marketing Association (WOMMA) is the official trade association dedicated to word of mouth and social media marketing. Founded in 2004, WOMMA is the leader in ethical word of mouth marketing practices through

its education (Word of mouth marketing association 2010).
According to their website, all word of mouth marketing techniques are based on the concepts of customer satisfaction, two-way dialog, and transparent communications. It is important to notice that word-of-mouth marketing is not about creating word of mouth – it is about learning how to make it work within a marketing objective. In addition, WOMMA continues “word-of-mouth can be encouraged and facilitated. Companies can work hard to make people happier, they can listen to consumers, they can make it easier for them to tell their friends, and they can make certain that influential individuals know about the good qualities of a product or service”. (Word of mouth marketing association 2010.)

The significant influence of word of mouth on customers’ purchasing behavior is evidenced and supported by many recent researches. Nearly all the recent studies conducted around the subject have implied that WOM is recognized as both a consequence of service quality/customer satisfaction and an antecedent to revenue and profit due to new customer acquisition. (Wangenheim & Bayòn 2007, p. 1.) Hence, most marketers and product providers show an increasing interest to include WOM into their market strategies (Yang et al. 2004, p. 33). Since word of mouth has its special characteristics, it is vivid and there is chance to communicate both-side, it is regarded as reliable and trustworthy by customers. Kotler (2000), also stated that word-of-mouth is the only marketing method spreading from one customer to another in a very low-cost manner. Still, this powerful tool cannot be directly controlled by companies, because it is originated by customers themselves. Therefore, how companies can affect customers’ word of mouth communication is extremely crucial. (Yang et al. 2004, p. 33.)

Furthermore, companies should manage their word of mouth communications via organizing their marketing activities, since by increasing or decreasing the frequency and quantity of marketing activities WOM can be controlled. For example, the raise of marketing activities can drive more attention from customers and thus activate their information requirement for their product. On the contrary, when more negative WOM appears, company can still use their

marketing activities to provide correction or explanation. (Yang et al. 2004, p.34.)

3.3.3 The Gummesson 4Q model of offering quality

One of the earliest service quality models developed was "Perceived Service Quality," by Grönroos (1988). Grönroos postulated that service quality is dependent upon the service, which the customer expects and the perceived service. The experienced quality consists of two dimensions, namely technical quality and functional quality.
Technical quality refers to the technical ability or know-how that a company possesses; it is an objective assessment [the "What"] comprising such issues as technical solutions, machines, computerized systems and know how.
Functional quality [the "How"] is a subjective assessment comprising attitudes, internal relations, behavior, service mindedness, appearance, accessibility and customer contacts.

Grönroos (1988) maintained that technical quality could be improved by improving the technical skills of service personnel or by the increased use of modern technology, and functional quality could be improved by ensuring satisfying service encounters and maintaining good interpersonal relations. In service businesses the consumer is not only interested in "what" he receives as an outcome of the production process, but in the process itself. "How" he gets the technical outcome or technical quality is also important to him and to his view of the service he has received.

The Gummesson 4Q Model of Offering Quality is the result of a process of synthesis, which Gummesson carried out in order to find a comprehensive model which could explain quality in both goods and service context.(Gummesson, 1993, p.222; Dixon & Napolitano, 2006, p.13.)
Therefore, when defining the concept of customer perceived quality properly, the Gummesson 4Q Model of Offering Quality is a vastly used tool, since it combines both goods and services regardless of whether services or physical

goods are the core offering (Grönroos, 2001). As businesses evolve towards service provision, it is more difficult to distinguish the difference between physical goods and intangible services. Gummesson showed that the degree of customer satisfaction depends on the correlation between the customer's expectation and experience and also without ignoring other influences such as the company's image. (Gummesson 1983, p.219.)

However, Grönroos' service quality model was not without criticism, and in an attempt to address some of the limitations of his model, Grönroos collaborated with Gummesson in revising his model (Gummesson & Grönroos, 1988).

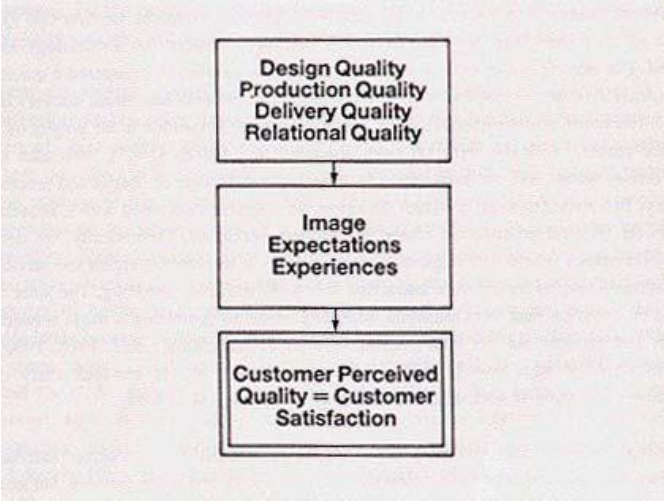


Figure 2. The 4 Q Goods quality model from Gummesson 1983.

This model, (Haksever et al. p. 2), established four different dimensions of quality: design quality - the way in which the product is designed in order to perform the functions needed to satisfy the customer; production quality - the successful manufacture of the product; delivery quality - the delivery of the goods; and relational quality - is the achievement of the building of a network of relations external and internal as the result of the interactive marketing function from time and part time marketers.

These four dimensions of quality were first described by Gummesson in his study of Ericsson manufacturing (Gummesson, 1983).

The next step was an analysis of the classic service quality model by Grönroos. As previously mentioned, characteristics such as the simultaneous consumption,

production of the service and the matching of the experiences and expectations are key features of the service quality concept. Moreover the role of image serves as a filter in the building of experiences and in the formulating of expectations.

The differences between the two models are clear. What is evidenced in particular are the different dimensions of quality. Two in the Grönroos model (technical and functional quality) and four in the Gummesson model (design, production, delivery and relational quality) (Gummesson 1993, p.222).

While design and relational quality are two dimensions that can also be directly applied to a service context, in light of Grönroos considerations production and delivery quality need to be adapted from a goods to a service context. This is because production and delivery in a service context are often experienced concurrently, since the customer consumes the service at the same time the company produces it.

From a synthesis between the two models Gummesson produced the 4q model of offering quality (Gummesson, 1993, p. 228). In this model (see figure 3) the quality dimensions have been changed in order to fit the model to every context, may it be goods or services.

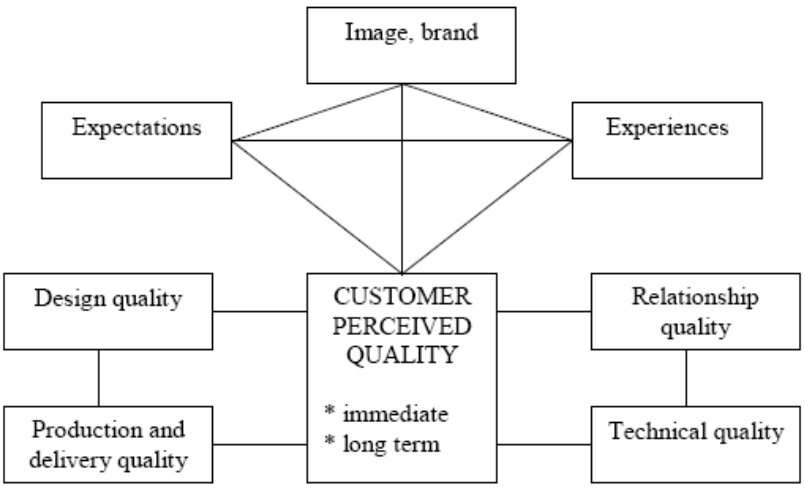


Figure 3. 4Q Model of offering quality Grönroos 2000.

In the top part of the model the features which have already been described

such as image expectations and experiences are represented. It shows the variables affecting expectations and experiences, and also adds a third dimension of image and branding. It gives a useful visual summary of how respondents to the survey intended for this research will formulate their views on experiences and expectations. What are of particular interest are the new quality dimensions: design quality refers to how well the offering is designed in order to satisfy customer needs, it is a characteristic strictly related to the “service concept” described in the paragraphs above.

Production and Delivery quality instead are the result of the rethinking of the old production quality and delivery quality dimensions. The synthesis of the old two dimensions in a new one allows the model to be applied both to services and goods. This dimension implies costs of correcting mistakes delivery costs, delays in deliveries, etc. On the right side of the model the result of the production of an offering is described. This results in two quality dimensions:

Relational quality which is linked to the perception the customer has during the service production offering. This is what corresponds in the Gummesson view to the functional quality described by Grönroos.

Technical quality represents the future benefits of the offering and is a measurement of how effective the goods or services were in fulfilling their desired function. It is of critical importance when it comes to repurchasing decisions (Grönroos 2001).

4 Empirical part

In the empirical part, the research method, the research study i.e. the questionnaire and the results from it are presented and discussed.

The following five concepts are used in the empirical part: student services, curriculum/study plan, work placement and exchange period.

- Student services

Student services include services such as library and information services, IT and

information network services, career and placement services, mentoring etc. Each campus in the University of Applied Sciences has its own student office, where students can get information about certificates of study, grades, student identification cards, advice and applications regarding financial aid, etc.

- Curriculum / Study Plan

Framework of the curriculum:

- Basic studies 34 credits
- Core studies of uas
  - Introduction to business
  - Operational tools
- Professional studies 116 credits
  - Going global
  - Financial management
  - Managing people and organizations
  - International marketing
  - Global supply chain management
  - Working in projects
  - Research and development
- Special language studies
- Elective studies 15 credits
- Bachelor's thesis 15 credits
- Practical training 30 credits

Total 210 credits

The curriculum structure may vary regarding the starting year of the studies.

- Work placement

Work placement or clinical practice is an integral part of polytechnic studies. At the Saimaa University of Applied Sciences, the scope of the Bachelor of Business Administration degree programme is 210 credits, of which practical training constitutes 30. This is furthermore divided into two stages: the basic practical training after the first year of studies and the professional practical training at the final stages of studies, both 15 credits. The goal of professional

practice is to train students in a supervised environment regarding the basic practical aspects of work in their chosen field. One week of supervised training equals 1.5 study credits. Work placement/clinical practice can be done either in Finland or abroad.

- Exchange period

The third year of the programme includes a semester study period at one of our partner institutions. Saimaa University of Applied Sciences has lively student exchange in the frames of different exchange programs, such as Nordplus, Erasmus and FIRST, as well as on the basis of its bilateral collaboration agreements with foreign partner institutions. The number of the incoming exchange students is yearly about 100 students. Approximately the same number of Saimaa University of Applied Sciences students study yearly for one or two semesters abroad in our partner institutions. (Saimaa UAS 2013)

- Webropol-programme

According to its websites (2013), the Webropol-programme is an online survey and analysis software. It has over 40 000 users utilizing the Webropol 2.0 programme, thus making it the market leader in Scandinavia. Their main goal is to transform information into knowledge and understanding for various purposes, such as

- Conducting research and sending surveys
- Registrations for events
- Gathering feedback
- Reporting
- Text analysis and
- Quantitative analysis (Webropol 2013)

4.1 Research method

The chosen research method was quantitative research. According to Aliaga and Gunderson (2006), quantitative research can be described as “Explaining phenomena by collecting numerical data that are analyzed using mathematically based methods (in particular statistics)”.

In other words, quantitative research is a research that uses numerical analysis and reduces the data into numbers, such as percentages. The researcher knows in advance what he/she is looking for and all aspects of the study are carefully designed before the data is collected. The objective of quantitative research is to develop and employ mathematical models, theories and/or hypotheses pertaining to phenomena. (Crossman 2013)

Quantitative research is generally done by using scientific methods, which includes the following steps:

- Developing models, theories, and hypotheses of what the researcher expects to find.
- Developing instruments and methods for measuring the data.
- Experimental control and manipulation of variables.
- Collecting the data.
- Modeling and analyzing the data.
- Evaluating the results.

In this research, questionnaires were sent through the Webropol-programme to the email addresses of students studying in IB09, IB10, IB11 and IB12, which enabled the answering process to be more convenient for them as well as the data collection to be more efficient for the author. In addition, information about the research was posted on to the Saimia UAS Moodle platforms to ensure a wide knowledge and highlight the importance on the matter.

Main reason for choosing this method was to secure the broadest possible sample among the respondents, thus enabling a comprehensive overall understanding from their perceptions. This also aids the end results of the research to have a good coverage.

4.2 Research study

As stated before, the research questionnaire was done by using the Webropol-programme in order to make the collection and analysis of the results

more efficient and less time-consuming.

According to QuaDem (Quality Assessment of Digital Educational Materials 2013), a questionnaire is “a research instrument consisting of a list of questions that a number of people are asked so that information can be collected about something”. Most often this method of data collection is used to gain statistical data that can serve as the basis for scientific research.

In this research questionnaire, a combination of open-ended and scaled questions was used, therefore providing a good amount of overall information as well as deeper and more insightful knowledge when needed. This also offered the respondents to have a chance in expressing their thoughts with their own words.

In the scaled questions, a decision to use a scale from 1- 4 was made in attempt to minimize the middle-ground answers. These "ok" answers would not really offer information either way, regarding the satisfactory level of the students.

Out of the total 160 students studying in the four IB-groups at Saimaa UAS, 27 replied to the questionnaire, which makes the responding level to 16, 9%.

Divided by groups, the table below shows the responding shares (figure 4):

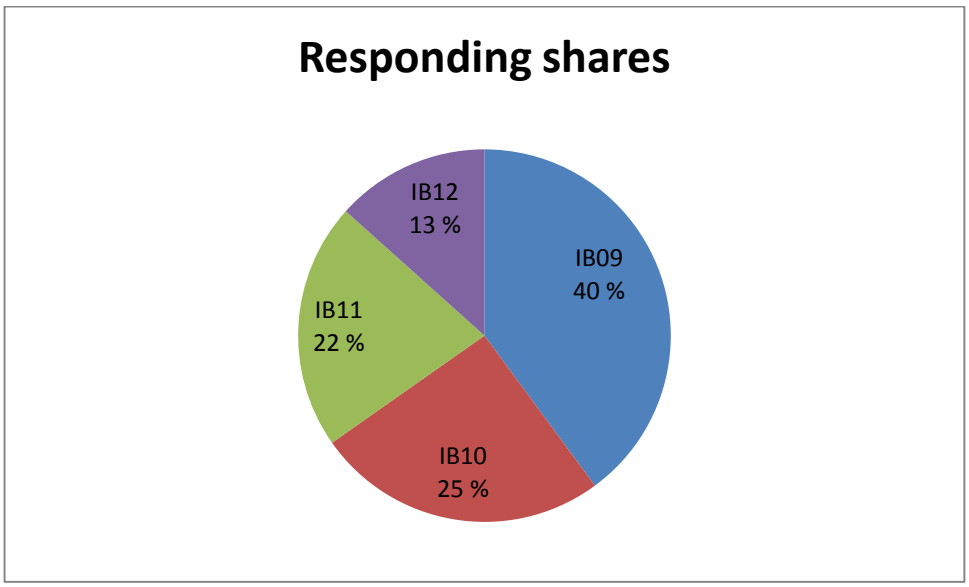


Figure 4. Responding shares by groups.

4.3 Research results

The first four questions were grouping questions about the respondent's age, gender, group and nationality.

Regarding the respondents` age, 37% were in the age group of 16 - 20, 55,6% in the age group of 21 - 25 and 3, 7% in age group of 26 - 30 as well as in the age group of 36 - 40. Out of the 27 respondents, 26 % were men and 74 % female.

As can be seen from the table below (figure 5), the distribution between the four IB-groups was relatively equal among them. This is an excellent factor, since it makes the comparison between the groups valid. Still, most of the respondents, with 37%, were from IB09 and the least were from IB12, with 15%.

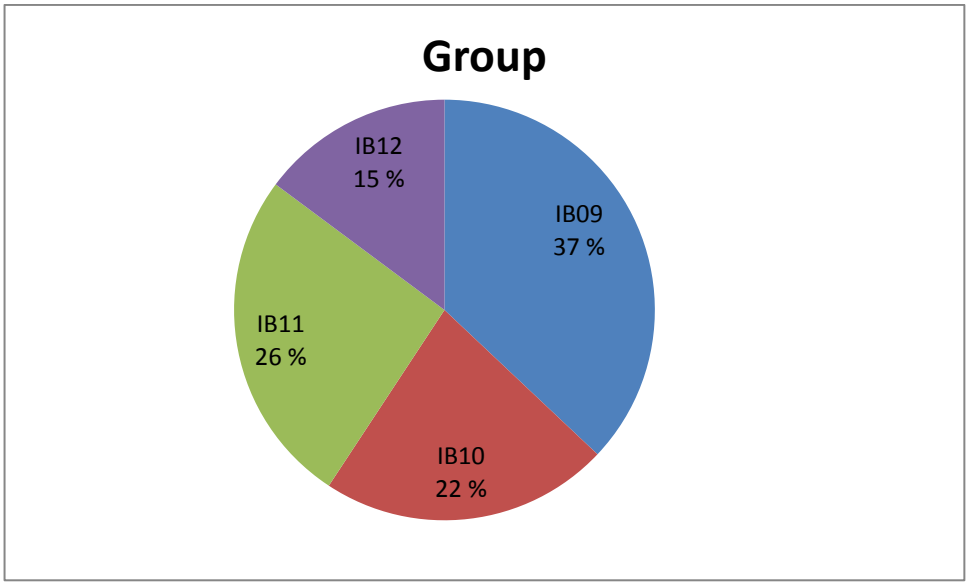


Figure 5. Division of respondents by groups.

From the respondents, 29,7% were Finnish and 70,3% were international students.

4.3.3 Expectations

"What were your original expectations on the Degree Programme in International Business?" was asked from the respondents to determine their expectations.

This was an interesting question for the whole thesis, since as mentioned before, expectations can be defined as the starting point when the objective is to

generate the best possible result for the organization through customer satisfaction, since they can be seen as a customer's internal standards that he/she uses to judge the quality of a service experience (Rope& Pöllänen 1994, p.30). Therefore the variety and diversity of the answers collected is delightful, since it offers a basis for the analysis.

The importance of internationality and multicultural environment can be seen in many responses: "*International learning environment with a lot of active activities, practical cases and updated business issues, as well as real life company meetings", "emphasize on international aspects of business life".*
Furthermore, better language skills were mentioned: "*To get familiar with the business environment and processes. Also to get vast knowledge of working with different nationalities and strong English language skills, and of course the necessary skills to work in various professions in different firms".*

The significance of close cooperation with local business companies was a major factor, too: "*I expected more meetings with real companies, more visits to enterprises, more practical courses", "As the programme is supposed to be more practical than for example University of technology, I was hoping that by the end of our studies we would have good connections at least in Lappeenranta".*
Assistance with opening up a business in Finland and information about entrepreneurship were also important: "*Practical knowledge of how to open the successful business in Finland or elsewhere and the opportunity of finding good job in Finland," "I expected I would be taught more precisely where should I start from in the wish to start up own business, rather than studying everything "a little".*
In addition, the expectation for practicality as a whole, e.g. concerning the style of teaching and studying, was mentioned often: "*I was expecting a lot of real time learning, not just traditional bookish knowledge".*

As shown in the table below (figure 6), these expectations had been met fairly well.

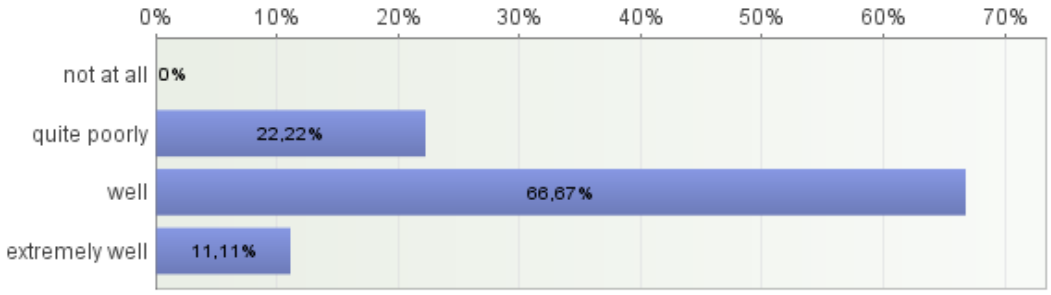


Figure 6. Expectations for the Degree Programme.

Majority from the respondents with 66,67% felt that their expectations from the IB-programme had been met well and 11, 11% extremely well.

4.3.4 Experiences

After the respondent's expectations from the IB-programme were determined, the nature of their experiences from the Degree Programme came next.
As the table below shows (figure 7), 77,78 % from the respondents rated their overall experiences as good, which can be considered to be an excellent result.

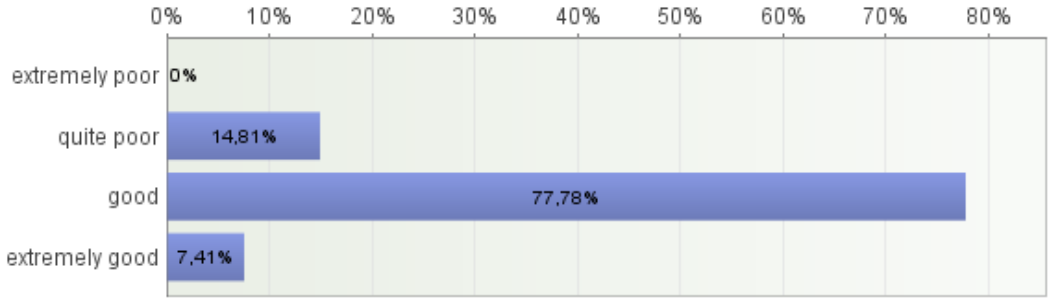


Figure 7. Experiences from the Degree Programme.

When asked to rate the following individually in the scale of 1-4 (figure 8), the student services received the best reviews with the average grade of 3.44, which display the content towards library, student's office etc. In addition, the exchange period is appreciated with the average grade of 3.15.
On the other hand, respondents gave the lowest rates to the work placement with an average grade of 2.56 and to the quality of teaching with average grade of 2.63.

	Extremely	Quite	Good	Extremely	Total	

	poor	poor		good		Average
Quality of courses	0%	25.93%	62.96%	11.11%	27	2.85
Quality of teaching	0%	37.04%	62.96%	0%	27	2.63
Student services (student office, library etc.)	0%	3.7%	48.15%	48.15%	27	3.44
Curriculum / Study Plan	3.7%	29.63%	48.15%	18.52%	27	2.81
Work placement	11.11%	44.44%	22.22%	22.22%	27	2.56
Exchange period	3.7%	11.11%	51.85%	33.33%	27	3.15
Total	**3.09%**	**25.31%**	**49.38%**	**22.22%**	**162**	**2.91**

Figure 8. Grades.

These two aspects also received complaints in the next question" *Would you like to improve one or more? Why and how?"*

This question inspired suggestions for improvement in the quality of teaching, especially with the teachers motivational and language skills: "*Some teachers teach in a very boring way with monotonous voice", "Teaching should have more enthusiasm and be more active", "some new teachers don't have fluency in English".* On the other hand, although many complained about the quality of teaching, only few had concrete suggestions for improvement in that specific matter.

The structure and content of the courses taught received some negative feedback: "*The courses should have more actual information and less group works that have no benefit", "Courses may be more diverse and complicated".*

The number of group works got its share, too: *Some group works are great; some feel like they are done only because there has to be a group work to fill the blanks of a real content in the course".*

The exchange period was rarely mentioned, for some reason. One respondent felt that: *"Exchange period shouldn't be compulsory at all, because in our case we had to extend our studies, because some compulsory courses were not offered immediately after we returned from exchange, but instead they went on while we were abroad.*

Another respondent was relatively unhappy with the partner university: *"The problem with the exchange was the unmet expectations of the partner university.*

I thought that the courses are at least same quality as in Saimaa and that they would somehow fit my curriculum and study plan. I was somewhat disappointed when it wasn't like that. The courses were really basic business courses for first or second year students, which meant that I was pretty much doing same courses again as in Finland. This meant that I was lacking behind in my curriculum, because I couldn't get the courses done which were planned to be done during the exchange period. This meant that all the courses from exchange went to elective studies".

In addition, more assistance with the preparations for the exchange period, meaning the documents, requirements for the partner university etc. was needed. One respondent wished for more visiting teachers from partnering universities, since they would offer a bit different view on business studies. *"At the moment there are a handful of teachers that teach in most of my courses".*

Lastly, the question about the overall satisfaction on the Degree Programme (figure 9) was asked and it offered very positive results:

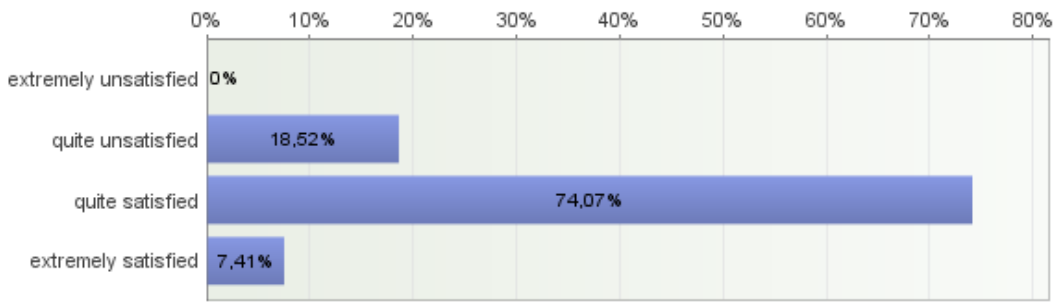


Figure 9. Satisfaction on the Degree Programme.

One respondent wrote that: *"Even though there were some (read. a bunch) of issues in the IB09-curriculum I feel that people in charge of Business Degree have taken the issue seriously and changed it for the better. In conclusion, it's great to see that improvement have been actively made. People rarely get anything right in the first time anyway."*

4.3.5 Study plan

According to the objectives and contents set in the Study Plan (SoleOps), "*studies provide you with versatile competencies for diverse aspects of international business operations including studies in marketing, finance, logistics and management. Foreign languages, different cultures and global business operations form an essential part of the programme*".

When asked how the Degree Programme matched these objectives (figure 10), the majority felt that these objectives had been met well:

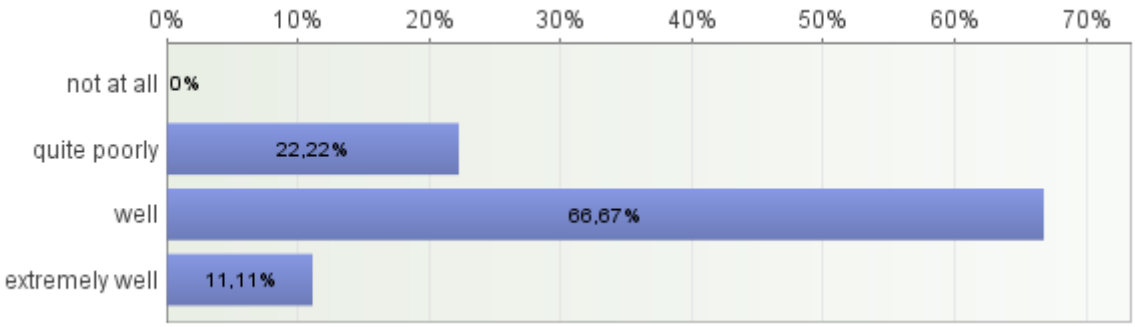


Figure 10. Objectives on study plan.

According to the Study Plan (SoleOps), the Degree Programme provides following competences:
"Basic business competences, international business and marketing competences, oral and written communication skills, project and team working skills, managements, leadership and supervisory skills, skills of current IT applications, research and analytical skills".

When asked if the respondents felt that they had acquired these competencies (figure 11), the results were again relatively good:

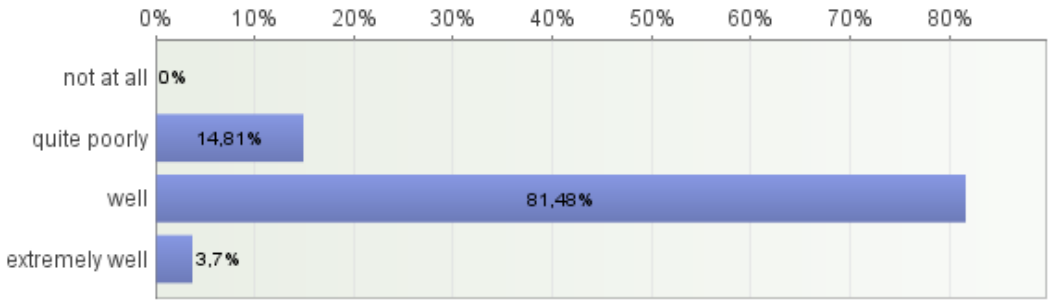


Figure 11. Competencies.

Some were very satisfied with the study plan: "*All subjects are good and useful for students, so nothing to remove".* In particular courses related to marketing and sales management as well as logistics got appraisal for being interesting and easily connected to working life. In relation, more economics, law and management courses were needed.

In turn, the respondents felt that the study plan should be designed into a more focused and compact package with deeper knowledge and competence: "*SoleOps could be a little bit more focused. As now in the end of my studies I feel like I have been "forced" to study little bit from all the fields of business but not as much as in the normal business side which is taught in Finnish. I feel more like I have bits and pieces from there and there but not as "whole" picture as I would like to have",*

"The curriculum ought to be thought through. At its current state it didn't provide me the skill I would have wanted. I feel that I know a little (or very little in the case of accounting) of everything. This is obvious in work interviews, where I am asked the following question "What did you study in your degree, I mean actually" I do not know how to answer the previous question."

"The curriculum should definitely be changed into more segmented but clear entity, meaning that after the first year students would be able to choose their major subject and focus on the courses that are really interesting.

Many also wished for more flexibility and freedom to choose the courses: "*Compulsory language courses should be elective. I think that the programme should be more flexible and give the students an opportunity to make their study*

programme unique and suited for them".

One specific factor that was mentioned often in a negative sense was the number and content of the accounting courses: *"better content to the accounting courses - four courses and still very little actual understanding of the important factors in accounting".*

Respondents wished to have less courses related to culture and language, too. "*Too many courses are concentrated on intercultural aspects, instead of putting more emphasis on studying material and methodology."*

4.3.6. Work placement

The work placement periods, especially the basic practical training, divided opinions among the respondents the most. The following table shows (figure 12), how the basic practical training period had matched the respondents goals:

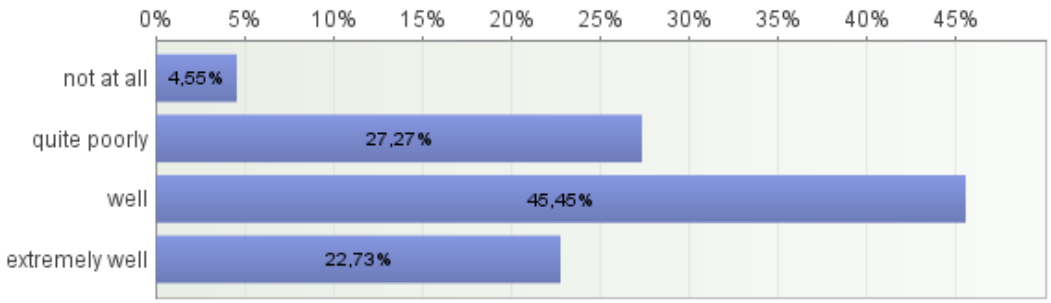


Figure 12. Basic practical training.

When asked how the professional practical training had matched their goals (figure 13), the results were noticeably more positive:

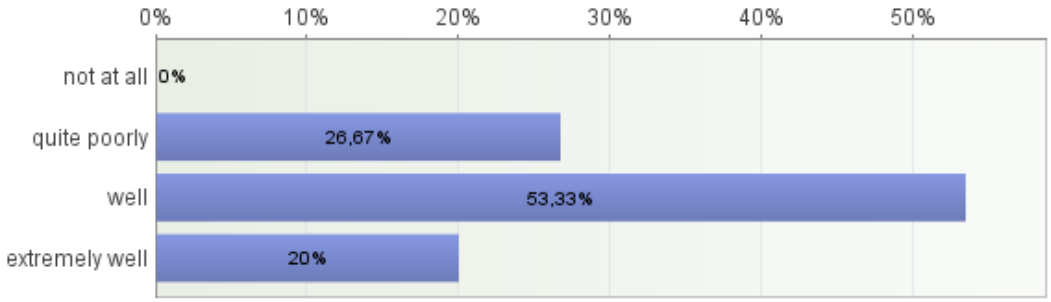


Figure 13. Professional practical training.

Work placement was the object of a lot complaints, especially respondents would have wanted to have a lot more assistance and help in finding a suitable work place: "*I expected more guidance, tips, and ideas from school; and also interest from local firms, but there were not much of those things. I have seen that for my engineer friends it has worked much better." "Employers are not interested in interns; therefore in most of cases students don't have versatile tasks and are left for themselves. I suppose that the university should provide more help to students, work in cooperation with companies and recommend them the best students. That reflects the purpose of educational program - to provide talented students with work placements."*

One respondent suggested an equivalent of DuuniDay to SUAS, so that BBA students could get in contact with local companies and thus get training placements and summer jobs.

Again, the difference in opinions regarding the basic and professional practical trainings was obvious: "*The practical work placement period is quite useless, because the majority of students work in any case besides studying. The success of the professional work placement is entirely up to the student and has nothing to do with the school, but it is useful if the student manages to acquire a good position".*

Still, there were naturally positive feedbacks, too. Many felt that the professional training period had offered them an abundance of useful experiences and helped them to acquire the skills and competence they needed.
"*I had a chance to use the skills that I acquired during study year in a real life, at a work place. I was responsible for the job by myself and had to manage different situations in real time."*
Respondent`s overall experiences from the work placement were relatively good (figure 14):

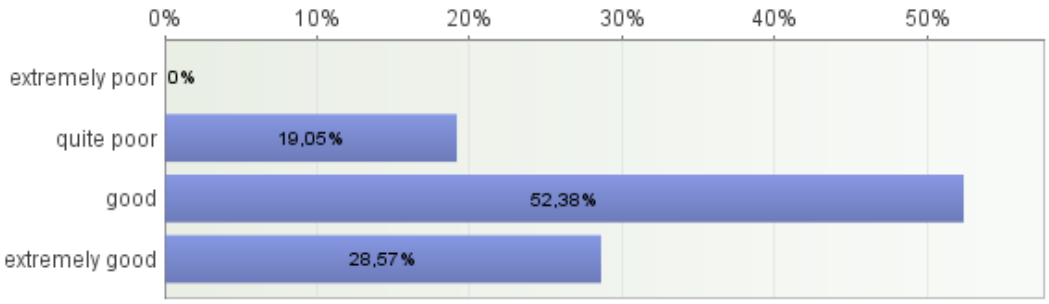
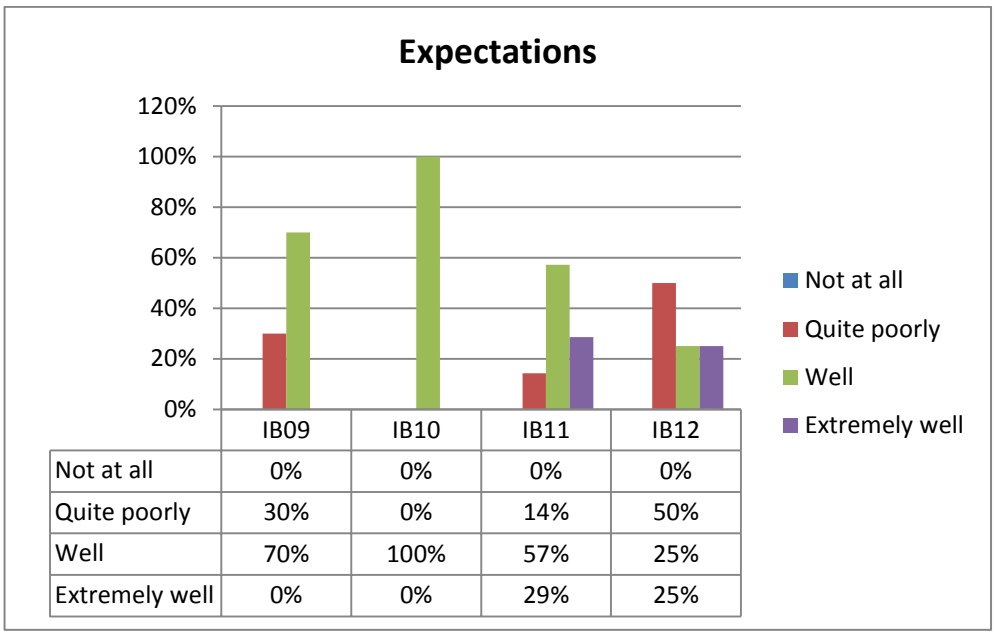


Figure 14. Overall experiences from the work placement.

4.3.7 Differences between the groups

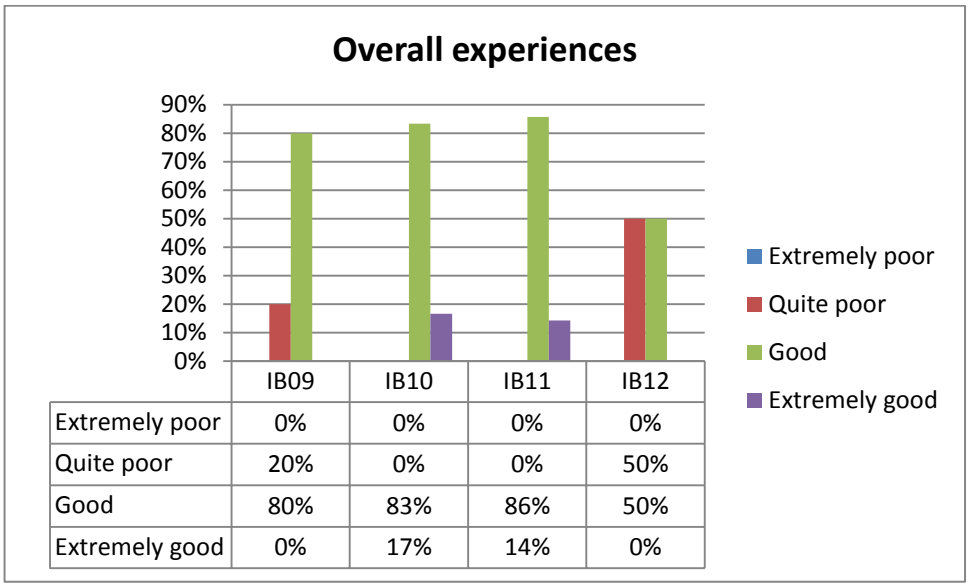
As can be seen from the table below (figure 15), there were some differences between the groups regarding the question “How has these expectations been met?”



	IB09	IB10	IB11	IB12
Not at all	0%	0%	0%	0%
Quite poorly	30%	0%	14%	50%
Well	70%	100%	57%	25%
Extremely well	0%	0%	29%	25%

Figure 15. Differences between groups in expectations

From IB10, all the respondents answered “well” in a very united manner, whereas in IB12 the answers were a lot more scattered. Quite surprisingly, respondents in IB12 also felt that their expectations had been met the least out of these four groups.

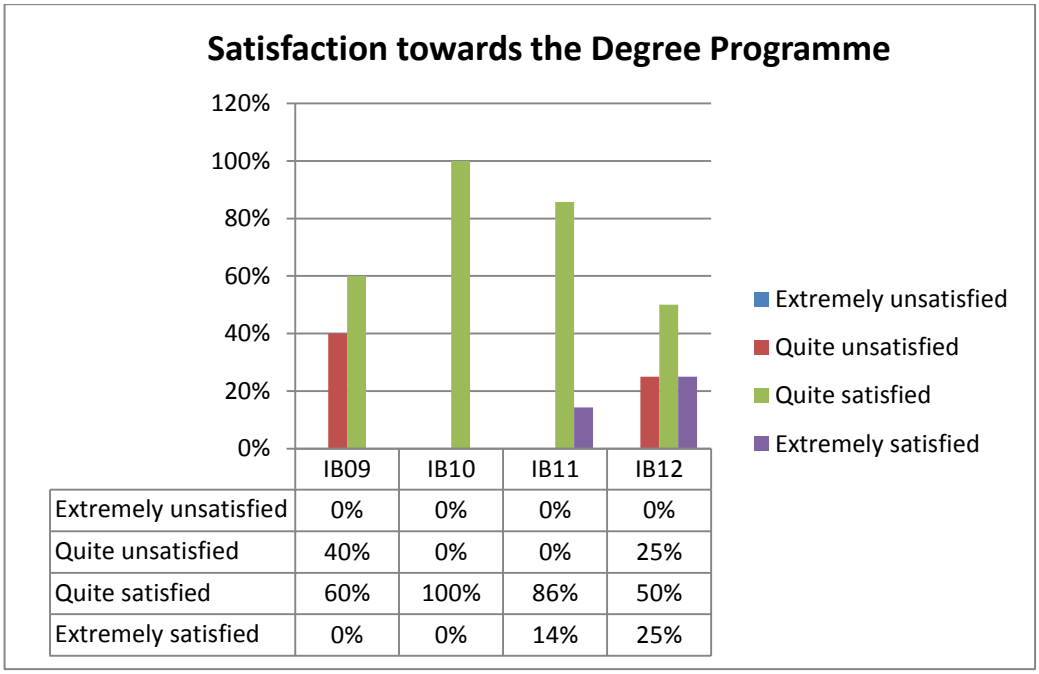


	IB09	IB10	IB11	IB12
Extremely poor	0%	0%	0%	0%
Quite poor	20%	0%	0%	50%
Good	80%	83%	86%	50%
Extremely good	0%	17%	14%	0%

Figure 16. Differences between groups in overall experiences

Again, as shown in the table above (figure 16), IB12 were the least satisfied out of the four groups, when asked "What are your overall experiences from the Degree Programme (at the moment)?"

Otherwise no major differences occurred between the groups.



	IB09	IB10	IB11	IB12
Extremely unsatisfied	0%	0%	0%	0%
Quite unsatisfied	40%	0%	0%	25%
Quite satisfied	60%	100%	86%	50%
Extremely satisfied	0%	0%	14%	25%

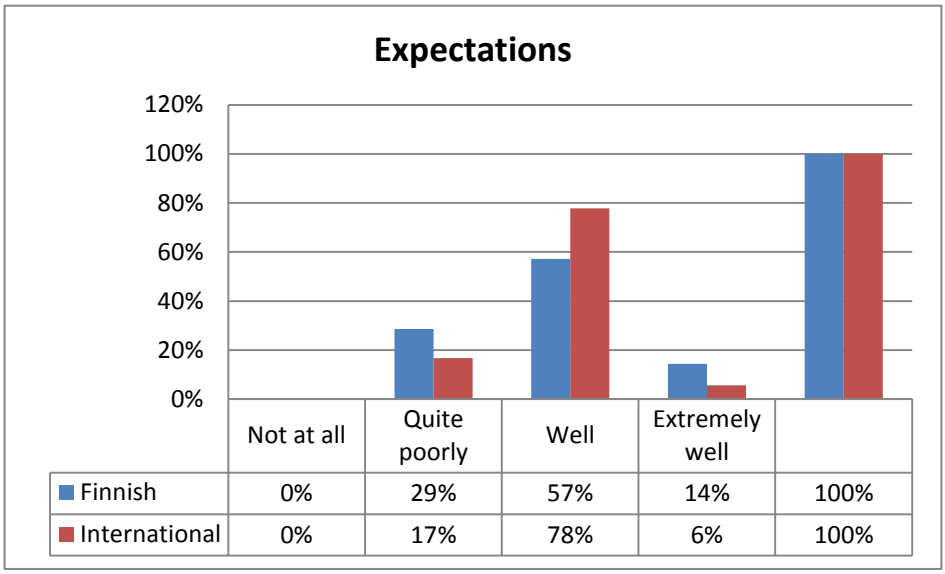
Figure 17. Differences between groups in satisfaction towards the Degree Programme

When asked "How satisfied are you in overall with the Degree Programme?"

groups IB10 and IB11 had the highest percentages of all the respondents answering either “quite” or “extremely satisfied” (figure 17).

4.3.8 Differences between Finnish and international students

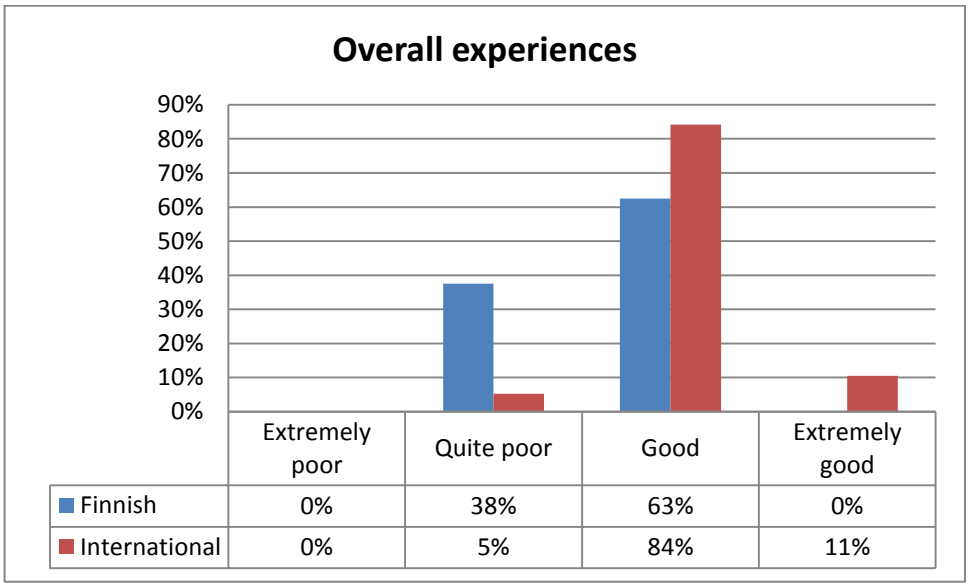
When comparing the original expectations between Finnish and international respondents (figure 18), the results are relatively similar:



	Not at all	Quite poorly	Well	Extremely well	
Finnish	0%	29%	57%	14%	100%
International	0%	17%	78%	6%	100%

Figure 18. Differences between nationalities in expectations

29% of the Finnish respondents felt that their expectations had been met quite poorly in contrast to the international respondents 17 %, but on the other hand, the Finnish respondents also felt that their expectations had been met extremely well by 14% in contrast to international respondents 6%.



	Extremely poor	Quite poor	Good	Extremely good
Finnish	0%	38%	63%	0%
International	0%	5%	84%	11%

Figure 19. Differences between nationalities in overall experiences

As can be seen from the table above (figure 19), there are major differences between Finnish and international students overall experiences: Finnish students have had quite poor experiences with 38% in contrast to international students 5%. In addition, not a single Finnish respondent has had extremely good experiences, when compared to international respondent`s percentage of 11.

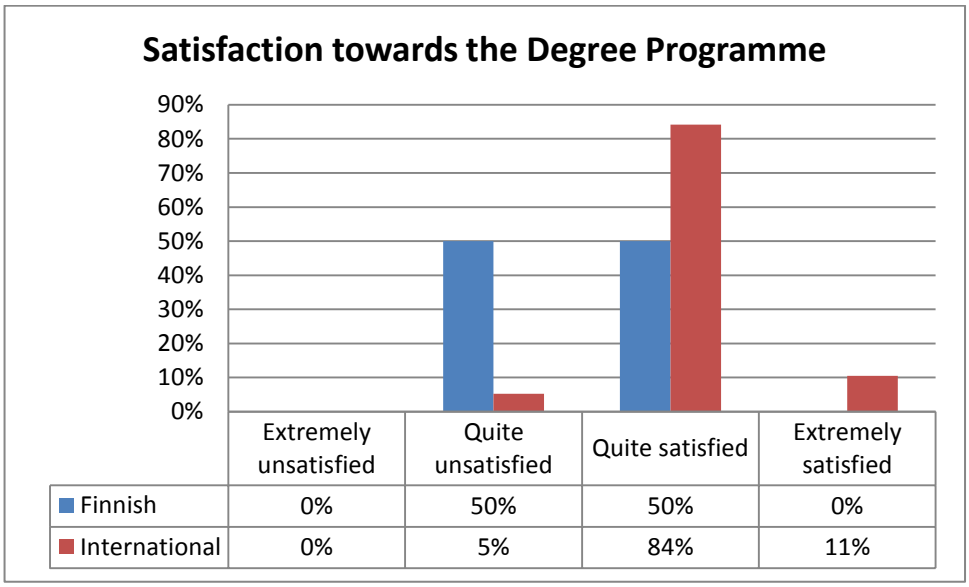


Figure 20. Differences between nationalities in satisfaction towards the Degree Programme

The highest difference in opinions between Finnish and international students emerges, when comparing their overall satisfaction towards the Degree Programme (figure 20). Half of the Finns are quite unsatisfied versus international students 5 %, as well as 11 % of the international students are extremely satisfied versus 0% in Finnish students.

5. Summary and discussion

The purpose of this thesis was to examine, how the Degree Programme in International Business at Saimaa UAS has succeeded from the students perspective. In order to do that, questionnaires were sent to a number of IB-students from the Saimaa University of Applied Sciences, studying in groups IB09, IB10, IB11 and IB12.

The results from the research were analyzed on the basis of two theories: quality in education and customer satisfaction. It is to note that both of these theories as well as the results from the survey rely on personal opinions and beliefs of the customers (students) – therefore they are also affected by many variable factors, such as subjective values, attitudes etc.

Unicef defined the concept of quality of education as following: "Many definitions of quality in education exist, testifying to the complexity and multifaceted nature of the concept. The terms efficiency, effectiveness, equity and quality have often been used synonymously". (Global Monitoring Report 2005, p. 28.) When put into the context of this thesis and more specifically with the results from it, it can be easily detected that the Degree Programme in International Business, taught at Saimaa University of Applied Sciences, fulfills and meets the requirements for good quality education - it can surely be considered to be an efficient, effective and equal education with good overall quality.

Furthermore, Parri (2006, p.1) stated multiple different definitions for quality in education, but one of the most suitable and widely used in the context of higher education is "Quality as fitness for purpose", which means in practice that the moral and intellectual development of students, expansion of self-realization opportunities, etc. are considered to be of the utmost importance in higher education and the focus in quality measurement should be on thorough analysis of the study process (Parri 2006).
Quality measurement is one of the utmost priorities in Saimaa UAS, proved by e.g. with the cooperation of The Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council. The university conducts regular audits on quality systems in co-ordination with the FINHEEC in order to ensure continuous improvement and thorough assessment in the quality of education.

As Parri continued, “the product or service should meet the needs and wishes of the customer. At the same time the customer has to express his/her needs and wishes explicitly”. The service (or product) is naturally, in the case of Saimaa UAS, the quality education and the customers are the students.
When these aspects are put into the context with the results from the survey, it can be said that at least now, the customers have expressed their needs and wishes quite explicitly. This applies, without a doubt, for example to the work placement(s), where many students wished for more guidance from the university`s part.

Regarding the theory of customer satisfaction, Johnson and Gustafsson (2000, p.50) defined it as “a customer’s overall evaluation of the purchase and consumption experience with a product or service” (Ylikoski 2000, p.155).
Furthermore, Kanuk & Schiffman (2007) described it as "the difference between customers’ expectations about a product or service and the actual outcome. However, the expectations may differ drastically depending on a customer’s personal values".
Kotler (2009) on the other hand defined satisfaction as “a person’s feelings of pleasure or disappointment resulting from comparing a product are perceived performance (or outcome) in relation to his or her expectations”.

On the basis of these definitions, the Degree Programme in International Business has satisfied its “customers”, i.e. the students, fairly well, since 66,67 % of the respondents answered that their expectations had been met “well” (see figure 6).
In addition, students` experiences and their level of satisfaction towards the Degree Programme were also very much on the positive side (see figures 7 & 14). Thus, it is safe to determine as an answer to the main research question “How the Degree Programme in International Business has succeeded from the student`s perspective?” in one word – well.
Students also felt that the Degree Programme had in practice matched the aims set in the Study plan (see figure 10) with 66,67 % answering “well”.

Among the results were suggestions for improvement, too. These negative feedbacks concerned foremost the work placement(s) and the structure and content of the curriculum. Nevertheless, a vast majority of the respondents were pleased with these aspects.

One of the most interesting results brought up by the research, was the question of "Are there differences between international students and Finnish student’s opinions?" As the figures 19 and 20 show clearly, there are quite distinctive differences, especially regarding the comparison between their experiences and

the level of satisfaction. When analyzing the differences between the groups, tough, there were not any major distinctions.

This thesis process, and in particular the research study, has been enormously interesting – therefore I am glad the results reflect that to some point. Hopefully, the results will provide useful information to the Saimaa University of Applied Sciences, too.

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Appendix 1 Cover letter for the questionnaire

Dear fellow IB-students!

I am inviting you to participate in my thesis process by conducting the attached questionnaire. The purpose of my thesis and thus, this research, is to find out how the Degree Programme in International Business, taught in Saimaa University of Applied Sciences, has succeeded from the students perspective.

This offers also a unique opportunity for you to give constructive feedback to the Saimaa University of Applied Sciences in the form of this survey, therefore your contribution is extremely important.

It will take you approximately 5 min. to complete.
All the information will remain strictly confidential.

Thank You for participating!

Sincerely,
Jenny Vanninen

Appendix 2 Questionnaire

Students experiences on Degree Programme in International Business

1. Age *

○ 16 - 20

○ 21 - 25

○ 26 - 30

○ 31 - 35

○ 36 - 40

○ over 40

2. Gender *

○ Male

○ Female

3. Group *

○ IB09

○ IB10

○ IB11

○ IB12

4. Nationality *

○ Finnish

○ International

5. What were your original expectations on the Degree Programme in

International Business? *

_____

_____

_____

6. How has these expectations been met? *

○ not at all ○ quite poorly ○ well ○ extremely well

7. How would you rate your overall experiences from the Degree Programme (at the moment)? *

○ extremely poor ○ quite poor ○ good ○ extremely good

8. How would you rate the following? *

	extremely poor	quite poor	good	extremely good
Quality of courses	○	○	○	○
Quality of teaching	○	○	○	○
Student services (student office, library etc.)	○	○	○	○
Curriculum / Study Plan	○	○	○	○
Work placement	○	○	○	○
Exchange period	○	○	○	○

9. Would you like to improve one or more? Why and how?

_____

_____

_____

ABOUT STUDY PLAN:
According to the objectives and contents set in the Study Plan (SoleOps), "*studies provide you with versatile competencies for diverse aspects of*

international business operations including studies in marketing, finance, logistics and management. Foreign languages, different cultures and global business operations form an essential part of the programme".

10. How has the Degree Programme matched these objectives? *

○ not at all ○ quite poorly ○ well ○ extremely well

According to the Study Plan (SoleOps), the Degree Programme provides following competences:
"Basic business competences, international business and marketing competences, oral and written communication skills, project and team working skills, managements, leadership and supervisory skills, skills of current IT applications, research and analytical skills".

11. Do you feel that you have acquired these competencies? *

○ not at all ○ quite poorly ○ well ○ extremely well

12. Is there something you would remove, add or change in the Study Plan (SoleOps) particularly?

_____

_____

_____

13. Are there things (e.g courses) that are especially important / unimportant in the Study Plan (SoleOps)?

_____

_____

_____

ABOUT WORK PLACEMENT:
(If you haven`t done your work placement yet, move on to question 18)

14. How did the practical work placement match your goals?

○ not at all ○ quite poorly ○ well ○ extremely well

15. How did the professional work placement match your goals?
(If you haven`t done your professional work placement yet, move on to question 16)

○ not at all ○ quite poorly ○ well ○ extremely well

16. Do you feel that the work placement period(s) helped you acquire the competence and skills you wanted? How?

_____

_____

_____

17. How would you rate your overall experience from the work placement?

○ extremely poor ○ quite poor ○ good ○ extremely good

18. Finally, how satisfied you are overall with the Degree Programme? *

○ extremely unsatisfied ○ quite unsatisfied ○ quite satisfied ○ extremely satisfied

19. Additional comments?

_____

_____

_____

Thank You for participating! 😊